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Author(s): Nina Baym
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/363242
Accessed: 29/01/2013 11:31

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PASSION AND AUTHORITY IN
THE SCARLET LETTER

NINA BAYM

WITH the composition of The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne, after two decades of hesitation and experimentation, finally accepted his vocation as an author and produced a major work. In this book he defined the focus of all four of his finished novels: the conflict between forces of passion and of repression in the psyche and in society. The book also gave definitive symbolic shape to a number of elements in his continuing exploration of this theme. In Hester, he developed the “dark lady” type of his stories into an embodiment of the soul’s creative and passionate impulses; this type is subsequently varied to form Zenobia and Miriam. In Dimmesdale he presented the most memorable version of the guilt-prone, emotionally divided young men who are so often at the center of his work. And, having treated the Puritans in a number of ways in his short stories and sketches, he fixed on a use for them as symbols of authority and repression in both society and the self.

The sexual encounter which forms the donnée of The Scarlet Letter was an act neither of deliberate moral disobedience nor of conscious social rebellion. The two characters had forgotten society, and were thinking only of themselves, their passion, and momentary joy. Yet, in the world of this novel, where the community dominates all life, to forget the claims of society is to sin against it. But the sin has no reference beyond its social dimension, and society has no reference beyond itself. The community in which Hester and Dimmesdale live is represented as the historical New England Puritan community, but the entire world view within which this historical community conceived of itself is missing.

The Puritans demanded a far-reaching surrender of selfhood to society, it is true, but always in the service of the vital and holy work which had brought them to the New World. This work involved an expansion of the Christian faith into
new geographical territories, and, more importantly, a re-trenchment of it through the re-creation of the true, biblically ordained, forms of worship and communal life. References to that purpose are continuous in Puritan writings. Winthrop, in his “Model of Christian Charity,” gave it the most memorable utterance:

For the work we have in hand, it is by a mutual consent through a special overruling providence, and a more than ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical. In such cases as this the care of the public must oversway all private respects. . . . We are entered into covenant with Him for this work; we have taken out a commission. . . . For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man . . . always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.

In everything they did, the Puritans made constant reference out from the act to the divine purpose for which they acted, and the greater will they were bound to serve.

Remove this sense of communal purpose and service, and a self-satisfied secular autocracy remains—precisely what we find in The Scarlet Letter. Although the settlement has been in the New World but a little more than a decade when the action of the novel begins, there is nothing of this crucial context provided. Reading through the first scaffold scene carefully, we find a rhetoric remote from that of the Puritans, with God referred to only by the nebulous phrase “Heaven” and even that word used only three times. There are no references to the community’s “work,” to its “covenant,” and none even to the divine commandment that Hester has broken. Though much is said about sin, little of this discourse is directly presented, and what Hawthorne does give us bears little resemblance to Puritan theology. On the one hand, there is no vivid sense of Hell, and on the other, there is a doctrine which appears to suggest that man is bound for heaven unless and until he commits a sinful act. Even if Hawthorne’s Puritans believe that man is more likely than not in the course of his life to commit
such an act, the implication of their words are that man's sinful nature is, at birth at least, potential rather than actual. But Puritan dogma, which consigned new-born babies to Hell, implies quite another understanding of "natural depravity."

It is clear that Dimmesdale holds this unpuritan view of sin, for he seems to think that until he met Hester in the forest he was a sinless man. Nor do we find him thinking of sin as, ultimately, a hardness of heart signifying alienation from God, which the sinner could not hope of his own accord to overcome; nor of the vital corollary of grace (a term which does not once occur in the novel) as God's free and unearned gift of salvation. We miss God almost entirely in Dimmesdale's mental life—that overwhelming sense of Divine presence which is never absent from the devout Puritan's reflections, expressed as a desire to be swallowed up in Him, to lie low before Him, to be melted with love for Him. Dimmesdale's is no soul to exclaim, with Jonathan Edwards:

My wickedness, as I am in myself, has long appeared to me perfectly ineffable, and swallowing up all thoughts and imagination, like an infinite deluge, or mountains over my head. . . . And it appears to me that were it not for free grace, exalted and raised up to the infinite height of all the fulness and glory of the great Jehovah, and the arm of his power and grace stretched forth in all the majesty of his power, and in all the glory of his sovereignty, I should appear sunk down in my sins below hell itself, far beyond the sight of everything but the eye of sovereign grace, that can pierce even down to such a depth.

Nor can he plead with Edward Taylor:

Oh! That thy love might overflow my heart
To fire the same with love; for love I would.
But oh! My straitened breast! My lifeless spark!
My fireless flame! What chilly love and cold!
In measure small, in manner chilly, see!
Lord, blow the coal! Thy love enflame in me.

