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THE RUINED WALL: UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVATION IN THE SCARLET LETTER

FREDERICK C. CREWS

HESTER Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, in the protective gloom of the forest surrounding Boston, have had their fateful meeting. While little Pearl, sent discreetly out of hearing range, has been romping about in her unrestrained way, the martyred lovers have spoken their hearts at last. Hester has revealed the identity of Chillingworth and has succeeded in winning Dimmesdale's forgiveness for her previous secrecy. Dimmesdale has explained his seven-years' torment. Self-pity and compassion have led unexpectedly to a revival of desire; "what we did," as Hester boldly remembers, "had a consecration of its own," and Arthur Dimmesdale cannot deny it. In his state of helpless longing he allows himself to be swayed by Hester's insistence that the past can be forgotten, that deep in the wilderness or across the ocean, accompanied and sustained by Hester, he can free himself from the revengeful gaze of Roger Chillingworth.

Hester's argument is of course a superficial one; the ultimate source of Dimmesdale's anguish is not Chillingworth but his own remorse, and this cannot be left behind in Boston. The closing chapters of The Scarlet Letter demonstrate this clearly enough, but Hawthorne, with characteristic license, tells us at once that Hester is wrong. "And be the stern and sad truth spoken," he says, "that the breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired. It may be watched and guarded; so that the enemy shall not force his way again into the citadel, and might even, in his subsequent assaults, select some other avenue, in preference to that where he had formerly succeeded. But there is still the ruined wall, and, near it, the stealthy tread of the foe that would win over again his unforgotten triumph."

This metaphor is too striking to be passed over quickly. Like Melville's famous comparison of the unconscious mind to a
subterranean captive king in Chapter XLI of *Moby Dick*, it provides us with a theoretical understanding of behavior we might otherwise judge to be poorly motivated. Arthur Dimmesdale, like Ahab, is "gnawed within and scorched without, with the infixed, unrelenting fangs of some incurable idea," and Hawthorne's metaphor, inserted at a crucial moment in the plot, enables us to see the inner mechanism of Dimmesdale's torment.

At first, admittedly, we do not seem entitled to draw broad psychological conclusions from these few sentences. Indeed, we may even say that the metaphor reveals a fruitless confusion of terms. Does Hawthorne mean to describe the soul's precautions against the repetition of overt sin? Apparently not, since the "stealthy foe" is identified as guilt rather than as the forbidden urge to sin. But if the metaphor means what it says, how are we to reduce it to common sense? It is plainly inappropriate to see "guilt" as the original assailant of the citadel, for feelings of guilt arise only in reaction against condemned acts or thoughts. The metaphor would seem to be plausible only in different terms from those that Hawthorne selected.

To resolve this confusion we must first of all guess what Hawthorne intended to say. There is no reason to doubt that he meant to comment on the persistent threat of guilt-feelings against the soul of a man who has once sinned. This is made certain not only by his choice of terms but by the context of the metaphor, for his purpose is to explain why Dimmesdale's efforts to flee from guilt cannot succeed. We are left, then, with the problem of finding why "guilt" has been characterized as an invader of the soul and its persistent enemy. The commonsense objection that this role properly belongs to the temptation or libidinal impulse proves, when we reconstruct Dimmesdale's history, to be well founded. In his act of adultery Dimmesdale succumbed to an urge which, because of his ascetic beliefs, he had been unprepared to find in himself. Nor, given the high development of his conscience and the
sincerity of his wish to be holy, could he have done otherwise than to have violently expelled and denied the sensual impulse, once gratified. It was at this point—the point at which one element of Dimmesdale's nature passed a sentence of exile on another—that the true psychological damage was done.

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The original foe of his tranquillity was guilt, but guilt for his thoughtless surrender to passion. In this light we see that Hawthorne's metaphor has condensed two ideas that are intimately related. Dimmesdale's moral enemy is the forbidden impulse, while his psychological enemy is guilt; but there is no practical difference between the two, for they always appear together. We may understand Hawthorne's full meaning if we identify the potential invader of the citadel as the libidinal impulse, now necessarily bearing a charge of guilt.

