Life Beyond The Scarlet Letter

Shauna Ciarco DeMarco
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/813

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Life Beyond The Scarlet Letter

By

Shauna Ciarco DeMarco

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of
Master of Arts

August 2010

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

English Department

Certified by:

Dr. Marietta Morrissey
Dean of College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Monika M. Elbert
Thesis Sponsor

Dr. Daniel Bronson
Committee Member

Dr. Rita Jacobs
Committee Member

Dr. Daniel Bronson
English Department Chair
Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* recounts the events that occur during a time span of seven years that follows an adulterous encounter between two of the novel's three protagonists. This act took place before the novel begins and details of it are never disclosed to the reader. The novel's focus remains fixed on the events that occur after the symbol of this sin, the scarlet letter "A," is placed upon the breast of Hester Prynne.

While Hester boldly and steadfastly confronts a new life as a scorned woman and single mother, the father of her child, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, is tortured by guilt and Hester's cuckolded husband, Roger Chillingworth, is driven by revenge. The behaviors of these three individuals in response to this one sinful act reveal the true character of each protagonist, and Hester is the only one who is able to overcome the situation that eventually consumes and defeats both of the male protagonists. *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates that one can best identify a person not by the trouble he/she encounters, but rather by the behaviors a person demonstrates in response to a problematic situation.

Hester, the novel's heroine, is clearly a strong woman at the start of the novel, but she becomes even more empowered as the plot develops. Her quiet strength, intense passion, and her ability to remain devoted to her personal beliefs and values cause her to neither conform to society, as Hepzibah does in *The House of Seven Gables*, or attempt to reform society, like Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, but instead allow her to adapt to society as wearer of the scarlet letter. Hester's actions and demeanor cause others to eventually view her as a figure of strength, endurance, and reform, one who transforms a stigma of sinfulness and weakness into an emblem of dignity and admiration.

The religious title and garb of Arthur Dimmesdale prohibits others from viewing him as a sinner like Hester, and Roger Chillingworth who presents himself to be a
scholarly doctor, is never suspected to be a man seeking revenge upon this holy reverend as he assists him with his medical ailments. The outward appearances of these men mask their inner selves, just as the Puritanical dress and actions of the audience in this work hides their impurities. *The Scarlet Letter* points out that the judgments society makes based on appearances alone are often inaccurate and false.

The act of adultery that seemed so important at the start of the novel is deemed insignificant by the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*. The symbol of this one act, the scarlet "A," becomes an empowering force for Hester while it is a force which overpowers both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth and ultimately leads to their demise. Hester demonstrates the ability to control the circumstances surrounding her, thereby prohibiting them from gaining full control over her life.

As the novel concludes, Hester is no longer defined as an adulteress, but rather a mother whose inner strength and maternal values save her from becoming stigmatized as society's sinner; she accepts her punishment, fulfills her sentence, yet remains an individual within society. Hester adapts her lifestyle to establish her place in society without forfeiting her individuality and represents one who has achieved balance between her values, her responsibilities, and her position within her community. At the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester ironically portrays the ideal moral figure, one who observes, feels, ponders, and adapts enough to survive in a hostile world, one who silently alters society's views through her deeds and actions, and bequeaths these skills of survival and adaptation onto the generation that follows. Hester Prynne is the one protagonist who is able to move on with life beyond the scarlet letter.
LIFE BEYOND THE SCARLET LETTER

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in English

by

SHAUNA CIARCO DEMARCO

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2010
Copyright © 2010 by Shauna Ciarco DeMarco. All rights reserved.
Acknowledgements

For Robert, Gabriella, Bobby, Matthew, and Anthony DeMarco for your love, patience and cooperation; and for Phil and Kathleen Ciarco for your undying, heartfelt support.
Table of Contents

An Introduction 1

Chapter One: 7
Moving Beyond the Scarlet Letter

Chapter Two: 20
“A” is for Audience:
The Audience of and in Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter

Chapter Three: 32
Hester’s Union with the Scarlet Letter

Conclusion 54

Bibliography 57
Life Beyond The Scarlet Letter

An Introduction

*The Scarlet Letter* begins in-medias-res, making it clear to its readers that the acts preceding the novel’s introductory event are not as significant as this moment or the plot events that follow. Since the novel does not incorporate flashback about the act that results in Hester’s adornment of the scarlet letter, the reader is not privy to the details leading up to Hester’s presentation as an adulterous woman, and this aspect of the work’s structure serves as the foundation of the novel’s theme. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates that the behaviors which lead an individual to a problematic situation are often less significant than the way an individual behaves in response to the consequential situation. The response of Hester Prynne to the difficult situations she encounters in *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates that one’s behavior can result in the empowerment of oneself; the composure Hester models, the quietude with which she handles her punishment, and the exuberant passion she displays portray Hester to be a strong woman who becomes more empowered as the plot unfolds. She is placed in stark contrast to the novel’s two male protagonists who are consumed and defeated by the same situation that Hester overcomes.

Hester emerges as the survivor of the three adult characters directly affected by the understood act of adultery; Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth are both physically weakened by the situation as the novel progresses, and this deterioration foreshadows their ultimate demise. Marked, stigmatized, and faced with the challenges of motherhood, Hester is indeed hardened, but retains her health and her appearance and sustains residency within the community that rejects her.
No demands are placed upon Hester to remain in her society; she is free to move, yet chooses not to do so. The narrator within the work ponders Hester's reason for staying:

Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first, had converted the forest-land, still so uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne's wild and dreary, but life-long home . . .

The chain that bound her here was of iron links, and galling to her inmost soul, but never could be broken . . . it might be that another feeling kept her within the scene and pathway that had been so fatal. There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 75-6)

Perhaps she is in search of redemption; or perhaps hopes of a future relationship with the father of her daughter, Pearl, keep Hester in place. Regardless of the reason, the result of her decision is ironic: With the scarlet letter glimmering upon her breast, Hester's presence among a Puritan people who persecuted her for an impure action has as great an impact upon them as it has upon her own self.

Although the obvious Other in this novel, an independent passionate woman living among Puritan people, Hester serves to point out their impure ways. This impurity is established by the ways Hester is treated by various members of her society: some seek to have control over her maternal rights; others try to impose silence upon her, and
all fail to recognize their beloved religious leader as the father of her daughter. Hester’s otherness is a powerful force in this literary work, causing the gaze of the reader to shift as the novel progresses; the gaze that is upon Hester, the convicted adulteress, at the start of the work, shifts its focus upon the Puritan society, revealing their inequities, their frequently rash acts of judgment, and their hypocrisy, thereby exposing the sinful truths that can exist behind a façade of religious wholesomeness.

The Puritan audience within the novel forms its own character presence. Larry J. Reynolds identifies the people of Hester’s town, not Hester herself, to be the focus of this novel. He asserts that the scaffold scene at the start of *The Scarlet Letter* signifies Hawthorne’s abhorrence for movements founded on the provocation of “specter evidence, lies, and mental weakness” (64). Hester, then, acts as the lens through which the readers examine this Puritan society as the narrator tells what she observes, what she feels, and what she thinks. Many of the onlookers, particularly the females, call for Hester’s severe punishment and even her execution: “What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown or the flesh of her forehead? . . . This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 56). Reynolds uses this to point out that Hawthorne does not present witches or devils demonizing the thoughts of people, but instead, human beings are encouraging that evil acts be done unto another human being.

Hester faces persecution from the political sect, is denied support from her religious leader (who is also the father of her child), and is socially rejected, but she retains her place as a member of this community. As one who was gazed upon at the start of the novel, by readers and townspeople alike, the end of the novel shows how
Hester comes to transfix the gaze upon the Puritans, including the two male protagonists, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, thus signifying the need for humans to gaze upon the actions of their own societies and the behaviors of their own selves before passing judgment upon others.

The narrator describes how others spoke of Hester with cruel words that caused her to feel “anguish, by the rudest touch upon the tenderest spot” and gave harsh glances that “fell upon the sufferer’s breast like a rough blow upon an ulcerated wound” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 79). Although seven years pass from the novel’s beginning to its conclusion, the pain of this symbol remains: “Hester Prynne had always this dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token; the spot never grew callous; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive with daily torture” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 80). Likewise, readers are informed of the means by which Hester coped with such situations:

Hester had schooled herself long and well; she never responded to these attacks, save by a flush of crimson that rose irrepressibly over her pale cheek, and again subsided into the depths of her bosom. She was patient, - a martyr, indeed, - but she forbore to pray for her enemies; lest, in spite of her forgiving aspirations, the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 79)

Hester is not consumed by an obedient dedication to her society nor does she scorn what others think of her. Monika Elbert explains, “Hester, precisely because she stands outside the realm of the religious and scientific law and cannot find a home outside her own psyche, is able to confront her self honestly and to work creatively with her
existence” (“Hester and the New Feminine Vision” 181). The scarlet letter, or more particularly the situation from which this letter resulted, certainly took Hester “out of the ordinary relations with humanity . . . inclosing her in a sphere by herself” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 58). Within this sphere, there was no place for Dimmesdale or Chillingworth because they were too overpowered by the consequential emotions of the adulterous encounter: Dimmesdale by guilt and Chillingworth by revenge. The mark Hester wears upon her bosom overpowers these men; neither is able to move on with life beyond the scarlet letter.