There are only two instances of impassioned religious utterance from Dimmesdale, the first in Chapter 8 where he
pleads that Hester be allowed to keep Pearl, arguing in most unorthodox fashion that Pearl is "the Creator's sacred pledge, that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child also will bring its parent thither!" Later, in Chapter 10, he resists Chillingworth's prying in these words: "if it be the soul's disease, then do I commit myself to the one Physician of the soul! He, if it stand with his good pleasure, can cure; or he can kill! Let him do with me as, in his justice and wisdom, he shall see good. But who art thou, that meddest in this matter?—that dares thrust himself between the sufferer and his God?" (p. 137). Dimmesdale's antipathy is justified here, of course, but his argument is poor. What Puritan, who had been admitted to church fellowship precisely because he had been able to stand up before the members and give convincing public witness to his conversion (the novel is set before the installation of the Half-way Covenant) would insist that his relationship to God was a private matter? How, indeed, in the presumed context of public detection and punishment of sins against God, can Dimmesdale even frame such an argument?—only because the presumed and actual contexts of this novel are not the same. The ministerial qualifications listed by Hawthorne in Chapter 10 are such as might fit Dimmesdale for this calling at some later era, but not in the Puritan age: "high aspirations for the welfare of his race, warm love of souls, pure sentiments, natural piety, strengthened by thought and study, and illumined by revelation" (p. 130). Hawthorne's emphasis here, on Dimmesdale's humanitarian and humanistic temper, relegates Christianity to minor importance.2

Dimmesdale is a seriously distorted Puritan, and the settlement is distorted in like manner (no true Puritan community, really convinced that Roger Chillingworth was "Satan himself, or Satan's emissary," would have left him unmolested, waiting "with an unshaken hope, to see the minister come

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1 The Scarlet Letter (Columbus, Ohio, 1962), 115. All page references to the novel are to this text.

2 Few of these "precious materials," as Hawthorne calls them, are displayed by the minister during the course of the novel, so self-engrossed has he become.
forth out of the conflict, transfigured with the glory which he would unquestionably win" [p. 128]) because Puritan religion has been replaced by nineteenth-century sentimental piety. The God of this book is a remote, vague, occasional concept ceremonially invoked at the last minute and in cases of emergency. He is not the immediate, personal, overwhelmingly present, inescapable Alpha and Omega of Puritan life and thought. Discussions of The Scarlet Letter generally overlook this crucial distortion. The questions "why does Hawthorne use the Puritans," or "how does Hawthorne use the Puritans," conceal within them the assumption that he uses them accurately. It is generally believed that he shared their "gloomy" view of human nature and found it an important corrective to the optimistic meliorism of his own day. While a story like "The Celestial Railroad" supports this belief, on the whole Hawthorne's view of human nature, though gloomy, is not Puritan, and the Puritans he uses are the Puritans he invents. He must be held accountable as one of the first shapers of that myth of the Puritans which turned them into dour Victorians. His distortions cannot be attributed to ignorance, for he was well-read in Puritan writings; they must be attributed to design. Nor can that design be explained as a pious unwillingness to speculate about ultimates, for ultimates are not in question: the question is the accurate portrayal of a historical community. It might be argued that he is "translating" Puritanism into forms meaningful to his own day, but the point is then that his translation cuts the spirit away from the forms, leaving behind a residue of empty institutions. Hawthorne's Puritan community considers its own laws the ultimate moral framework of the universe to the point where such laws define, rather than reflect or contain, morality as well as good and evil.  

3 R. W. B. Lewis, in The American Adam (Chicago, 1955) probably speaks for the majority of critics of this novel when he says that "Hester's deed appears as a disturbance of the moral structure of the universe" (112). But this can be the case only if the Puritan community is shown to reflect, in its laws and values, that moral structure, for Hawthorne does not deal (as has so often been pointed out) with absolutes and universals directly. And the care with which he
social system and to enforce the general will on individual members of the group. In sum, in The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne has created an authoritarian state with a Victorian moral outlook. He examines the struggles, within this state, of two people who differ from one another not as beings more or less religious, but as beings differently bound to the community, and differently affected by it.