This hypothesis helps us to understand the rather sophisticated view of Dimmesdale's psychology that Hawthorne's metaphor implies. Dimmesdale's conscience (the watchful guard) has been delegated to prevent repetition of the temptation's "unforgotten triumph." The deterrent weapon of conscience is its capacity to generate feelings of guilt, which are of course painful to the soul. Though the temptation retains all its strength (its demand for gratification), this is counterbalanced by its burden of guilt. To readmit the libidinal impulse through the guarded breach (to gratify it in the original way) would be to admit insupportable quantities of guilt. The soul thus keeps temptation at bay by meeting it with an equal and opposite force of condemnation.

With this much enlightenment we may turn to the most arresting feature of Hawthorne's metaphor. The banished impulse, thwarted in one direction, "might even, in his subsequent assaults, select some other avenue, in preference to that where he had formerly succeeded." Indeed, the logic of Hawthorne's figure seems to assure success to the temptation in finding another means of entrance, since conscience is massing all its defenses at the breach. This devious invasion would evidently be less gratifying than the direct one, for we are told
that the stealthy foe would stay in readiness to attack the breach again. Some entry, nevertheless, is preferable to none, especially when it can be effectuated with a minimum resistance on the part of conscience. Hawthorne has set up a strong likelihood that the libidinal impulse will change or disguise its true object, slip past the guard of conscience with relative ease, and take up a secret dwelling in the soul.

In seeking to explain what Hawthorne means by this "other avenue" of invasion, we must bear in mind the double reference of his metaphor. It describes the soul's means of combating both sin and guilt—that is, both gratification of the guilty impulse and consciousness of it. For Dimmesdale the greatest torment is to acknowledge that his libidinous wishes are really his, and not a temptation from the Devil. His mental energy is directed, not simply to avoiding sin, but to expelling it from consciousness—in a word, to repressing it. The "other avenue" is the means his libido chooses, given the fact of repression, to gratify itself surreptitiously.

If we are thus obliged to introduce the name of Freud, who "discovered" repression in the sense of formulating its operation in scientific terms, there is no cause for alarm over the anachronism. Hawthorne's metaphor, in dividing the psyche into forces that oppose one another in dynamic balance, already contains an implicit theory of repression, and the substitution of "ego," "superego," and "libido" for Hawthorne's "soul," "watchful guard," and "stealthy foe" does no injustice to Hawthorne's meaning. The following account of Sándor Ferenczi's makes the "Freudianism" of Hawthorne's idea clear, and at the same time helps us toward a solution of the problem at hand:

The healthy person protects himself successfully against the return of these wishes and the sudden appearance of the objects of desire by erecting moral ramparts round these "repressed complexes." Feelings of shame and disgust conceal from him all his life the fact that he still really cherishes those despised, disgusting, shameful things as wish-ideas. Things happen in this way, however, only with
healthy people; but where, owing to some peculiarity of temperament or too great a strain on those protective ramparts, the psychic mechanism of repression fails, a "return of the repressed material" occurs, and with it the formation of symptoms of disease.  

If we grant that Hawthorne's metaphor bears the interpretation I have given it, we can say that it is an even better reflection of Freud's views than Ferenczi's very similar passage. Ferenczi (in an evangelistic lecture to skeptical physicians) was merely trying to show that repressed wishes keep their vitality in the unconscious and are capable of re-emerging in the form of neurotic symptoms if repression should be weakened. Hawthorne, too, sees that the frustrated wish never ceases its clamor for gratification; the breach cannot be repaired and must be constantly guarded. But most importantly, Hawthorne distinguishes between direct and indirect gratification. When Ferenczi says that a failure of repression leads to "the formation of symptoms of disease," he is oversimplifying his own theoretical principles. In Freudian theory the symptoms of disease are produced as a compromise between the unwelcome libido and the ego, which has suffered from the libido's incessant demands. The neurotic symptom expresses, therefore, both the original wish and the punishment of that wish; in its ultimate form it is no longer recognizable as an embodiment of the forbidden wish, and for this reason the ego relents in its censorship. What we have, then, in a neurotic symptom is not a total failure of repression (which would allow the wish to be gratified in undisguised form) but a weakening of repression, contingent upon the libido's agreement to change its object or its aim. If we were to suppose that Hawthorne knew his Freud, we would find in the "other avenue" into the citadel an excellent figure for this psychic compromise that issues in neurosis.