The novel’s expository scene of Hester’s presentation as an adulterous mother who emerges from the prison with babe in arms, to words and stares of mockery from her Puritan neighbors, is one of great intensity, but the narrator suggests that the plot events which follow will be of even greater intensity stating, “the sufferer should never know the intensity of what he endures by its present torture, but chiefly by the pang that rankles after it” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 59). This moment, then, is not Hester’s most difficult one to endure. In fact, Hester’s time upon the scaffold was arguably a simple, peaceful experience in comparison to the difficulties she later faced. This, too, is foreshadowed:

Perhaps there was a more real torture in her first unattended footsteps from the threshold of the prison, than even in the procession and spectacle that have been described . . . Then, she was supported by an unnatural tension of the nerves . . . which enabled her to convert the scene into a kind of lurid triumph . . . With this unattended walk from her prison-door, began the daily custom, and she must either sustain and carry it forward by the
ordinary resources of her nature, or sink beneath it. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 74)

Hester is the only one of the novel’s three protagonists, all of whom are affected by this situation, to survive within society, and her survival reflects the novel’s major theme: the true strength of a person’s character is not determined by the clothes one wears or the title one bears, nor is it determined by the way one is perceived or the way one presents himself to society. Every human encounters troubles in life and it is each person’s handling of these problematic situations that reveals his/her true character. Clearly, Hester does not set out to be a reformer following her punishment, but the ways she responds to her own life experiences manifest her into an iconic figure of reform, one who survives by finding and utilizing power from within herself to turn a negative stigma of weakness and sinfulness into an emblem of dignity, strength, and endurance.
Chapter One: Moving Beyond the Scarlet Letter

Hawthorne’s opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* is titled “The Prison-Door” and the door, as well as the audience standing outside of it, is described vividly, providing a tone of darkness and gloom:

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes. (53)

The readers are informed that while these Puritan settlers desired their new home to be a “Utopia of human virtue and happiness,” they were well aware of the need to create space for two dark places that would inevitably be necessities of any society: a cemetery and a prison (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 53). It is from this door of the prison that Hester emerges, with three-month old Pearl in her arms, and the reader is led to wonder if the edifice from which she emerges is, indeed, the prison or if, in fact, the market place into which she enters could more accurately be deemed Hester’s prison.

Immediately there is obvious strength and determination noted in Hester’s character; as the town beadle places his hand upon her shoulder, Hester “repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free-will” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 57). This action represents the independent, strong qualities of Hester that remain consistent of her character throughout the novel, placing her in great contrast to the negative changes undergone by Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth following Hester’s persecution.
In “Hester and the New Feminine Vision,” Elbert identifies this moment, when “Hester quietly resists the beadle’s authority, and her haughty attitude affronts the crowd” as one of significance and as one which foreshadows behaviors of Hester yet to come:

Hester never imposes her needs or lifestyle on others, the way the minister Dimmesdale or . . . Chillingworth does. She lives by her own code when she remains silent, when she refuses to disclose Dimmesdale’s identity as the adulterer, as the father of her child. She also abides by her own standards when she finally breaks her vow of secrecy to Chillingworth and reveals to Dimmesdale that Chillingworth is his tormentor. (192-3)

Throughout the novel, Roger Chillingworth is consumed by rage and Arthur Dimmesdale is consumed by guilt. These overpowering emotions engulf the lives of both men. Conversely, Hester wears the scarlet letter, the symbol of her sin, and raises little Pearl, the personification of her adultery, yet she is never consumed by any emotion that disengages her ability to reason, function, and live healthily. Hester does not succumb to her stigma, nor does she seek to reject it; Hester adapts to life as a marked woman while retaining her independence and her right to live within this society and raise her daughter as she sees fit.

With Hester’s emergence from the prison comes the brightening of the novel’s imagery, seeming to align her with the only other symbol of brightness thus far, the fragrant “wild rose-bush” “rooted almost at the threshold” of the prison door, the one from which the reader is presented “one of its flowers [intended] . . . to symbolize some sweet moral blossom . . . or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 54). Hester is described in great detail:
The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes... And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like... than as she issued from the prison... her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 58)

Only the “SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom,” and symbolizing her as a sinner, radiates more brightly than she as she stands upon the scaffold in the market place for all to stare upon. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 58). As the novel progresses, it is this symbol that comes to have a power all its own, a power that is bestowed upon Hester to know when she is in the presence of a fellow sinner: “The scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 80). Hester soon becomes aware that many bore symbols of sin within, but only hers was worn for all to gaze upon.

While on the scaffold in the opening scene, Hester seeks mental escape in order to endure the pain of the gaze upon her, recalling “reminiscences, the most trifling and immaterial, passages of infancy and school-days, sports, childish quarrels, and little domestic traits of her maiden years” to relieve “the cruel weight and hardness of the reality” of this moment (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 61). While the Puritans gathered
around the scaffold are transfixed by the letter’s glittering appearance, Hester retreats within to find the serenity needed to overcome this moment of adversity in silence and quietude. Hester’s mental sojourn provides only a momentary respite, for her own glance upon Pearl in her arms and the “A” upon her breast reminds Hester that she now faces a reality from which there would be no escape, a reality that would require great endurance and would present even greater challenges than she had faced thus far. The silence, strength, and determination that work for her while on the scaffold continue to be displayed and utilized by Hester during the moments of adversity that lay ahead.

Roger Chillingworth presents himself to this Puritan community as a doctor, one who can assist Hester at this time of despair, and so he gains access to her inside the prison. It is during this meeting that his true identity is revealed to the reader; he is the husband of Hester, whom she believed to be dead and whom she has betrayed with an adulterous encounter. He demands that she keep his true identity hidden from all others as he sets forth to pay retribution to the man with whom she had the affair and whose identity she refuses to reveal. Chillingworth declares this to be his only ambition, one founded on anger, humiliation, and a need for revenge:

Believe me, Hester, there are few things, - whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought, - few things hidden from the man, who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery. Thou mayest cover up thy secret from the prying multitude. Thou mayest conceal it, too, from the ministers and magistrates, even as thou didst this day, when they sought to wrench the name out of thy heart, and give thee a partner on thy pedestal. But, as for
me, I come to the inquest with other senses than they possess. I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy. There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him. I shall see him tremble. I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares. Sooner or later, he must needs be mine! (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 73)

Chillingworth warns Hester to allow her husband to lie dead, as one “of whom no tidings shall ever come” or else “Beware!” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 73). The passionate rage that consumes Chillingworth intensifies and ultimately leads him to Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl’s father, under the guise of a trustworthy doctor who promises to assist him with the recent health ailments from which he suffers due to “his too unreserved self-sacrifice to the labors and duties of the pastoral relation” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 95).

Following his encounter in the prison with Hester, and his companionship with Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth’s physique exhibits obvious deformations, a change in appearance that Hester recognizes even as her maternal abilities are brought into question by the Governor in the presence of Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth:

Hester Prynne looked at the man of skill, and even then, with her fate hanging in the balance, was startled to perceive what a change had come over his features, - how much uglier they were, - how his dark complexion seemed to have grown duskier, and his figure more misshapen, - since the days when she had familiarly known him. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 97)
Questionable feelings arose among others about this “mysterious old physician” and his affiliation with their beloved reverend, but the society “could justify its prejudice against Roger Chillingworth by no fact or argument worthy of serious refutation” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 108). They, too, note the physical changes evident since his arrival:

A large number – and many of these were persons of such sober sense and practical observation, that their opinions would have been valuable, in other matters – affirmed that Roger Chillingworth’s aspect had undergone a remarkable change while he had dwelt in town, and especially since his abode with Mr. Dimmesdale. At first, his expression had been calm, meditative, scholarlike. Now, there was something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still the more obvious to sight, the oftener they looked upon him. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 108)

Chillingworth determines Dimmesdale to be the man with whom his wife had an affair, and his presence within Dimmesdale’s life is not to assist him with his health issues, but to destroy him for his sinful act. Chillingworth’s compulsive drive for self-vindication distorts him both physically and mentally and controls his every action.