Power in this community is vested in a group of elders, ministerial and magisterial, who blend its legal and moral strands into a single instrument, and, acting as a group, make that power appear diffuse and impersonal. This is the Puritan oligarchy as an outsider or an unbeliever might perceive it. The patriarchal nature of this oligarchy is important for Hawthorne's scheme, which contrasts youth with age, and women with men. The oligarchy is aptly personified in Governor Bellingham,

a gentleman advanced in years, and with a hard experience written in his wrinkles. He was not ill fitted to be the head and representative of a community, which owed its origin and progress, and its present state of development, not to the impulses of youth, but to the stern and tempered energies of manhood, and the sombre sagacity of age; accomplishing so much, precisely because it imagined and hoped so little. (p. 64)

The impetus of the Puritan movement, as Hawthorne presents it here, runs directly counter to the "American dream," being neither romantic nor libertarian, but distinctly authoritarian and conservative. Pointing out that the people accept forms of authority as divinely sanctioned, and hence worship authority in and for itself, Hawthorne notes the symbols of physical might with which the Puritan rulers surround themselves: the halberd-bearing sergeants in the scaffold scene, the governor's armor in Chapter 7 (reflected in which, Hester's A is monstrously enlarged), and the "weapons and bright armour of

isolates the Puritans in time and space, while refraining from commenting on the truth of such dogmas as he shows them to hold, makes it impossible for us to conclude that his Puritans do serve as spokesmen for the moral structure of the universe.
the military company” (p. 237) in the final procession. The rulers justify their authority by its forms, and thus the whole system is self-enclosed. They are dedicated to preserving the values and purposes of aging men, “endowments of that grave and weighty order, which gives the idea of permanence, and comes under the general definition of respectability” (p. 238). “Respectability” is a key term in Hawthorne’s discourse; in his next novel, the most complete of his villains, Jaffrey Pyncheon, will be characterized as its very embodiment. And of the oligarchy’s kindest representative, Hawthorne says that he “had no more right than one of those [darkly engraved] portraits [which we see prefixed to old volumes of sermons] would have, to step forth, as he now did, and meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish” (p. 65).

Dimmesdale is the only young man among these patriarchs, and he holds this position by a kind of resolute clinging to childhood. He strenuously avoids contact with the world, hoping thereby to stay sinless. He “trode in the shadowy by-paths, and thus kept himself simple and childlike; coming forth, when occasion was, with a freshness, and fragrance, and dewy purity of thought, which, as many people said, affected them like the speech of an angel” (p. 66). By retaining his childish naïveté, Dimmesdale tries to avoid the dangerous period of young manhood and achieve old age without the usual “hard experience” that precedes it. This requires continuous self-restraint. His sin consists in an inadvertent relaxation of that self-restraint, with a consequent assertion of youth against the restrictions of the elders—an assertion of the passionate, thoughtless, willful, and impulsive in his nature. As a result of this act, the minister becomes a man, ceases forever to be the Senior James’s “dimpled nursling of the skies.” Although both James and Hawthorne share the interesting view that the guardians of the nursery are male, Hawthorne, lacking James’s optimism, is convinced that they do not welcome their charge’s coming of age. Dimmesdale knows that if his deed is discovered, he will be thrown out of what is, to him, Heaven—the society of elders. It is typical both of Hawthorne
and the romantics in general, that the assertion of manhood involves a shift of allegiance away from the values of a male-dominated ethos towards those held rather by a female.

The plot of The Scarlet Letter moves from this prior sin of "omission," the undeliberate breakthrough of suppressed passion, to a more important sin of commission. All the years of punishment and pseudorepentance operate only to bring the lovers back to the scene of their original deed, there to resolve on a far more radical and shocking action. Now, they deliberately reject the judgment society has passed on them—by deciding to leave the community they in effect repudiate its right to punish them. Responsibility for this decision is mainly Hester's, whose seven years of solitude have turned her into what she was at most only implicitly before, a rebel. Responsibility for the subsequent catastrophe is mainly Dimmesdale's, who, momentarily inflamed by Hester's beauty as well as her argument, is led out of the path natural to his feet and then dramatically returns to it. Unlike Hester, he does accept society's right to judge, as well as its specific judgment; but his dying speech does not convince her, for she undertakes alone the journey that had been planned to accompany him. Not until the fruit of her sin is secured from the consequences of a Puritan judgment on it does she return. And then her return is not entirely a penitent's return, for ultimately, though quietly, she forces the community to admit that the scarlet letter is, after all, a badge of honor and not a token of shame.