Now, I need not be reminded that such scholastic reasoning is dangerous and without evidential value. Thus far we have proved nothing about Arthur Dimmesdale's psychology, but

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have simply indulged in a game of abstract theorizing. We can, however, already draw a conclusion that will be helpful in studying the only important evidence—Dimmesdale's behavior. We can say that Hawthorne, whether or not his thinking anticipates Freud's to the extent I believe, regards his characters with the same clinical interest that a psychologist would assume. His metaphor of the besieged citadel cuts beneath the theological and moral explanations in which Dimmesdale puts his faith, and shows us instead an inner world of unconscious compulsion. Guilt will continue to threaten Dimmesdale in spite of his resolution to escape it, and indeed (as the fusion of "temptation" and "guilt" in the metaphor implies) this resolution will only serve to upset the balance of power and enable guilt to conquer the soul once more. Hawthorne's metaphor demands that we see Dimmesdale not as a free moral agent but as a victim of feelings he can neither understand nor control. And the point can be extended to include Chillingworth and even Hester, whose minds have been likewise altered by the consequences of the unforgotten act, the permanent breach in the wall. If, as Chillingworth asserts, the awful course of events has been "a dark necessity" from the beginning, it is not because Hawthorne believes in Calvinistic predestination or wants to imitate Greek tragedy, but because all three of the central characters have been ruled by motives inaccessible to their conscious will.

As for the more specific implications we have drawn from Hawthorne's metaphor, these begin to take on substance as we examine Arthur Dimmesdale in the forest scene. His nervousness, his mental exhaustion, and his compulsive gesture of placing his hand on his heart reveal a state that we would now call neurotic inhibition. His lack of energy for any of the outward demands of life indicates how all-absorbing is his internal trouble, and the awful stigma on his chest, though a rather crass piece of symbolism, must also be interpreted psychosomatically. Nor can we avoid observing that Dimmesdale shows the neurotic's predictable reluctance to give up his
symptoms. How else can we account for his obtuseness in not having recognized Chillingworth’s character? “I might have known it!” he murmurs when Hester forces the revelation upon him. “I did know it! Was not the secret told me in the natural recoil of my heart, at the first sight of him, and as often as I have seen him since? Why did I not understand?” The answer, hidden from Dimmesdale’s surface reasoning, is that his relationship with Chillingworth, taken together with the change in mental economy that has accompanied it, has offered perverse satisfactions which he is even now powerless to renounce. It is Hester, whose will is relatively independent and strong, who makes the decision to break with the past.

We can understand the nature of Dimmesdale’s illness by defining the state of mind that has possessed him for seven years. It is, of course, his concealed act of adultery that lies at the bottom of his self-torment. But why does he lack the courage to make his humiliation public? Dimmesdale himself offers us the clue in a cry of agony: “Of penance I have had enough! Of penitence there has been none! Else, I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment-seat.” The plain meaning of this outburst is that Dimmesdale has never surmounted the libidinal urge that produced his sin. His “penance,” including self-flagellation and the more refined torment of submitting to Chillingworth’s influence, has failed to purify him because it has been unaccompanied by the feeling of penitence, the resolution to sin no more. Indeed, I submit, Dimmesdale’s penance has incorporated and embodied the very urge it has been punishing. If, as he says, he has kept his garments of mock holiness because he has not repented, he must mean that in some way or another the forbidden impulse has found gratification in the existing circumstances, in the existing state of his soul. And this state is one of morbid remorse. The stealthy foe has re-entered the citadel through the avenue of remorse.