Roger Chillingworth’s quest for destruction has a reciprocal effect; the hate that consumes him prevents him from finding any joy or happiness, and when his quest for justice ends with Dimmesdale’s sudden death, it leads to his own demise. This is explained in the novel’s final chapter, “Conclusion”:

Nothing was more remarkable than the change which took place, almost immediately after Mr. Dimmesdale’s death, in the appearance and
The death of Arthur Dimmesdale left Roger Chillingworth with no sense of need or motivation to live. He never sought revenge upon Hester; he made this clear during their conversation in the prison admitting, “I seek no vengeance, plot no evil against thee” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 72). Roger Chillingworth died within a year of the death of Arthur Dimmesdale.

The adultery of his wife took over the life of Hester’s husband. He declared his former self dead, assumed a new identity, and lived a life filled with anger and hate in quest of revenge. Even this learned man could not find the power to overcome or move forth from the situation, but instead succumbed to it, allowing it to take over his thoughts, actions, and even his physical appearance. Both Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are defeated by their inabilities to cope with the emotional turmoil caused by their respective positions as cuckold and adulterer.
The community’s vision of Arthur Dimmesdale as a pure, devoted man of religion remains throughout the novel’s entirety:

Reverend Dimmesdale; a young clergyman, who had come from one of the great English universities, bringing all the learning of the age into our wild forestland . . . He was a person of very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow, large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which, unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint.

Notwithstanding his high native gifts and scholar-like attainments, there was an air about this young minister, - an apprehensive, a startled, a half-frightened look, - as of a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own. Therefore, so far as his duties would permit, 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. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 66-7)

Following his “brief and reluctant part in the scene of Hester Prynne’s disgrace” Dimmesdale befriends Roger Chillingworth who offers assistance with his failing health, a condition believed by the Puritan people to be the result of his dedication and devotion to the ministry:

The health of Mr. Dimmesdale had evidently begun to fail . . . the paleness of the young minister’s cheek was accounted for by his too earnest
devotion to study, his scrupulous fulfillment of parochial duty, and, more than all, by the fasts and vigils of which he made a frequent practice, in order to keep the grossness of this earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp... His form grew emaciated; his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it; he was often observed, on any slight alarm or other sudden accident, to put his hand over his heart, with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain. (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 103)

There is no speculation among the members of his Puritan congregation that perhaps Dimmesdale was suffering from anything other than the effects of having been too good a being for the world, a world "not worthy to be any longer trodden by his feet" (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 103). In this novel, Hawthorne consistently shows that social judgment is greatly dependent upon appearances. Just as Hester's scarlet letter deems her an adulteress, Dimmesdale's religious garb and demeanor deem him a holy man, one incapable of giving in to evil temptations.

The narrator explains how Arthur Dimmesdale tries to overcome his adulterous encounter with Hester: "He longed to speak out, from his own pulpit, at the full height of his voice, and tell the people what he was... 'a pollution and a lie!'" but he fails (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 119-20). His congregation "fancied him the mouth-piece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love" and could never come to understand "the agony with which this public veneration tortured him" (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 119-20). Dimmesdale succumbs to the guilt associated with this act and cannot escape from it, even as Hester urges him to do so:
You have deeply and sorely repented. Your sin is left behind you, in the
days long past. Your present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it
seems in people's eyes. Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and
witnessed by good works? (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 153)

While one might expect Dimmesdale to be inclined to act as a support for Hester, after all
the public scrutiny that she has endured for this encounter that involved both of them,
Hester finds the strength to offer words of support to him. Dimmesdale declares his need
for others to see him as equal a sinner as Hester; he believes her scarlet letter is what has
allowed her to overcome the situation: "Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet
letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*
153). Dimmesdale makes a final endeavor to escape the guilt by agreeing to run off with
Hester following his final sermon, but his death upon the pulpit after making yet another
failed attempt to reveal his sin prevents this from happening. It becomes apparent that
Dimmesdale would never be able to find peace in life, but does find it in death: "While
the minister stood with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest
pain, had won a victory. Then, down he sank upon the scaffold" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet
Letter* 196). Dimmesdale escapes his agony with his passing, and this same passing
leaves Chillingworth with no zest for life, "with a blank, dull countenance, out of which
the life seem to have departed" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 196).

In *The Scarlet Mob of Scribblers: Rereading Hester Prynne*, Jamie Barlowe
points out, "Dimmesdale's inner turmoil manifests itself in his appearance, which
deteriorates steadily. He looks as though he needs help, whereas Hester looks as though
she grows stronger and more independent" (65). Furthermore, Barlowe contends that
“Dimmesdale’s narcissism,” demonstrated by his inwardly directed attention, is to blame for his inability to make “gestures toward Hester to help or comfort her,” thus leaving her to deal with the situation as an independent woman; the only assistance he ever offers is when he supports her custody of Pearl to the Governor, and even this had to be “enforced by Hester’s passion” (66-7). Baym concurs, declaring “Dimmesdale as Hester’s foil – weak, orthodox, conventional,” and she contends that his choice not to help Hester is a choice unsupported by Hawthorne since it leads Dimmesdale to a state of weakness:

As an actor in his own story, Dimmesdale, like so many other Hawthorne male characters, reflects the woman at his own cost as well as hers. In The Scarlet Letter, oppression or rejection of women . . . led to male downfall.

(“Revisiting Hawthorne’s Feminism” 109)

In “Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” Elbert also reflects upon the downfall of these men, professing that the “the aggressive traits of” Dimmesdale and Chillingworth cause them to “struggle for public power and ultimately destroy each other by cancelling out each other’s vindictiveness or competitiveness” (181). While Dimmesdale remains focused upon his guilty conscience and Chillingworth remains focused upon his vengeance, Hester remains focused on moving forth beyond the scarlet letter. Hester is the sole survivor, the only one whose selected modes of behavior in response to one sinful act empower her to continue living beyond this one brief moment in her life.

Brook Thomas declares Hester Prynne to be Hawthorne’s personification of “good citizenship.” In “Citizen Hester: The Scarlet Letter as Civic Myth,” Thomas performs a close reading of The Scarlet Letter and couples this with the work’s historical context in an effort to analyze what Hawthorne suggests about good citizenship through
the characters and diction of the work. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne questions the meaning of “good citizenship” with the ironic reference of Chillingworth, “the book’s villain” as a “reputable citizen” (Thomas 183). According to Thomas, Hawthorne’s meaning is clear: determining a good citizen by a given set of standards fails because “truly good citizens, it seems, cannot be distinguished from those who simply appear respectable” (183). Thomas concludes:

Hawthorne through Hester expands our notion of what [good citizenship] can entail by stressing the importance of actions within . . . civil society, a sphere of social interaction between economy and the state, composed of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially volunteer associations), social movements, and forms of public communication. Acutely aware that the stress on civic participation could obscure important interior matters of the heart and spirit, Hawthorne . . . tells the tale of how a “fallen woman” finds redemption by helping to generate within a repressive Puritan community the beginnings of an independent civil society. (184)

Hester exudes compassion and sympathy for others and seeks redemption through renewal, thereby demonstrating numerous acts of good citizenship despite one act of sinfulness. Hester accepts responsibility and punishment for her act of passion, and moves forward with her life, affected, but refusing to allow the negativity associated with the situation control the remainder of her life or the life of Pearl. Both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth appear to be good citizens, each giving in their own professional way to their community, but neither is able to retain control over the power of an emotion and
therefore cannot experience renewal or regeneration. Respectively, the emotions of guilt and revenge direct the lives of these men: one cannot forgive himself and the other cannot forgive the man who wronged him. Hester’s handling of the difficult situation she faced allows her to go forth in life beyond this act of adultery; her acceptance of responsibility and punishment coupled with her determination to live as an independent citizen enables this one-time adulteress to live a long, productive life.
Chapter Two: “A” is for Audience: The Audience of and in Hawthorne’s

The Scarlet Letter

Stephen Railton clearly identifies one thesis of his essay, “The Address of The Scarlet Letter” as a “focus on the difference between the way a text originally responds to its audience and the way readers subsequently respond to a text” (349). Railton prefaces the core of his writing by distinguishing between two literary terms: reader and audience. He explains that the audience precedes the novel; this is the group of people an author is writing for, with anticipation that they will be the predominant readers of his work. The reader is the antecedent to the novel’s publication; this is the person who will engage in the act of reading the novel; the reader may or may not be a member of the audience.

Railton concludes one must read The Scarlet Letter as a story with a seventeenth-century setting written for a nineteenth-century audience (348-9). Readers of post-nineteenth century are readers, but not part of Hawthorne’s audience. Railton acknowledges the difficulty this presents for modern readers of The Scarlet Letter: “It is almost impossible for us to imagine how those contemporary readers would have initially reacted to Hester Prynne . . . We cannot help but bring to the novel a very different set or preconceptions – about someone like Hester” (350). Later in his work, Railton expands on the limitations a modern reading presents:

But whereas Hawthorne’s culture had conditioned his audience, as they valued the image of themselves that the genteel culture sanctioned, to reject any identification with so dark a heroine, our own cultural experience, including the high ideological status accorded the dissatisfied
wife, leads today’s readers to prejudge Hester, so passionate a victim of a
bad marriage and a repressive society, almost antithetically. (367)
The sympathy and/or understanding that may be offered to Hester by modern readers was not expected of Hawthorne’s intended audience, but perhaps an awareness that such sympathy or understanding could be afforded to such a woman is one idea put forth in the novel, thereby supporting the need for sympathy and compassion among members of a society.