In the main, then, The Scarlet Letter is the story of the different effect on two unlike characters of an act which seriously transgresses the social code. Conventionally, The Scarlet Letter is viewed as being about three characters, a triangle or hierarchy of sinners; yet much is unsatisfactory about this approach. For one thing, it leaves Pearl in a kind of limbo, unrelated, unattached, and unsymmetrical; for another, it involves overlooking (or excusing) much about the way in which Chillingworth is handled. One really cannot accept him as a character in the same sense that the other two can be taken. Not only do Hester and Dimmesdale share a single sin, while Chil-
lingworth's is of another genre entirely; he himself is of a
different genre. Martin Green's devastating attack on Haw-
thorne's technique in this instance makes it clear that the view
of Chillingworth as a developed, rounded character is untena-
ble.4 A character is not developed by being asserted to be grow-
ing duskier and more crooked. Much is incongruous in his
behavior in terms of the cold, calm, disposition he is originally
supposed to have had (which the reader never sees, in any
event): his psychology as an abused husband is not realistic.
Moreover, we have to deal with the surrealistic manner of his
appearance and disappearance in the book, as well as the vio-
lently exaggerated rhetoric which is used to describe him. All
these factors tell us that Chillingworth operates on a different
plane of reality from that of either Hester or Dimmesdale.
This is the same plane occupied by Pearl, like him a semi-
human but mainly symbolic figure. Pearl stands to Hester in
exactly the same symbolic relationship as Chillingworth
stands to Dimmesdale.
This symbolic relationship has several aspects. Pearl and
Chillingworth represent, to begin with, Hester and Dimmes-
dale's sin; and since that sin did indeed occur, they have, in the
fantasy world of the novel, objective reality. But these charac-
ters represent the sin as it is felt and understood by each of the
two actors, and since these two feel and perceive very differ-
dently about what they have done, the deed assumes a different
embodiment in each one's emotional life. Pearl is Hester's sin
and Chillingworth is Dimmesdale's, and the difference be-
tween them is one of the sharpest and clearest statements about
hero and heroine. Hester perceives her deed in the shape of
the beautiful child, wild, unmanageable, and unpredictable,
who has been created from it; Dimmesdale sees his in the form
of the vengeful and embittered husband who has been offended
by it. Lastly, Pearl and Chillingworth, splintered off from the
characters to whom they properly belong, represent dishar-
mony and disunity within Hester and Dimmesdale—another

4 Re-Appraisals: Some Commonsense Readings in American Literature (New
York, 1965), 78-89.
result of their passion. Each character is at odds, however, with a
different part of his nature: crudely, Hester is tormented by her passions, Dimmesdale by his conscience. The end of the
book, when these two symbolic characters disappear, portrays
the reintegration of these shattered personalities. As Dimmes-
dale dies, Chillingworth dies; as Hester, leaving the society
that has tortured her, resumes a full humanity, so Pearl be-
comes a complete and living child.

Hester is torn between a genuine desire to feel that society
has judged her rightly, that there is a purpose and a reason for
all the suffering she endures, and a far deeper, irrational con-
viction that what she has done is not sinful.

Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter, which had
such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could
reach her, save it were sinful like herself. God, as a direct conse-
quence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely
child, whose place was on that same dishonored bosom, to connect
her parent for ever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be
finally a blessed soul in heaven! Yet these thoughts affected Hester
Prynne less with hope than apprehension. She knew that her deed
had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its results
would be for good. Day after day, she looked fearfully into the
child's expanding nature; ever dreading to detect some dark and
wild peculiarity, that should correspond with the guiltiness to
which she owed her being. (pp. 89-90)

Here we see Hester accepting, on a conscious level, the idea
that Pearl is guilty; yet the name she gives the child indicates
her truer conviction. Similarly, her handling of the letter it-
self reveals rejection of the social definition of her deed. An
artist with her needle ("then, as now," Hawthorne comments,
"almost the only [art] within a woman's grasp"), she turns the
letter into a work of art by gorgeous embroidery. The art there
exhibited is fundamentally amoral; that is, sheerly decorative,
delighting in itself for its own sake. Hawthorne calls it a "rich,
voluptuous, Oriental characteristic,—a taste for the gorgeously
beautiful," which finds no possibility for exercise except in
the "exquisite productions of her needle." Thus Hester's
needlework is self-expressive both because it realizes her energy and because the form (to the extent that she does not punish herself by making coarse garments for the poor—a masochistic enterprise for which Hawthorne reproves her) corresponds to her nature. In the social context, the amoral, sensuous activity of her art takes on moral significance, because by making the letter beautiful Hester is denying its social meaning. The embroidery is a technique by which Hester subverts the letter’s literal meaning; this is well understood by the Puritan women:

“She hath good skill at her needle, that’s certain... but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?” (p. 54)

The godly magistrates, however, lack this sort of insight; as men “distinguished by a ponderous sobriety, rather than activity of intellect,” they seldom see beyond the literal. They perceive the letter on Hester’s breast, and do not see what she has done with it. But Hester’s letter is just what the goodwives say it is: an assertion of her pride in what she has done, and a masked defiance of the authorities. Although she is a far more complex symbol than the letter, a living thing and not an inanimate object, Pearl’s identity with it is made abundantly clear both by Hawthorne and Hester herself. Her aptness for the role is evident: she is the living product, the literal realization, of the act; she is the reason that Hester can never be free of the act; she is its consequence as well as its commission. Hester, aware of all this, stresses the child’s resemblance to the letter by decorating her in exactly the same style.