This conclusion may seem less paradoxical if we bear in mind a distinction between remorse and true repentance. In
both states the sinful act is condemned morally, but in strict repentance the soul abandons the sin and turns to holier thoughts. Remorse of Dimmesdale's type, on the other hand, is attached to a continual re-enacting of the sin in fantasy and hence a continual renewal of the need for self-punishment. Roger Chillingworth, the psychoanalyst manqué, understands the process perfectly: "the fear, the remorse, the agony, the ineffectual repentance, the backward rush of sinful thoughts, expelled in vain!" 

The self-punishment in this sequence is masochistic; that is, it contains an element of pleasure or release, for the otherwise repressed libido, having diverted its aim from sexual union to aggression, has diverted its object from Hester to Dimmesdale's own ego.

In plainer language, we may say that Dimmesdale is helpless to reform himself at this stage because the passional side of his nature has found an outlet, albeit a self-destructive one, in his present miserable situation. The original sexual desire has been granted recognition on the condition of being punished, and the punishment itself is a form of gratification. Not only the overt masochism of fasts, vigils, and self-scourging (which makes him laugh, by the way), but also Dimmesdale's emaciation and weariness attest to the spending of his energy against himself. It is important to recognize that this is the same energy previously devoted to passion for Hester, for we shall see in the last week of his life that he can indulge either in that passion, or in masochistic remorse, or in the third course that he eventually finds himself impelled to follow. We do not exaggerate the facts of the novel in saying that the question of Dimmesdale's fate, for all its religious decoration, amounts essentially to the question of what use is to be made of his libido.

We are now prepared to understand the choice that the poor minister faces when Hester holds out the idea of escape. It is not a choice between a totally unattractive life and a happy one (not even Dimmesdale could feel hesitation in that case), but rather a choice of satisfactions, of avenues into the citadel. The seemingly worthless alternative of continuing to admit
the morally condemned impulse by the way of remorse has the advantage, appreciated by all neurotics, of preserving the status quo. Still, the other course naturally seems more attractive. If only repression can be weakened—and this is just the task of Hester's rhetoric about freedom—Dimmesdale can hope to return to the previous "breach" of adultery. In reality, however, these alternatives offer no chance for happiness or even survival. The masochistic course leads straight to death, while the other, which Dimmesdale allows Hester to choose for him, is by now so foreign to his withered, guilt-ridden nature that it can never be put into effect. The resolution to sin will, instead, necessarily redouble the opposing force of conscience, which will be stronger in proportion to the overtness of the libidinal threat. As the concluding chapters of *The Scarlet Letter* prove, the only possible result of this attempt of Dimmesdale's to impose, in Hawthorne's phrase, "a total change of dynasty and moral code, in that interior kingdom," will be a counterrevolution so violent that it will slay Dimmesdale himself along with his upstart libido. We thus see that in the forest, while Hester is prating of escape, renewal, and success, Arthur Dimmesdale unknowingly faces a choice of two paths to suicide.

Now, this psychological impasse is sufficient in itself to refute the most "liberal" critics of *The Scarlet Letter*—those who take Hester's proposal of escape as Hawthorne's own advice. However much we may admire Hester and prefer her boldness to Dimmesdale's self-pity, we cannot agree that she understands human nature very deeply. Her shame, despair, and solitude "had made her strong," says Hawthorne, "but taught her much amiss." What she principally ignores is the truth embodied in the metaphor of the ruined wall, that men are altered irreparably by their violations of conscience. Hester herself is only an apparent exception to this rule. She handles her guilt more successfully than Dimmesdale because, in the first place, her conscience is less highly developed than his; and secondly because, as he tells her, "Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an
open triumph over the evil within thee, and the sorrow without.” Those who believe that Hawthorne is an advocate of free love, that adultery has no ill effects on a “normal” nature like Hester’s, have failed to observe that Hester, too, undergoes self-inflicted punishment. Though permitted to leave, she has remained in Boston not simply because she wants to be near Arthur Dimmesdale, but because this has been the scene of her humiliation. “Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil,” says Hawthorne. “The chain that bound her here was of iron links, and galling to her inmost soul, but never could be broken.”