Like the writing of Railton, the essay by Larry J. Reynolds titled “Strangely Ajar With the Human Race,” also reminds readers to focus not only on Hester, but upon the novel’s audience, the Puritan community, for a complete understanding of this novel’s purpose. Reynolds explains:

Hawthorne’s politics, growing out of an aversion to violence, social unrest, moral absolutism, and faulty perception, expressed itself in The Scarlet Letter and throughout his works in allegories of self-delusion and faulty vision, where lies and myths of salvific action, rather than devils, take possession of people and lead them toward a hell they do not see ahead. . . Hawthorne can more fairly be credited with a “politics of imagination,” which allowed him to resist the kind of groupthink leading to violence and death. His habitual assumption of the perspectives of different persons . . . and his exposure to the viewpoints of those in foreign cultures . . . enabled him to appreciate multiple points of view in the midst of partisan propaganda and radical violence. (64)
Reynolds determines it is Hawthorne’s intent to point out that “the multitude, when aroused by false stimuli, especially if it is salacious, can be positively fatal” (64). Hawthorne wanted to impart onto readers of *The Scarlet Letter* the dangers that intended acts of goodness can assume when one perspective attempts to negate all other points of view: “righteousness can become totalitarian as it tries to impose one narrow view of the world upon others” (Reynolds 65). Elbert focuses her discussion on the effects of the patriarchal “multitude” upon women as she examines the behavior of the females in the crowd in her article, “Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” With regard to the first scaffold scene, Elbert asserts,

Indeed, these scolding women are simply mirror-images of the governors and ministers who surround them . . . These women, depicted by the narrator as harsh, rheumatic, and beyond the age of childbearing, have lost their mothering function and know no other way of gaining power in this closed society than to be as critical as their men in the persecution of one of their sisters . . . and [try] to outstrip the sternest Puritan judge and minister by becoming more male, more hard, than the toughest patriarch.

(176)

Hester’s silence and stature upon the scaffold separate her from the other Puritans, both men and women alike. She is, indeed, presented as the Other, one who does not follow the actions and beliefs of the crowd.

Each of the three scaffold scenes, around which the novel is based, has a specific audience. Hawthorne takes great care to make each audience known and uses literary imagery to also make the audience visible to his readers. For each scene, the audience is
an important aspect to its significance; the second scaffold scene would have had much
greater significance if the audience consisted of people who were unaware of
Dimmesdale’s position as Pearl’s father; at this moment the reader can assume that Roger
Chillingworth has already determined Dimmesdale to be the man with whom his wife
committed her act of adultery and so Dimmesdale’s words are no revelation, but instead
affirmation of what was previously suspected. In each of the scaffold scenes the
following question must be asked and answered for a clear and accurate understanding of
its significant purpose: Who is in judgment of whom? This then leads the reader to
ponder further questions: Is the one upon the scaffold the one gazing or the object of the
gaze? Is the one upon the scaffold the one to be judged or the one to judge others?

Jamie Barlowe quotes Shari Bernstock in her analysis of this first scaffold scene,
declaring it a “‘spectacle of womanhood, the female body dressed as icon or effigy,
wards off patriarchal fears of female sexuality’” (51). Barlowe explains the relevance of
this moment in the novel:

From the moment Hester Prynne crosses the prison threshold to venture
onto the scaffold – with the scarlet A and Pearl clutched to her breast – she
functions as a spectacle . . . “defining the object of the look as possessed
and controlled by the subject of the look.” (51)

In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey defines Freud’s
study of “scopophilia” as “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling
and curious gaze” (2184). Mulvey further describes the effects of a gaze upon a woman
in a patriarchal society:
The function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic . . . Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (2182)

Hester, the intended object of the gaze is not only attractive, as described by the narrator, but her femininity is clearly represented by the baby in her arms, and it is this maternal image that appears to empower her while weakening the males who gaze upon her. Mulvey explains:

In psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure . . . Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (2188)

Hester is a reminder for the audience that gazes upon her, even the females in the crowd, of their weaknesses and their impurities. She continues to be a reminder as they continue to gaze upon her and her scarlet letter when she is seen in public:

A mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert itself, as she met the sanctified frown of some matron . . . once more, the electric thrill would give her warning, - “Behold, Hester, here is a companion!” – and, looking
up, she would detect the eyes of a young maiden glancing at the scarlet letter, shyly and aside, and quickly averted, with a faint chill crimson in her cheeks; as if her purity were somewhat sullied by that momentary glance. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 81)

Hester bears the scarlet letter on her bosom, yet it ignites the hidden sin that others carry within their own souls. Her behavior to those acknowledging her A later comes to show her disdain for women who conform to a patriarchal society. Elbert explains:

Hester is victorious, weaving another meaning into her badge, her contempt for patriarchal approbation . . . Hester refuses to be assimilated into this matriphobic society. When sympathetic or grateful townspeople approach her, she hushes them: “she never raised her head to receive their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on.” (“Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” 187)

Such behaviors show the power of Hester’s silence; her quiet yet deliberate actions reveal her beliefs and values and her intent to resist conformity.

Great care is taken to describe the Puritan audience of each scene within the novel. In chapter one, the first lines of the novel are revealed as details of clothing colors and textures and facial features, along with an image of the number of people who await Hester’s exit from the prison are granted by the narrator. Chapter two begins in much the same way, emphasizing the anticipation with which the crowd awaits the prisoner’s appearance:
The grass plot before the jail, on Prison Lane, on a certain summer morning, not less than two centuries ago, was occupied by a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston; all with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door. Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful business in hand. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 54-5)

As Hester prepares to stand in punishment for her adulterous act, the crowd prepares to scorn her, to mock her, and to gaze upon her. They come forth in “throngs” with expressions of disgust on their faces, and taunts of hate come forth from their tongues, calling for her execution. But the audiences in the remaining scaffold scenes, whereby Dimmesdale, the church minister, presents himself and his sinfulness upon the scaffold, are in stark contrast to those presented in these first two scaffold scenes. Even when they do look at him and listen to him, it is with an overwhelming reverence that causes them to miss the meaning of his words.

The second scaffold scene occurs in chapter twelve, and the reader is led to presume that there is no audience watching as “the minister went up the steps,” because “the town was all asleep” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 122). Disturbed by the absence of his community members, Dimmesdale “shrieked aloud” in the anticipation of gaining an audience of townspeople (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 123). Instead, Dimmesdale’s first audience member, Reverend Mr. Wilson, fails to see him standing upon the platform, and the only audience that recognizes Dimmesdale – Hester, Pearl, and Chillingworth – was fully aware of his reason for standing upon this pillar of guilt prior
to the act of doing so, thereby deeming his act of revelation worthless. The third and final scaffold scene takes place in chapter twenty-three, in front of an audience described as Dimmesdale’s “hearers,” “silent and inactive spectators,” “People of New England . . . that have loved . . . and deemed [Dimmesdale] holy” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 191-5). People such as those described here, with deeply rooted, pre-conceived constructs of Dimmesdale’s character as a devout Puritan, cannot escape their vision of him as holy and, therefore, do not determine the meaning of his penitential speech offered in declaration of his sinfulness.

A most striking observation in the first scaffold scene of *The Scarlet Letter* is the identification of Chillingworth as the only person recognizable, or the only one noted as such by the narrator, to Hester as she stands in punishment for her act of adultery:

> Hester Prynne had been standing on her pedestal, still with a fixed gaze towards the stranger; so fixed a gaze, that at moments of intense absorption, all other objects in the visible world seemed to vanish leaving only him and her. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 64)

Hester has lived in the community for two years and yet there is nothing within the novel to support the notion that prior to this moment she was an outsider, but rather a community member like any other. Therefore, it is odd that Hawthorne does not allow the narrator to indicate that she gazes upon the faces of particular townspeople such as neighbors, fellow churchgoers, and friends. At this moment, it is significant to note that Hester’s gaze is upon them not as individuals, but as a collective, and the only individual she takes note of is the one who is Chillingworth, an outsider to the community and the husband she believed to be dead.
Hester’s gaze is once again upon this Puritan group in the final scaffold scene, as Dimmesdale stands before them in a confessional attempt. She sees how the large audience fails to recognize him in any way other than the holy person he always presented himself to be, despite his declaration as a sinner:

“Ye, that have loved me! – ye, that have deemed me holy! - behold me here, the one sinner of the world! At last! - at last! I stand upon the spot where, seven years since, I should have stood; here with this woman, whose arm, more than the little strength wherewith I have crept hitherward, sustains me, at this dreadful moment, from groveling down upon my face! Lo, the scarlet letter which Hester wears! Ye all have shuddered at it! Wherever her walk hath been . . . it hath cast a lurid gleam of awe and horrible repugnance roundabout her. But there stood one in the midst of you, at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered!” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 196)

This collective remains unaware of the sinner standing before them, some blaming Chillingworth’s medicine for the mark they perceive on Dimmesdale, others concluding that the perceived mark was the result of “a hideous torture” inflicted upon himself, as a “course of penance,” and still others, claiming to be “spectators of the whole scene . . . denied that there was any mark whatever upon his breast” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 198). They further deny that his words in any way connected him to Hester’s adulterous act; instead they believe he was teaching his congregation a final lesson:

He had made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite
Purity, we are sinners alike. It was to teach them, that the holiest among us has but attained so far above his fellows as to discern more clearly the Mercy which looks down, and repudiate more utterly the phantom of human merit, which would look aspiringly upward. (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 198)

The religious lens through which they view Dimmesdale taints the gaze of the Puritans upon him; they fail to see Dimmesdale, their revered minister, as unholy or as a man who would violate their religious code of beliefs.