Her mother, in contriving the child’s garb, had allowed the gorgeous tendencies of her imagination their full play; arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic, of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread... It was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and, indeed, of the child’s whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear
upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life! (pp. 101-102)

Pearl, like the letter, is her mother's "work of art" (not, as some critics have argued, Dimmesdale's). Neither symbol is a perfect representation of this idea, but each contributes to it. The letter, though a true artistic production, is created by the play of imagination on a socially received, and basically ungenial, form which, the magistrates believe, implies guilt in its very shape. This guilt Hester, through the restricted means of surface decoration, attempts to deny. On the other hand, Pearl is an entirely "original" form, springing not only from sources beyond society's control, but from sources largely beyond the artist's control. This "original" Hester tries, somewhat ineffectively, to fit to the letter's meaning. The truth about art, to Hawthorne, lies somewhere in the blend of these concepts of organicism and artifact, and between the social and private imperatives. And the whole question of artistic creativity is inextricably linked to the question of social guilt. At once accepting guilt as the price of creation, and denying it, Hester is mentally torn. She is torn, too, between a willingness to endure a punishment she cannot truly concur in as the price for remaining near Dimmesdale, and a normal human rejection of misery and suffering.

Pearl embodies more than her mother's deed; she also symbolizes a part of Hester's nature—the wild, amoral creative core of the self. With this part of herself Hester is very much at odds; the splintering of the self is implicit in the very existence of an alter ego. The social view of this part of the self is, of course, condemning: this is the sin-producing segment of the soul. Truly to assent to her punishment, Hester must come to feel that the judgment of her nature on which it is based is just. She does make a sincere effort to feel guilty, operating on the time-tested principle that if one behaves as though one feels guilty, patiently and continuously, one will eventually create the condition. She tries to restrain and discipline the

child according to society's judgments, but ultimately she cannot be so false to herself. She dresses Pearl like an opulent princess and lets her run wild; here her own wildness has outlet. Perhaps Pearl's most important function as the doppelganger is to express all the resentment, outraged pride, anger, and even blasphemy that Hester feels in her punishment, but cannot voice. One recalls the famous catechism scene, where Pearl proclaims that "she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door." There is expressed in this speech an angry repudiation of God, of the oligarchs, and of Dimmesdale as well—resentments Hester can barely admit to herself, freely spoken by her uninhibited child.

Hester's ultimately unshakeable belief in the goodness of this part of herself, its wild chaotic nature notwithstanding (although, to be sure, its intensity sometimes appalls and frightens her), saves her from taking the readily available and more common route, the path leading straight from the governor's mansion: witchcraft. The witches are rebellious, of course, but their rebellion is predicated on an acceptance of society's judgment on them. They believe they are evil, and they rejoice in their wickedness. Hester's lonely path, taken less out of conscious decision than out of temperamental necessity, is that of refusing to believe herself evil.

In her solitude, her emotions stifled, she comes to think more and more critically of society. She "assumed a freedom of speculation . . . which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter." At a later point in the novel, Hawthorne calls her vantage point as estranged from social institutions as that of the "wild Indian," and comments in very significant language that "the tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free" (p. 199). So long as she remains in Boston, she is restrained from showing this newly acquired radicalism by her obligations to Pearl (or, differently put, by her simple instinct for self-preservation), but it is not Pearl who keeps her in Boston.
By the time Hester meets Dimmesdale again in the forest, all social ties but one have disappeared. Only her feeling for Dimmesdale is left. This has bound her to Boston, and so long as she remains there, she must wear the letter. The plot moves Hester towards casting off the letter (just as it moves Dimmesdale towards assuming it), and this action is impossible until Dimmesdale either leaves Boston or otherwise frees her. It is the usual case in Hawthorne's fiction that the "dark" woman is a far more passionate, imaginative, and intellectually daring being than the man, but she is also the less cold, the more loving—and hence her fate is found to be inextricably tied to that more timorous, conventional man. Thus, in the forest, with Dimmesdale, Hester is not permitted to pretend that she is free of the letter; not in the forest, but on the scaffold when Dimmesdale dies, Hester is liberated—insofar, indeed, as woman can hope to be liberated. This is also why Hester, returning later to Boston, looks back on her experience with the hope for the revelation of a new truth which will "establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." Having cast off the letter and saved her guilt-conceived child, Hester has been as free as any woman; apparently she has learned that no woman, as society now stands, can be truly free. Probably, too, her very return to Boston is meant to symbolize the limits of a woman's freedom, circumscribed by love.