We need not dwell on this argument, in any event, for the liberal critics of The Scarlet Letter have been in retreat for many years. Their place has been taken by a more sophisticated school, the Christian or “neo-orthodox” critics. Their view, which is most fully expounded in Roy R. Male’s study, Hawthorne’s Tragic Vision, is that the plot of The Scarlet Letter brings us from sin to redemption, from materialistic error to pure spiritual truth. The moral heart of the novel, according to Male, is contained in Dimmesdale’s Election Sermon, and Dimmesdale himself is pictured as Christ-like in his holy death. Hester, in comparison, degenerates spiritually after the first few chapters; the fact that her thoughts are still on earthly love while Dimmesdale is looking toward heaven is a serious mark against her. Indeed, Male sides with those spectators of the final scene who believe that their sainted pastor has arranged the manner of his death in the form of a useful parable, and that he has chosen to die in the arms of Hester, the fallen woman, only to illustrate “that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike.” Chillingworth, parasite though he is, may be understood in a deeper sense as a healer, for he enables Dimmesdale to achieve the “moral growth” that culminates in his salvation.

This redemptive scheme, which rests on the uncriticized assumption that Hawthorne’s point of view is identical with Dimmesdale’s at the end, seems to me to misrepresent the “felt life” of The Scarlet Letter more drastically than the
liberal reading. Both interpretations take for granted the erroneous belief that the novel consists essentially of the dramatization of a moral idea. The tale of human frailty and sorrow, as Hawthorne called it in his opening chapter, is treated merely as the fictionalization of an article of faith. Hawthorne himself, we might note, did not share this ability of his critics to shrug off the psychological reality of his novel. The Scarlet Letter is, he said, "positively a hell-fired story, into which I found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light." We shall see various points where the Christian reading fails to do justice to this "hell-fired story," but it is more important to recognize that the generic error is that of extracting a definitive meaning from the novel before sensing the full complexity of its situation.

Returning to the forest scene, then, we can appreciate the terrible irony of Dimmesdale's exhilaration when he has resolved to flee with Hester. Being, as Hawthorne describes him, "a true religionist," to whom it would always remain essential "to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework," he is ill-prepared to savor his new freedom for what it is. His joy is that of his victorious libido, of the "enemy" which is now presumably sacking the citadel, but this release is acknowledged by consciousness only after a significant Bowdlerization:

"Do I feel joy again?" cried he, wondering at himself. "Me-thought the germ of it was dead in me! O 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 merciful! This is already the better life! Why did we not find it sooner?"

Hawthorne's portrayal of self-delusion and his wealth of compassion are nowhere so powerfully combined as in this passage. The Christian reference to the putting on of the New Man is grimly comic in the light of what has inspired it, but we feel no more urge to laugh at Dimmesdale than we do at Mil-
ton's Adam. If in his previous role he has been only, in Hawthorne's phrase, a "subtle, but remorseful hypocrite," here he is striving pathetically to be sincere. His case becomes poignant to us as we imagine the revenge that his tyrannical conscience must soon take on these new promptings of the flesh. To say merely that Dimmesdale is in a state of theological error is to miss part of the irony; it is precisely his theological loyalty that necessitates his confusion. His sexual nature must be either denied with unconscious sophistry, as in this scene, or rooted out with heroic fanaticism, as in his public confession at the end.