There is great significance in the fact that no audience member of this Puritan community is individualized in either the first or final scaffold scenes: no audience member is changed by what is occurring. No one is moved to express sympathy for Hester, and no one steps forth to condemn Dimmesdale. This representation of the power of authority, or the power of the majority, over the power of the individual, thus enhances the power of Hester as an individual. These are her most heroic moments, when she is put forth as the only member of this society who has not allowed the thoughts, ways, and morals of others influence her own.

Railton references Hawthorne’s own words to identify the emphasis he placed upon thoughts of his reading audience while writing The Scarlet Letter. When asked for an excerpt of the novel, Hawthorne refused, stating, “I don’t think it advisable to give any thing from the story itself; because I know of no passage that would not throw too much light on the plan of the book” (Railton 351). Railton’s close reading of this statement focuses on the use of the word “plan” in place of its literary term, “plot” (351). He concludes Hawthorne’s strategy was to use this novel as a means for speaking to a
particular audience – his nineteenth century readers in particular – suggesting that, perhaps, “the novel’s deepest ‘plot’ was somehow against its audience” (Railton 351).

Railton believes Hawthorne intended his nineteenth century audience to step away from a reading of this work, “with sorrow for human frailty, awe at the hidden mysteries of the heart, [and] reverence for another soul as equally human” (370). The idea that the mid-seventeenth-century audience in the novel so closely resembles the mid-nineteenth-century audience for which Hawthorne wrote is noteworthy for Railton:

And as an audience, the “Puritans” are not very historical. Although they dress like seventeenth-century colonists, their reactions, and the assumptions behind those reactions, are those of the genteel readers who formed Hawthorne’s mid-nineteenth-century audience. The first step in appreciating Hawthorne’s “plan” is to recognize the way he writes into the novel a version of his reading public, disguised in period costumes. (352)

Hawthorne’s novel suggests that issues of morality and adversity will forever exist in any given society, and only one’s individuality will enable him/her to ignore the tendencies to join the majority, thus avoiding groups like “the violent-prone mob of ‘gossips’ who surround the scaffold and reveal a frightening blood-lust, wanting Hester to be branded or executed” (Reynolds 64). Baym agrees, “This is what Hawthorne shows in the novel: a world wherein different individuals and groups are either trying to persuade others that ‘their’ meaning is the right one, or are simply imposing their meaning by physical force” (The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 87). By transforming Hester from her position as the object of the gaze to the one who gazes upon the audience, Hawthorne compels his audience, the readers of The Scarlet Letter, to gaze upon their inner selves after reading
this work and recognize the importance of remaining an individual within the construct of society; it is, after all, what Hester did as she gave in to her passion during a time that demanded sexual repression, and for which she never displayed regret, despite the condemnation she faced; and it is indeed what Hawthorne urges his reading audience to do.
Chapter Three: Hester’s Union with the Scarlet Letter

To best understand Hester’s success, one might identify the failures endured by two of Hawthorne’s other female characters: Hepzibah in *The House of Seven Gables* and Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*. While Zenobia seeks independence and equality for women, Hepzibah mourns for the traditional aristocratic woman who ceases to exist within society. Zenobia attempts to reform society while Hepzibah attempts to conform to society; both females fail.

Zenobia’s sexual, passionate, and insightful traits are likened to those of Hester. Coverdale, the narrator of *The House of Seven Gables*, describes Zenobia as “an admirable figure of a woman . . . remarkably beautiful” and points out that her disposition alludes to her sexuality, “Zenobia has lived, and loved! There is no folded petal, no latent dew-drop, in this perfectly developed rose” (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 48; 71). In her essay titled “Justice to Zenobia,” Mary Suzanne Schriber defines Zenobia’s wealth of knowledge as surpassing that of the women of her time, thereby empowering her. She asserts that Zenobia’s dictation of the “Legend of Zenobia” is done with accuracy, and, concurrently, is interwoven with mockery at the melodramatic literature so appealing to women of the time (Schriber 69-70). Zenobia’s vast knowledge, coupled with her gibes at traditional female roles, makes evident her desired for female reform, and thus gives reason for her participation in the utopian communal experiment at Blithedale as presented in the novel. Coverdale explains:

She declaimed with great earnestness and passion, nothing short of anger, on the injustice which the world did to women, and equally to itself, by not allowing them, in freedom and honor, and with the fullest welcome,
their natural utterance in public. “It shall not always be so!” cried she. “If I live another year, I will lift up my own voice, in behalf of woman’s wider liberty.” (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 126)

Zenobia consciously sought change and reform for all women in society through her outspoken ways. She attempted to live as an independent, beautiful woman, but was unsuccessful in her quest for immediate social change; her words, expressed with a plethora of passion and power, did not penetrate society’s ears. Ultimately, Zenobia concluded that society offered females two options: give up one’s own ambitions for the sake of love, or stay true to their ambitions and live without love. Zenobia thus declared her efforts fruitless in reforming society’s views and, unable to make such a choice, succumbed to the struggle to which she devoted her life with her presumed suicide. Although her own death was accidental, Margaret Fuller may have been the premise upon which Hawthorne created the fictional Zenobia.

Like Zenobia, Fuller took part in Utopian societies, actively sought for female equality, and had a desire to marry. Fuller’s commitment to recognizing the capacity of thought within others and to meeting the rights of all people is evident indeed throughout *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Fuller’s argument greatly depends upon the reasoning capabilities of both men and women to make all see the value social equality would provide. If each man and each woman retreated within him/her self to examine each self as an individual and then as part of a unit, many would return and be able to share similar thoughts. Essentially, Fuller believes that the Transcendentalist way of life will lead individuals to share common perceptions and, thus, form stronger communities. Christina Zwarg asserts, “Fuller was attuned to social theory. Her interest in the work of
French theorist Charles Fourier made her particularly aware of the way in which the individual was a socially constructed concept” (168). Fuller’s simple statement, “Union is only possible to those who are units,” clearly identifies her understanding of this theory (71). She advises women to find their natural selves in order to escape the socially constructed concept of “woman”:

Lay aside all thought, such as she habitually cherishes, of being taught and led by men . . . [be] free from compromise, from compliance, from helplessness . . . [be] good enough and strong enough to love and all beings, from the fullness not the poverty of being. (Fuller 71)

Doing so will create the natural female being, thus a natural unit, not one formed by the dictates of a patriarchal society. Such natural units could then join in union with their counterparts and create a natural society, one union comprised of many individual units, not socially developed constructs.

Amidst the many arguments Fuller presents to encourage equality for women is her most cogent argument, one that equates such equality with the improvement of the state of marriage. This argument suggests that male conformity to social equality will have a direct benefit upon the happiness of the males within society. Fuller reasons the ways an improved female condition would improve marriages:

Were this done [women granted equality] and a slight temporary fermentation allowed to subside, we should see crystallizations more pure and of more various beauty. We believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no
discordant collision, but ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue.