Hester then, is branded guilty by society, but gradually rejects that brand; Dimmesdale is considered innocent by society, but gradually assumes a stigma of guilt. He is a complete psychological contrast to Hester, except in one crucial respect: both of them must, ultimately, at whatever cost, be true to the imperatives of their own natures. Hester must reject the judgment of the letter, no matter how she tries to assent to it; and Dimmesdale must take that letter on himself, no matter how

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6 One must take exception to Roy R. Male's general thesis, in *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (Austin, 1957), that the woman is the conservative force holding back the speculative male: Hester and Dimmesdale, Zenobia and Coverdale or Hollingsworth, are only two of many counterexamples.
much a part of him struggles to resist. But where Hester is naturally independent and romantic, Dimmesdale is social and conservative. His choice of profession as well as his astonishing early success in it, make clear that he is a real man of society.

Mr. Dimmesdale was a true priest, a true religionist, with the reverential sentiment largely developed, and an order of mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of a creed, and wore its passage continually deeper with the lapse of time. In no state of society would he have been what is called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework. (p. 123)

Never one to give the genesis of his characters' psychic structures, Hawthorne does not explain why Dimmesdale is inclined to revere authority, but he makes clear that this is a psychological rather than an ethical matter with the minister. Dimmesdale's needs and dependencies mean that he is not hypocritical. It appears, indeed, that he has remained ignorant of his own passionate nature until his encounter with Hester reveals it. Hester plays a role here regularly allotted to women of her type in Hawthorne's fiction: to correspond to and arouse the dormant, repressed, unrealized, or unacknowledged passions of the men. But Hester does not create passion in the minister; there is a passionate nature underlying his spirituality all the time, as Hawthorne suggests in a variety of ways. There are signs of a struggle in his constitutional pallor, in the tremor of his mouth denoting both "nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint."

Even more interesting are indications, increasingly emphasized as the novel progresses, that the true source of Dimmesdale's power and influence over his congregation is not the spirituality to which he, in sincere piety, attributes his ministerial gifts, but is that same despised and submerged passion. The chief means by which Dimmesdale sways his listeners is his voice, which is made an instrument of passion.
This vocal organ was in itself a rich endowment; insomuch that a listener, comprehending nothing of the language in which the preacher spoke, might still have been swayed to and fro by the mere tone and cadence. Like all other music, it breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated. . . . Now [Hester] caught the low undertone, as of the wind sinking down to repose itself; then ascended with it, as it rose through progressive gradations of sweetness and power, until its volume seemed to envelop her with an atmosphere of awe and solemn grandeur. (p. 243)

This sobbing, passionate voice, which "gushed irrepressibly upward" full of plaintiveness and anguish, speaking with "the whisper, or the shriek . . . of suffering humanity" has nothing whatever to do with Dimmesdale's intellectual or spiritual being. By-passing language, reason's instrument, the tones of the voice come straight from the romantic heart. Dimmesdale's power is multiplied manifold after his encounter with Hester, because that encounter has represented the first surfacing of that heart, and because thereafter it can no longer be completely repressed. As ignorant as he about the source of this new art, Dimmesdale's parishioners "knew not the power that moved them thus. They deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness." Hawthorne makes the nature of the attraction felt by the people to Dimmesdale even more clear when he comments that "the virgins of his church grew pale around him, victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment that they imagined it to be all religion, and brought it openly, in their white bosoms, as their most acceptable sacrifice before the altar" (p. 142).

Passion, which has made him an artist, has made him, as he thinks, a hypocrite as a minister. Dimmesdale is bewildered and horrified by his success. In the social context, art itself is guilty, and a man like Dimmesdale, deeply committed to the furthering of social aims (permanence and respectability) but who is yet an artist, is necessarily the most psychologically ravaged of human beings. In a sense, Dimmesdale's profession (prior to his meeting with Hester) had assuaged his conflict by
channeling his energies into accepted social patterns and permitting him to rationalize about the source of these energies. His affair with Hester and the accompanying development of his artistic powers destroy this refuge. His profession becomes a source of torment. Unable to identify his "self" with the passionate core he regards as sinful, he is even less able to admit that this sinful core can produce great, true, sermons. He is obsessed with a feeling of falseness. His act with Hester almost immediately becomes loathsome to him. The part of him which is Puritan magistrate, and which he thinks of as himself, condemns the sinful "other."

The ugliness of his act, as it appears to him, is well expressed in the hideous figure of Chillingworth who materializes, as Hawthorne implies repeatedly, out of thin air, to persecute him. This monster becomes his constant companion and oppressor. If Pearl (to borrow a Freudian metaphor) is a representation of Hester's "id," then Chillingworth represents Dimmesdale's "superego." That he is meant to be part of Dimmesdale's personality is made clear not only by the magical ways in which he appears on and disappears from the scene, and his unrealistic fixation (for a cuckolded husband) on the guilty man, but also by the physical and occupational similarities of the two men and their spatial disposition under the same roof.