On one point, however, Dimmesdale is not mistaken: he has been blessed with a new energy of body and will. The source of this energy is obviously his libido, meaning his sexual passion; he has become physically strong to the degree that he has ceased directing his passion against himself and has attached it to his thoughts of Hester. But as he now returns to town, bent upon renewing his hypocrisy for the four days until the Election Sermon has been given and the ship is to sail, we see that his "cure" has been very incomplete. "At every step he was incited to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other, with a sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional; in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse." The minister can scarcely keep from blaspheming to his young and old parishioners as he passes them in the street; he longs to shock a deacon and an old widow with arguments against Christianity, to poison the innocence of a naive girl who worships him, to teach wicked words to a group of children, and to exchange bawdy jests with a drunken sailor. Though Male attributes most of these urges to Dimmesdale's "rejection of the old rhetorical discipline," they evidently constitute a return of the repressed, and in a form which Freud noted to be typical in severely holy persons. The fact that these impulses have reached the surface of Dimmesdale's mind attests to the weakening of repression in the forest scene, while their perverse and furtive character shows us that repression has not ceased al-
together. Hawthorne's own explanation, that Dimmesdale's hidden vices have been awakened because "he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin" (italics mine), gives conscience its proper role as a causative factor. Having left Hester's immediate influence behind in the forest, and having returned to the society where he is known for his purity, Dimmesdale already finds his "wicked" intentions constrained into the form of a verbal naughtiness which he cannot even bring himself to express.

Now Dimmesdale, after a brief interview with the taunting Mistress Hibbins, arrives at his lodgings. Artfully spurning the attentions of Roger Chillingworth, he eats his supper "with ravenous appetite" and sits down to write the Election Sermon. Without really knowing what words he is setting on paper, and wondering to himself how God could inspire such a sinner as himself, he works all night "with earnest haste and ecstasy." The result is a sermon which, with the addition of spontaneous interpolations in the delivery, will impress its Puritan audience as an epitome of holiness and pathos. Nothing less than the descent of the Holy Ghost will be held sufficient to account for such a performance. Yet insofar as the Election Sermon will consist of what Dimmesdale has recorded in his siege of "automatic writing," we must doubt whether Hawthorne shares the credulous view of the Puritans. Dimmesdale has undergone no change in attitude from the time of his eccentric impulses in the street until the writing of the sermon. Though he works in the room where he has fasted and prayed, and where he can see his old Bible, he is not (as Male argues) sustained by these reminders of his faith. Quite the contrary: he can scarcely believe that he has ever breathed such an atmosphere. "But he seemed to stand apart, and eye this former self with scornful, pitying, but half-envious curiosity. That self was gone! Another man had returned out of the forest; a wiser one; with a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former never could have reached."

In short, the Election Sermon is written by the same man who
wants to corrupt young girls in the street, and the same newly liberated sexuality "inspires" him in both cases. If the written form of the Election Sermon is a great Christian document, as we have no reason to doubt, this is attributable not to Dimmesdale's holiness but to his libido, which gives him creative strength and an intimate acquaintance with the reality of sin.

Thus Dimmesdale's sexual energy has temporarily found a new (but equally "Freudian") alternative to its battle with repression—namely, sublimation. In sublimation the libido is not repressed but redirected to aims that are acceptable to conscience. The writing of the Election Sermon is just such an aim, and readers who are familiar with psychoanalysis will not be puzzled to find that Dimmesdale has passed without hesitation from the greatest blasphemy to flights of piety. The objection that Hawthorne had never heard of sublimation is irrelevant, for he is not illustrating a psychological theory but obeying his intuitive sense of human character. To say that Dimmesdale has suddenly become reverent again is to add to the text; all we really find is that he has turned his new-found energy to the purpose of literary creation.