(20)

Here, Fuller further asserts that these resulting marriages would provide a happiness and serenity unlike any of the unions before this time, and the energy emitted from these peaceful, loving unions would expand to create a more harmonious universe. Fuller remains determined: "If principles could be established, particulars would adjust themselves aright. Ascertain the true destiny of woman, give her legitimate hopes, and a standard within herself; marriage and all other relations would by degrees be harmonized with these" (Fuller 18). Elbert establishes a connection between Hawthorne's and Fuller's desires for future societies:

Hawthorne envisages a new age . . . not so different from what his contemporary, Margaret Fuller, hoped for: a redefinition of gender relations through the coming of a female savior . . . who would be above the commodity world of wifedom. ("Hester's Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?" 197)

One needs only examine the failed efforts of Zenobia to recognize that Hawthorne did not support reform through Utopian societies, cries, or overt outpourings of passion, nor did he deem such means capable of having the potential for success. Baym states this clearly with the rhetorical question she puts forth to readers of her essay "Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism" when focusing on the "feminist conundrum" Zenobia's "capitulation" puts forth: "If millions of men behave like Holgrave and millions of women behave like Zenobia . . . what can be hoped for?" (120). For Hawthorne, radical acts were not steps towards social reform.
Hepzibah took a different approach when seeking to survive in society; instead of prompting reform, she attempted to completely conform to society’s norms. With age, strength, and finances working against her, Hepzibah resorted to doing that which she loathed in an effort to “earn her own food, or starve” (Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables* 29). Baym identifies an alignment between Hepzibah and Hester in the opening scene of *The House of the Seven Gables*:

As the novel begins – in a set-up that has much in common with the start of *The Scarlet Letter* – she is about to step out from her chamber (just as Hester stepped out from behind the prison door). Soon to abandon fifteen years of hermit-like privacy to open a shop... Hepzibah is self-supporting; like Hester, she also supports a dependent, but he is a dependent who, in the “normal” course of things, ought to be supporting her. (“The Heroine of *The House of The Seven Gables*; Or, Who Killed Jaffrey Pyncheon?” 609-10)

Despite her discomfort doing so, Hepzibah reopens a shop in the family home, a shop that had existed there but had not been used in a century, the last time the head of the Pyncheon family had suffered financial difficulties.

The changing social class, particularly the development of the middle class, requires that Hepzibah change in order to survive. As David Anthony points out, ” the categories of class are “unstable” in *The House of Seven Gables* (444). Hepzibah, once of the upper class, now depends upon business from the lower class for her own survival; this mixing of the classes also leads to a mixing of the races, a notion foreign to one of Hepzibah’s generation (Anthony 444). Hawthorne himself explains this in his novel:
This born lady, after sixty years of narrowing means, is fain to step down from her pedestal of imaginary rank. Poverty, treading closely at her heels for a lifetime, has come up with her at last . . . And we have stolen upon Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon, too irreverently, at the instant of time when the patrician lady is to be transformed into the plebeian woman. (29)

Hepzibah’s attempt to conform leads her to self-aversion; she declared herself “simply Hepzibah Pyncheon, a forlorn old maid, and keeper of a cent-shop!” (Hawthorne, The House of Seven Gables 39). Survival depends upon her ability to change and, by so doing, Hepzibah sacrifices all of her own desires and beliefs to conform to those issued by society, thereby sacrificing her own self. Even the behavior of Phoebe, one who displayed traits of domesticity in the home as well as business sense in the shop, could not incite Hepzibah to retain her independence. Phoebe tells Hepzibah to observe her and discover “that I am as nice a little saleswoman, as I am a housewife” (Hawthorne, The House of Seven Gables 58). Hepzibah is aware of Phoebe’s traits, but also believes Phoebe is this way because “she takes everything from her mother” and is “no Pyncheon” (Hawthorne, The House of Seven Gables 59). As the narrator points out, Hepzibah, “with her deeply cherished and ridiculous consciousness of long descent” is too rooted in the past to move forward in the present (Hawthorne, The House of Seven Gables 59). But, as Baym carefully contends, Phoebe is by no means comparable to Hester:

Phoebe . . . is limit and law abiding – there is no defiance in her nature. She takes her boldest stand against authority when she shrinks from Jaffrey’s badly aimed kiss, leaving him to kiss the air. And as her stay in the house lengthens, she begins to droop – she becomes a potential victim
needing rescue. She is not a heroine.” (“The Heroine of The House of The
Seven Gables; Or Who Killed Jaffrey Pyncheon?” 607)

Phoebe does not encounter a situation which requires self-reliance, as Hester does, and
her ultimate dependence on Holgrave keeps her from asserting independent qualities like
those Hester must put forth, thereby preventing her from achieving any heroic acts.

Like Zenobia and Hepzibah, Hester, too, has beliefs that differ from those of her
Puritan society, yet she does not depart from society nor does she forsake her own beliefs
in a quest for social acceptance. Instead, Hester chooses to live on the outskirts of town
and remain dependent upon the Puritan townspeople for her income. It is they who
purchase the beautifully embellished garments she sews while in her abode in the woods,
with little Pearl as her only companion.

Unlike Zenobia, Hester does not cry out for reform. She does not speak out
against the injustices done to her for her innate passions nor does she retreat to a utopian
habitat. Such behavior could lead Hester to lose the only source of income she has and,
more importantly, the daughter she loves. Hester is also unlike Hepzibah; she does not
seek to conform to the hypocritical ways of the Puritans. Hester shows no remorse for
her actions, but she also does not seek understanding from others regarding her condition
of social exile. She stands and holds her baby upon the scaffold while jeers are hurled
her way by those Puritans she knew to be impure; each day she transfixes her glittering
“A” upon her breast, thereby performing the punishment dictated to her for her adulterous
sin. Despite her public persecution, Hester resumed a life based on her own beliefs,
raising Pearl as she saw fit, and even attempting to revive her passionate self in the forest
with Dimmesdale, as she lets down her long, dark hair and plans their venture of starting life anew.

Hawthorne suggests (and many critics agree) that, had it not been for her maternal responsibilities to Pearl, Hester may have sought reform and may have begun a cult and, like that of Anne Hutchinson, “she might . . . have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment” *(The Scarlet Letter* 153). Hester herself reveals this when she speaks with Mistress Hibbins,

> I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man’s book, too, and that with mine own blood! (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 101)

Instead, Hester places Pearl’s interests before her own, feeling guilt for any impact her act of adultery may have had upon her daughter. It may then be surmised that although Pearl’s existence comes with great responsibility for Hester and acts as a living reminder of the sin for which she endured great punishment, Pearl also acts as Hester’s savior:

> Providence, in the person of this little girl, had assigned to Hester’s charge the germ and blossom of womanhood, to be cherished and developed amid a host of difficulties. Everything was against her. The world was hostile. The child’s own nature had something wrong in it, which continually betokened that she had been born amiss, - the effluence of her mother’s lawless passion, - and often impelled Hester to ask, in bitterness of heart,
whether it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been born at all. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 134-5)

Hester dutifully places Pearl’s interests before her own; she recognizes the world as “hostile” and accepts her role as he one who must prepare Pearl with the survival skills for such a place.

One cannot overlook Hawthorne’s included reference to Anne Hutchinson at this point in the novel, and this comparison is examined by Michael J. Colacurcio in his essay “Footsteps of Anne Hutchinson: The Context of *The Scarlet Letter*.” Colacurcio points out Hawthorne’s allusion to Anne Hutchinson in this work and suggests it is indicative of Hawthorne’s intent to portray Hester as a reformer:

> Yet, had little Pearl never come to her from the spiritual world, it might have been far otherwise. Then, she might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Anne Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect. (*The Scarlet Letter* 134)

Here, Colacurcio asserts, Hawthorne was “apprising us of a relationship between Hester Prynne and that famous lady heretic . . . [but] the relationship is not one of ‘identity’” (106). It is, however, one of significance and one worthy of examination.

In the mid-seventeenth century, Anne Hutchinson acted out against the church for denying women the right to partake in church meetings and debates. She formed groups for women and led discussions about church and religious issues. Chandler describes the idea as “novel” and the meetings as approved by the “entire approbation of the clergy” at their onset (219). After a period of time, however, the lectures and meetings of Mrs. Hutchinson were questioned for the amount of power she was gaining among the female
church members and fear arose from the presumption of “alarming heresies in the
doctrines which Mrs. Hutchinson promulgated” (Chandler 219). Hutchinson was
banished from the church and the community, but not before she presented to the females
of her Puritan community a “most remarkable” woman, one whose “understanding was
bold, vigorous, and strong,” whose perceptions were “keen,” and whose character was
“energetic and masculine” but “not deficient in the graces which adorn the female sex”
(Chandler 220).

Colacurcio identifies some of the similarities that can be founded in a comparison
of these women. Hester’s scarlet letter suggested her to be a sexual seductress and,
similarly, Hutchinson’s doctrines were believed to have contained a “seductiveness”
within them (Colacurcio 107). Anne Hutchinson began her “prophetic career” as one of
counsel, and Hester progresses forth into acts of counsel following society’s reprimand
upon her act of adultery (Colacurcio 107). Although Hutchinson had been banished, her
presence remained a strong, positive, and powerful force among the Puritan women she
encountered and the generations that followed, just as the scarlet letter, which once
denoted adultery, came to connote Hester’s goodness humanity, and selflessness:

The scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn
and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and
looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. And, as Hester Prynne had
no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and
enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought
her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble . . .
Hester comforted and counseled them as best she might. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 201)

Colacurcio identifies the greatest distinction between these women to be their strong, clear perspectives on society's views. "Both make positive pronouncements about the inapplicability of what the majority of their contemporaries take to be inviolable moral law" (Colacurcio 107). In support of Hester, Nina Baym concurs, "Now, a century and a half after *The Scarlet Letter*, popular references to a scarlet letter invariably imply unjust stigmatization. In the wider world, this novel has performed that cultural work" (118).