The two were lodged in the same house; so that every ebb and flow of the minister's life-tide might pass under the eye of his anxious and attached physician. . . . Here, the pale clergyman piled up his library, rich with parchment-bound folios of the Fathers, and the lore of Rabbis, and monkish erudition. . . . On the other side of the house, old Roger Chillingworth arranged his study and laboratory . . . provided with a distilling apparatus, and the means of compounding drugs and chemicals, which the practised alchemist knew well how to turn to purpose. With such commodiousness of situation, these two learned persons sat themselves down, each in his own domain, yet familiarly passing from one apartment to the other, and bestowing a mutual and not incurious inspection into one another's business. (pp. 125-126)
The identification of Chillingworth with the watchful eye of the personality links him at once with both intellect and conscience. Cut off from punishment in the real world (for reasons we shall shortly consider), Dimmesdale substitutes internal punishment, and this change is symbolized by the replacement of his kindly, benevolent ministerial companion, Wilson, by this malevolent demon. Chillingworth's cruelty represents Hawthorne's idea that the internal judge freed (exactly as Pearl, at the other end of the psyche's spectrum, is freed) from "reference and adaptation to the world into which it was born" is unmitigatedly unforgiving and remorseless. "All that guilty sorrow, hidden from the world, whose great heart would have pitied and forgiven, to be revealed to him, the Piteless, to him, the Unforgiving!" In all the various speculations about that letter on Dimmesdale's bosom, one likely possibility, that it has been brought out by Chillingworth's "drugs and chemicals," has been peculiarly overlooked. But perhaps this is how Hawthorne allegorized the work of a gnawing conscience.

That Chillingworth is, by virtue of his age, a sort of father figure, suggests a classical Freudian explanation of Dimmesdale's feelings of guilt. On a larger, mythical scale, it symbolizes his sense of having offended the "fathers," the patriarchs, the oligarchs, the male gods. And he has offended them less by having stolen "their" woman, for they are all men without women, and do not appear to covet Hester for themselves, than by having repudiated their values by joining with her. In the forest she is clearly presented as an alternative to them. As Chillingworth's wife, she becomes the alternative to him: to his sterile paternity she encounters with an image of "Divine Maternity." Dimmesdale, of course, is not "conscious" of the

7 The identification of Chillingworth with the intellect links him to Hawthorne's gallery, in the stories, of unpardonable sinners. But in this and later novels we see this theme of the intellect-passion or head-heart dichotomy being brought into a much larger context, wherein it is interestingly modified, because intellect is now allied to Puritanical repression, as well as to authoritarian institutions.

8 One senses here the dim outline of a romantic fiction along lines set down by Northrop Frye, where the "aggressive myths of Judaism, Christianity, and
rebellion implicit in his act, for his was a sin of passion, "not of principle, nor even purpose." Sincerely horrified by his deed, he embarks on a long course of self-torture and punishment; but he does not confess. These internal torments, bodied forth most horrifically in Chillingworth, are the strategy by which Dimmesdale keeps from confessing. His belief that he is being punished enables him to keep his guilt secret by pacifying his sense of justice. The question of Dimmesdale’s failure to confess, then, is more complicated than it first appears.

Of course, he is terrified by the social consequences of his confession. One who leans so heavily on the social structure would be almost certainly destroyed if he were cast out of it as Hester has been. For a being who defines himself largely by the image he sees reflected back from the watching eyes around him, loss of social place implies a loss of identity. But confession would represent something more: a final and irreversible capitulation to the sense of guilt. No matter how he persecutes himself, no matter what masochistic free reign he gives to his grotesquely distorted conscience, he does not fully assent to his guilt until he admits it openly, for open admission has irreversible consequences. The failure to confess is the one and only way in which Dimmesdale resists the judgment which his conscience attempts to enforce upon him. Chillingworth, thus, as a substitute for the judgment of society, acts also as a strategy for forestalling that judgment, is a buffer or a protection against an ultimate condemnation. Once Dimmesdale confesses he has, psychologically, no alternative but to die; Chillingworth the physician does quite literally keep Dimmesdale alive all these years, even if but to torture him. This is, of

Plato’s Timaeus, reflect[ing] an urban, tool-using, male-dominated society, where the central figure usually develops out of a father-god associated with the sky” is giving way to a “Romantic redemption myth” where “something of the ancient mother-centered symbolism comes back into poetry.” A Study of English Romanticism (New York, 1969), 6, 10. Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and Blake are all cited as poets centering fictions on a maternal goddess figure who is also, often, sister and bride. In Hawthorne’s forest the Apollonian tradition is being rejected for the Dionysian. This is why Chillingworth, who appears superficially at odds with society because of his iconoclastic scientific rationalism, may in fact represent the extreme abstraction of its underlying principles: the repressive and inhibiting male intellect at its most sterile and destructive.
course, an agonizingly roundabout method—a neurotic method—of resistance, but it is appropriate to Dimmesdale's divided values. Not to confess; to scourge oneself, to fast, endure any kind of private penance, making one's body and soul a veritable playground for internal punitive forces—anything rather than openly to say "I am guilty." This is the technique by which Dimmesdale tries to fend off final acquiescence in the notion of his guilt; if he lacks Hester's will to defy, he has at least something of a will to resist.