There is little doubt, however, that Dimmesdale has recovered his piety in the three days that intervene between the writing of the sermon and its delivery. Both Hester and Mistress Hibbins "find it hard to believe him the same man" who emerged from the forest. Though he is deeply preoccupied with his imminent sermon as he marches past Hester, his energy seems greater than ever and his nervous mannerism is absent. We could say, if we liked, that at this point God's grace has already begun to sustain Dimmesdale, but there is nothing in Hawthorne's description to warrant a resort to supernatural explanations. It seems likely that Dimmesdale has by now felt the full weight of his conscience's case against adultery, has already determined to confess his previous sin publicly, and so is no longer suffering from repression. His libido is now free, not to attach itself to Hester, but to be sublimated into the passion of his sermon and then expelled forever.
The moral ironies in Dimmesdale's situation as he leaves the church, having preached with magnificent power, are extremely subtle. His career, as Hawthorne tells us, has touched the proudest eminence that any clergyman could hope to attain, yet this eminence is due, among other things, to "a reputation of whitest sanctity." Furthermore, Hester has been silently tormented by a curious mob while Dimmesdale has been preaching, and we feel the injustice of the contrast. And yet Dimmesdale has already made the choice that will render him worthy of the praise he is now receiving. If his public hypocrisy has not yet been dissolved, his hypocrisy with himself is over. It would be small-minded not to recognize that Dimmesdale has, after all, achieved a point of heroic independence—an independence not only of his fawning congregation but also of Hester, who frankly resents it. If the Christian reading of The Scarlet Letter judges Hester too roughly on theological grounds, it is at least correct in seeing that she lacks the detachment to appreciate Dimmesdale's final act of courage. While she remains on the steady level of her womanly affections, Dimmesdale, who has previously stooped below his ordinary manhood, is now ready to act with the exalted fervor of a saint.

All the moral ambiguity of The Scarlet Letter makes itself felt in Dimmesdale's moment of confession. We may truly say that no one has a total view of what is happening. The citizens of Boston, for whom it would be an "irreverent" thought to connect their minister with Hester, turn to various rationalizations to avoid comprehending the scene. Hester is bewildered, and Pearl feels only a generalized sense of grief. But what about Arthur Dimmesdale? Is he really on his way to heaven as he proclaims God's mercy in his dying words?

He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost for ever! Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!
This reasoning, which sounds so cruel to the ear of rational humanism, has the logic of Christian doctrine behind it; it rests on the paradox that a man must lose his life to save it. The question that the neo-orthodox interpreters of *The Scarlet Letter* invariably ignore, however, is precisely whether Hawthorne has prepared us to understand this scene only in doctrinal terms. Has he abandoned his usual irony and lost himself in religious transport?

The question ultimately amounts to a matter of critical method: whether we are to take the action of *The Scarlet Letter* in natural or supernatural terms. Hawthorne offers us naturalistic explanations for everything that happens in the novel, and though he also puts forth opposite theories—Pearl is an elf-child, Mistress Hibbins is a witch, and so on—this mode of thinking is discredited by the simplicity of the people who employ it. We cannot conscientiously say that Chillingworth is a devil, for example, when Hawthorne takes such care to show us how his devilishness has proceeded from his physical deformity, his sense of inferiority and impotence, his sexual jealousy, and his perverted craving for knowledge. Hawthorne carries symbolism to the border of allegory but does not cross over. As for Dimmesdale's retrospective idea that God's mercy has been responsible for the whole chain of events, we cannot absolutely deny that this may be true; but we can remark that if it is true, Hawthorne has vitiated his otherwise brilliant study of motivation.

Nothing in Dimmesdale's behavior on the scaffold is incongruous with his psychology as we first saw it in the forest scene. We merely find ourselves at the conclusion to the breakdown of repression that began there, and which has necessarily brought about a renewal of opposition to the forbidden impulses. Dimmesdale has been heroic in choosing to eradicate his libidinal self with one stroke, but his heroism follows a sound principle of mental economy. Further repression, which is the only other alternative for his conscience-ridden nature, would only lead to a slower and more painful death through masochistic remorse. Nor can we help but see that his confes-
sion, as we might expect from a scene in which the superego is to heap vengeance on the id, passes beyond a humble admission of sinfulness and touches the pathological. His stigma has become the central object in the universe: "God's eye beheld it! The angels were forever pointing at it! The Devil knew it well, and fretted it continually with the touch of his burning finger!" Dimmesdale is so obsessed with his own guilt that he negates the Christian dogma of original sin: "behold me here, the one sinner of the world!" This strain of egoism in his "triumphant ignominy" does not subtract from his courage, but it casts doubt on his theory that all the preceding action has been staged by God for the purpose of saving his soul.