Colacurcio concludes that Hawthorne's comparison of these two women places into alignment sexual and spiritual freedom:

To be sure, it takes Hester Prynne some time to catch up with Anne Hutchinson; but when Hawthorne says of Hester, in the full tide of her later speculative freedom, that "the world's law was no law to her mind", we may well suspect that he intends some conscious pun on the literal meaning of "antinomianism." If Hester's problems begin with sex more literally than do Anne Hutchinson's, her thinking eventually ranges far outward from that domestic subject... Hester Prynne and sex are associated in Hawthorne's mind with Anne Hutchinson and spiritual freedom. (107)

Both women were driven by passion and fulfilled their passions even though they went against the religious codes of their respective societies, and both showed great strength as they faced those who passed judgment upon them and accepted their punishments without regret for their actions. Colacurcio explains:
[Hester] is conceived, like Hawthorne’s Anne Hutchinson, as a woman who bears “trouble in her own bosom:” and her “desperate recklessness” on the scaffold, symbolized by the flagrancy of her embroidered “A,” and issuing in “a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed,” seems deliberately to recall Mrs. Hutchinson’s courtroom defiance: “She stands loftily before her judges with a determined brow; and, unknown to herself, there is a flash of carnal pride half hidden in her eye, as she surveys the many learned and famous men whom her doctrines have put in fear.” That might describe Hester easily enough. (121)

Elbert clearly delineates between this historical figure and this fictional figure in “Hester and the New Feminine Vision,” noting that Hester’s actions in *The Scarlet Letter* reflect the “refuge of the mind over the power of the sword” (197). Elbert uses elaborate textual scholarship to support Hester as a character with “revolutionary spirit” who attempts to transfer this spirit onto others, first and foremost onto Pearl, through her actions of counsel and “humanitarian service” (“Hester and the New Feminine Vision” 186).

Hester’s reaction to feelings of dissidence is one of a “silent and visionary nature,” and such a description prevents one from accurately defining Hester as a rebel, as Hutchinson would be deemed (Elbert, “Hester and the New Feminine Vision” 197). Hawthorne’s successful use of allusion at this point in the novel, the mere mention of one historical name, does so much to assist in the development of the character of Hester Prynne without transforming her into a being she is not intended to replicate.

Hester’s maternity is the trait that acts as her most powerful guiding force and perhaps, the trait that ultimately saves her. It is also this trait that separates her from both
Zenobia and Hepzibah. Hester’s determination to fulfill her maternal role is made most evident when she responds passionately to the governor’s suggestion that Pearl might be better educated by one other than Hester:

“God gave me the child” cried she. “He gave her, in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness! – she is my torture none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin! Ye shall not take her! I will die first!” (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 98)

A loud voice emerges from Hester, not only in defense of herself, but also in defense of her daughter, described by the Governor as “equally in the dark as to her soul, its present depravity, and future destiny” (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 98). That which immediately follows is this independent mother’s demands for paternal support, as Hester directs these words to Dimmesdale in a commanding fashion:

“Speak thou for me! . . . Thou wast my pastor, and hadst charge of my soul, and knowest me better than these men can. I will not lose the child! Speak for me! Thou knowest, - for thou hast sympathies which these men lack! – and thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother’s rights, and how much the stronger they are, when that mother has but her child and the scarlet letter! Look thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!” (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 98)
Passion erupts from the typically quiet, composed Hester in an effort to urge Dimmesdale to put aside his own quietude and support her custody of Pearl. This passion is, indeed, impressed upon Dimmesdale who now responds with intense emotion,

"Is there not a quality of awful sacredness in the relation between this mother and this child? . . . This child of its father’s guilt and its mother’s shame hath come from the hand of God, to work in many ways upon her heart, who pleads so earnestly and with such bitterness of spirit, the right to keep her. It was meant for a blessing; for the one blessing of her life! It was meant, doubtless, as the mother herself hath told us, for a retribution too; a torture, to be felt at many an unthought of moment; a pang, a sting, an ever-recurring agony, in the midst of a troubled joy! Hath she not expressed this thought in the garb of the poor child, so forcibly reminding us of that red symbol which sears her bosom? . . . And may she feel, too, - what, methinks, is the very truth, - that this boon was meant above all things else, to keep the mother’s soul alive, and to preserve her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her . . . Therefore it is good for this poor, sinful woman that she hath an infant . . . to remind her, at every moment of her fall.” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 99)

Dimmesdale’s support of Hester’s maternal position suggests that Pearl acts as opportunistic salvation for this “sinful” mother while also bringing her joy. This is in stark contrast to the “sinful” father who receives no opportunity for salvation, but instead suffers inwardly from guilt. Chillingworth’s words cleverly profess the irony of
Dimmesdales’ words when he describes them as having been spoken with “strange earnestness” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 100).

Elbert identifies this moment, “when Hester wins custody” as victory of a “major battle . . . beating the governor at his game of governing, by showing him that she is the true governor of Pearl and that his powers are insignificant in childrearing” (“Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” 194). Hester is cognizant of the fact that, just as Pearl needs her, she needs Pearl. Hester is able to retain her composure when facing the public’s stares and she is able to maintain her silence when confronted by the whispers and gossip of others because of Pearl’s constant presence in her daily life; Hester is also able to express her innermost passion for the matters that she so firmly believes in, as she does in this confrontation with the Governor, because of her devotion to Pearl. Hester does not preach to Pearl, but instead instructs her behavior by modeling the behaviors she wishes to impart upon her daughter. For Pearl, the scarlet letter was part of her mother, it represents “Hester’s maternity,” and it is this maternity that serves, “ultimately [as] her weapon against patriarchy” (Elbert, “Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” 198). For readers, too, the scarlet letter is an extension of Hester; it is the vehicle that elicits her to show attributes of independence and strength in the face of judgment and the pressure to conform to society’s ways. Details of the act that leads to the “A” are irrelevant; it is how she behaves as owner of the “A” that comes to define the character of Hester Prynne.

Hester’s approach was unique. She did not seek to reform society and yet refused to fully conform to society. Hester adapted to society and her adaptation resulted in change. She may have capped her hair, but she still walked through town. She may have worn her “A,” but she never showed regret for the interlude. She may have lost her
sexual self, but she maintained her inner self. She did not speak out against others, but instead sought to help others. In essence, the beautiful, independent Hester demonstrates the strength needed to survive and, through her, Hawthorne presents a triumphant figure, one who embodies passion, strength, and reserve, not one who acts out with rebelliousness or dissidence. Hester knew she could not bestow upon others her feelings against particular beliefs or practices; ultimately, they had to arrive at their own beliefs based upon their individual experiences. This expressed understanding suggests that Hester did not view herself as a reformer, but she achieved reform nonetheless.

Although Louise DeSalvo argues that the character of Hester supports what DeSalvo believes to be Hawthorne’s belief that women cannot be reformers, stating that “Hester’s behavior suggests not only that women cannot accomplish feminist reform, but also that women, by their very nature, cannot ever hope to accomplish reforms,” the change in the meaning of the letter to the audience within the novel proves otherwise (6). As Baym points out, “the community’s severity is mitigated over time on account of Hester’s persistence” (“The Heroine of The House of Seven Gables; Or, Who Killed Jaffrey Pyncheon?” 617). Hester’s behavior changes the negative connotation of the scarlet letter “A” to a positive one. While Elbert reminds readers of Hawthorne’s narrative, “These townspeople say proudly to strangers, ‘Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge? . . . It is our Hester, - the town’s own Hester, - who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!’” she carefully explains that Hester avoids being “stereotyped with her maternal qualities” as she “forges her maternal identity on her own terms” (“Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” 187-8). Hester remains silent about her daughter’s paternity despite the demands of the magistrates, she
raises Pearl by her own code of ethics, and as a single parent, and she does all of this while continuing to wear a badge intended to be shameful long after she could have discarded it. Hester, indeed, rises “above those community members who attempt to claim her as their own and hence define her” (Elbert, “Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” 187). Hester is her own person – in a “sphere by herself”; she belongs to no one else and resists the pressures to conform to any given social code (Elbert, “Hester’s Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?” 187).