But the scene in the forest, where the lovers decide to flee together, has results which break that will. Dimmesdale's own astounding behavior after he leaves the forest convinces him beyond any doubt that he is, indeed, a morally polluted and hideously guilty man. A truly stupifying flood of demons are released from him when he asserts, deliberately, that the social law no longer binds him. He has turned the control of his psyche over to the passionate self that has been clamoring for freedom and recognition all these years. Hawthorne describes it as "a revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling" and a "total change of dynasty and moral code, in that interior kingdom." But rather than finding himself in this revolution, Dimmesdale loses himself. He undergoes a kind of rebirth, but a terrifying one. He recognizes neither his surroundings nor himself. More unsettling than his changed perceptions is his changed behavior—the sequence of blasphemous, lewd, and childishly crude sorts of acts he is tempted to perform. He faces what appears to him incontrovertible evidence of the iniquity of his own passionate nature. This experience of himself, this glimpse into the interior, is decisive. Whatever moral defense he might have been disposed to make for his passionate self, however he might have assented to Hester's "what we did had a consecration of its own" in the forest, when he was led to exclaim,

"Oh, Hester, thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung myself—sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened—down upon these forest-leaves, and to have risen up all made anew, and with new powers to glorify Him that hath been mercifull!" (pp. 201-202)
this disposition disappears entirely once he is out of the forest and sees how little his new powers lead him to glorify God—how they lead, in fact, in the opposite direction. He ceases, then, his attempts to evade final punishment. He turns his new burst of life into the writing of his greatest sermon, still bewildered "that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he." Then he delivers it, confesses, and by that confession, executes himself.

On the scaffold, two disintegrated personalities achieve resolutions appropriate to their natures. Hester's change, now that she is freed from the community, is represented by Pearl's disenchantment. By becoming a human being, Pearl effectively disappears as an alter ego or an allegorical projection. Instead of two fragments of a single personality we now have two people. Hester then takes her child from the Puritan community into a society where she may better fulfill herself—an ironic reversing of the American dream, for the American is sent backwards in time and space to a more advanced and enlightened Europe. A nature as severely and implacably at war within itself as Dimmesdale's can find peace only in death. This death deprives the parasitic conscience of a host on which to feed, and Chillingworth "positively withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun." Hawthorne's treatment of Dimmesdale, from the encounter in the forest to the expiation on the scaffold, has a convincing psychological inevitability; Hester has certainly meant well, but as Frederick Crews says, she does not really understand Dimmesdale's nature.9 She imagines him to be a person far more like herself than he really is. "Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame," she exhorts. The name, a social label like the scarlet letter, is easily assumed or put aside for Hester, but not for Dimmesdale. He is what society calls him. "What hast thou to do with all these iron men, and their opinions?" Hester asks,

but released from the iron framework he needs for support, he finds no inner principle to sustain him. His wholly liberated imagination creates not Emersonian images of beauty, but surrounds him with horrors.

This "twist" in the plot is found repeatedly in Hawthorne's fictions. Cut loose from their moorings, the fragile egos of most of his heroes are whirled into frightful, nightmarish fantasies of liberated fears and desires. Young Goodman Brown is perhaps an epitome of this event; but many other examples will come to mind. No one escapes from these nightmares undefeated except the stolid Robin Molineux. The pattern expresses, for one thing, Hawthorne's response, based on his psychological insight, to transcendental optimism about imaginative liberation; and for another, it provides a balance to the romanticism of his own fiction. As much as Hawthorne is drawn to, and moved by, romantic values, he knows too much of the "horrors of the half-known life" to be able to accede to a simple utopian vision. The only values expressed in this novel are romantic; and yet the author despairs of their fulfillment. His conclusions in *The Scarlet Letter*, as he examines these two versions of the struggle between self and society, have a doubly gloomy thrust. On the one hand, he finds (and asserts with increasing vehemence in each succeeding novel) life in society to be the death of art, of love—of the heart. Without denying the wilful, amoral, and chaotic aspects of the un-social core, he yet asserts its primacy and its basic value. But on the other hand, he does not believe that true self-fulfillment is possible. Men are born into society, and shaped by it. When they strike out towards freedom, the unknown and unimaginable, they are defeated, the stronger by the action of society against them, the weaker by their own internal collapse. Hawthorne's fictions provide an extensive compilation of various kinds of internal collapse: these are different from one case to another, but the vision which informs them is constant: not of a Puritan, but of a Romantic, Hell.