However much we may admire Dimmesdale's final asceticism, there are no grounds for taking it as Hawthorne's moral ideal. The last developments of plot in The Scarlet Letter approach the "mythic level" which redemption-minded critics love to discover, but the mythicism is wholly secular and worldly. Pearl, who has hitherto been a "messenger of anguish" to her mother, is emotionally transformed as she kisses Dimmesdale on the scaffold. "A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it." Thanks to Chillingworth's bequest—for Chillingworth, too, finds that a spell is broken when Dimmesdale confesses, and he is capable of at least one generous act before he dies—Pearl is made "the richest heiress of her day, in the New World." At last report she has become the wife of a European nobleman and is living very happily across the sea. This grandiose and perhaps slightly whimsical epilogue has one undeniable effect on the reader: it takes him as far as possible from the scene and spirit of Dimmesdale's farewell. Pearl's immense wealth, her noble title, her lavish and impractical gifts to Hester, and of course her successful escape from Boston all serve to disparage the Puritan sense of reality. From this distance we look back to Dimmesdale's egocentric
confession, not as a moral example which Hawthorne would like us to follow, but as the last link in a chain of compulsion that has now been dissolved.

To counterbalance this impression we have the case of Hester, for whom the drama on the scaffold can never be completely over. After raising Pearl in a more generous atmosphere, she voluntarily returns to Boston to resume, or rather to begin, her state of penitence. We must note, however, that this penitence seems to be devoid of theological content; Hester has returned because Boston and the scarlet letter offer her "a more real life" than she could find elsewhere, even with Pearl. This simply confirms Hawthorne's emphasis on the irrevocability of guilty acts. And though Hester is now selfless and humble, it is not because she believes in Christian submission but because all passion has been spent. To the women who seek her help "in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion," Hester does not disguise her conviction that women are pathetically misunderstood in her society. She assures her wretched friends that at some later period "a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness." Hawthorne may or may not believe the prediction, but it has a retrospective importance in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's characters originally acted in ignorance of passion's strength and persistence, and so they became its slaves.

Let us admit, then, that Hawthorne is far from sharing the Puritan severity in matters of sex. It is an obvious point, and to say that this is the "meaning" of *The Scarlet Letter* would be as superficial as to see everything through the dark glass of Dimmesdale's theology. Hawthorne himself, in explaining why we should not judge Roger Chillingworth too harshly, gives a clinical analysis of passion which removes any lingering basis for reducing the novel to one moral program or another. "It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry," he says, "whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom. Each, in its utmost development, supposes a high degree of
intimacy and heart-knowledge; each renders one individual dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another; each leaves the passionate lover, or the no less passionate hater, forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his object.” These penetrating words remind us that the tragedy of The Scarlet Letter has chiefly sprung, not from Puritan society’s imposition of false social ideals on the three main characters, but from their own inner world of frustrated desires. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth have been ruled by feelings only half perceived, much less understood and regulated by consciousness; and these feelings, as Hawthorne’s bold equation of love and hatred implies, successfully resist translation into terms of good and evil. Hawthorne leaves us, ultimately, not with the Sunday-school lesson that we should “be true,” but with a tale of passion through which we glimpse the ruined wall—the terrible certainty that, as Freud put it, the ego is not master in its own house. It is this intuition that enables Hawthorne to reach a tragic vision worthy of the name: to see to the bottom of his created characters, to understand the inner necessity of everything they do, and thus to pity and forgive them in the very act of laying bare their weaknesses.