By the end of the novel, few can recall the original meaning of Hester’s scarlet letter. Here, the reader’s interpretation of the meaning of this “A” is welcomed, and there are a plethora of interpretations to select from, including, but not limited to: “able, act, admirable, adversaries, alone, America, angel, Anne (Hutchinson), antagonists, apart, apple (referring biblically to events leading to the downfall of man in the Garden of Eden), art, Arthur (Dimmesdale), artist, author – anything” (Baym The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 88). Hester allowed others to arrive at their own opinions of her and of her chosen actions:

The final meaning for the letter is a compromise, a newly negotiated result . . . The Puritan community has arrived at a new consensus. Hester has not exactly prevailed over them, and she has certainly not been the prophetess of a revolution . . . Nevertheless, she has had a powerful effect on her society’s system of meanings, which means that she has been an agent of social change. (Baym The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 91)
This change was enacted, not through words, but through actions, and illustrates that people arrive at change based on experience and the perceived actions of others, not the written or spoken words of others.

Baym asserts:

It cannot be said that [Hester] triumphs on her own terms, over the community. But perhaps her terms have changed. And, certainly she has traveled far from the position of scorn and ignominy that she occupied in the opening scene. . . Hester has certainly changed the Puritans more than they have changed her, and more than anybody might have dared to hope at the beginning, when all were so firmly set against her. *(The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 28-9)*

Hester is, indeed, changed by the scarlet letter, but not necessarily for better or worse. It becomes a teaching tool, instructing her that life cannot simply begin anew after an experience such as this. This experience must be incorporated into the direction that the rest of her life will take. It is described in the novel in the following way:

Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman. Such is frequently the fate, and such the stern development, of the feminine character and person, when the woman has encountered and lived through, an experience of peculiar severity.

*(Hawthorne, Scarlet Letter 152)*

Hester was negatively affected by society and her position as a female within it, but she recognized that total social reformation was not the answer. Hester reasoned that even if reforms emerged within society that allowed for the progressive movement of women, a
female could not “take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone still a mightier change” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 154). Hester’s personal experience taught her to change enough and endure for her daughter’s sake, but she conceded that such an experience could not be relayed to another; crying out for reform was not the answer, but complete acceptance of a life against one’s beliefs was certainly not the answer either.

Perhaps Hester did not have the answers to the religious, moral, or social questions of the time, but she did negate the alternatives chosen by Zenobia and Hepzibah. Nina Baym contends, “As a seduced ingénue, [Hester] should have died; as an evil temptress, she should have recanted, gone mad, or been murdered by the mob. Instead, she survives” (“Revisiting Hawthorne’s Feminism” 124). Zenobia’s escape from society to a Utopian community led to devastation and to her ultimate death. Hepzibah’s choice to conform to the ways of society led to the destruction of her self-esteem and to her dependence upon Holgrave and Phoebe for continued survival. Neither approach would have sufficed for Hester; not one nor the other would have set before Pearl an example of true survival in an unfair world, nor would either have allowed Hester herself to survive. Had she chosen either approach, the “A” would have been victorious, controlling Hester; instead, Hester maintains control of her life despite the stigma she wears upon her breast and carries within her soul.

Sacvan Bercovitch explains, in “Hawthorne’s A-Morality of Compromise,” that the conclusion of this work reveals the true “office of the A”:

When in the Conclusion she returns to New England, Hester reveals what has been implicit all along, that the office of the A is socialization. She
neither reaffirms her adulterous love nor disavows it; or rather, she does both by incorporating it into the vision of an age of love to come. It is an act of compromise – bridging memory and hope; self and society; nature and institutions; past, present, and future – that reconciles the novel’s various antinomies . . . "The scarlet letter had not done its office," and when it has, Hester is transformed unaccountedly into an agent of social cohesion and continuity. (1-2)

Nina Baym agrees that Hester’s choices made her successful:

Had Hester never returned, she would have been forgotten. Had she returned and not worn the letter, she would have escaped the letter’s meaning without changing it . . . Re-entering civil life adorned with the letter by her own choice, Hester moves Puritan Boston from the Dark Ages towards enlightenment and modernity. ("Revisiting Hawthorne’s Feminism” 117-8)

Hester lives an independent life, but retains social connections; she feels comfort in the forest, but does not seek permanent refuge there; she hopes for a better future, but accepts the condition of the present. Hester successfully adapts to life following a situation which could have stripped her of her own sense of self; this is an achievement both Zenobia and Hepzibah were unable to attain.

The narrator of The Scarlet Letter wisely recognizes the essence of Hester:

It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of
action. So it seemed to be with Hester. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 134)

Leland S. Person, Jr. examines the strength of Hester’s silence in “Hester’s Revenge: The Power of Silence in *The Scarlet Letter*.” He identifies Hawthorne presenting, through Hester, a “third alternative to speech or the silence of the symbolic: a vengeful silence that has the effect of action” (Person 470). Person suggests a congruity between Hester’s intended silence towards the Puritan society for their acts of punishment and Hawthorne’s silent resentment towards the unjust conditions of his time. Hawthorne, indeed, used silence to successfully scream out against the many social injustices he observed. He chose not to “alter the balance” of his society, but rather to invite others to alter their own thinking, just as Hester’s goodness would ultimately “cause people to alter the meaning of the scarlet letter from Adulteress to Able” (Person 471). Hester did not succumb to the orders of the Puritan community around her with regard to her mothering style, nor did she seek a reformation that could result in society’s assumption of her personal beliefs or cause her to lose custody of her daughter.

Hester’s steadfastness to remain true to her beliefs did indeed change society by transforming a derogatory symbol into something positive. The beautiful Hester demonstrates the strength and determination needed to survive and, through her, Hawthorne indeed presents a figure that embodies both beauty and strength as demonstrated in the way she faces adversity and encourages others to endure through life’s difficulties. The scarlet letter represents the sin that all humans carry, but Hester represents the triumph one can achieve when one accepts responsibility for a sinful act,
faces the consequences that result, and expresses the courage, strength, and motivation to move beyond it, making the root of the sin an irrelevant event of the past.
Conclusion

The scarlet letter, imposed upon Hester to wear as a symbol of sin and immorality, sheds light upon the sins hiding beneath the seemingly pure exteriors of the individuals of this Puritan community, causing each person’s glance at the letter to be a reminder of his/her own sinfulness. Its hellish appearance is evident as soon as it gleams before them from its place on Hester’s bosom as she stands with Pearl on the scaffold: “[the clergyman’s] continual reference to the ignominious letter . . . assumed new terrors in their imagination, and seemed to derive its scarlet hue from the flames of the infernal pit” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 69). Hester accepted the adornment of this letter, and the behavior that she displays in response to the adulterous act and the consequences that came as a result of it, empower her to become an even stronger woman, aware not only of her own self, but of others as well: “Sometimes, the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb . . . ‘What evil thing is at hand?’ would Hester say to herself” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 80).

Details of the sexual encounter between Hester and Dimmesdale, the act which leads to the birth of Pearl and to Hester’s acquisition of the “A,” are never revealed, yet reference to this act brings Hester forth from the prison and into the pages of *The Scarlet Letter* and thus begins the novel. As the novel progresses, the plot becomes less dependent on what happened before and, instead, directs the reader’s attention to what is happening now and what will happen next. The “A” remains a part of Hawthorne’s character, Hester; readers know her only as bearer of the “A,” and so the reading audience’s perception of her is based solely on the actions she takes after she has acted
upon her passion. These actions deem her heroic as a citizen, as a mother, and as a female reformer.

This scarlet letter is a mark that Hester never sheds; it is even inscribed upon her tombstone. She chooses to continue wearing the letter long after it is required of her, knowing “it is too branded” and that it must be worn to do its “office” (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 68). It is the way Hester handles her struggles that causes this letter to no longer be a symbol of sin, but one of strength, “a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too” (201). Coupled with an immense amount of humility, Hester’s ability to retain her inner values and sense of self while wearing the letter lead her to understand her strength while refraining from declaring herself a type of savior:

Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confined to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a lifelong sorrow . . . So said Hester Prynne, and glanced her sad eyes downward at the scarlet letter. (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 201)

This one letter represents both her sin and her suffering; it represents weakness and strength; it represents pain and passion; and most importantly it represents the problems that arise in life and the inner strength needed to overcome such problems, strength found not in books, bottles, or bibles, but found within oneself.

Dimmesdale and Chillingworth lose their lives to the control of the scarlet letter, and, for the Puritan community members, the letter becomes a reminder of the sin that
remains hidden within each one of them. Had Hester allowed herself to become consumed by the negativity initially associated with this mark, or had she attempted to deny or escape from it, it would have forever remained a symbol of immorality, and she would have remained nothing more than a sinful, adulterous woman. Because of the strength, independence, and devotion to others that Hester displays in her life, as bearer of the “A,” this letter keeps doing its “office” long after Hester’s passing, and long after the publication of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s literary masterpiece. Hester’s adaptation to life with the “A” illustrates both her personal triumph and the human ability to be triumphant over life’s troubles, torments, and tribulations.


Zwarg, Christina. "Womanizing Margaret Fuller: Theorizing a Lover’s Discourse."