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Imprisonment, Punishment, and Progress in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

(TITLE)

BY

Ashley Breanne Waggoner

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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Imprisonment, Punishment, and Progress in Hawthorne's *The*

*Scarlet Letter*

Ashley Waggoner

Spring 2013

### Dedication:

This thesis project is dedicated to all those who have put up with my Type-A personality and diva-ish tendencies for the past year. More importantly, I want to dedicate the thesis contained herein to the people of Boston—a great all-American city that has always inspired me—on multiple levels.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction. . . . pp. 1-5

Chapter I: “On the Public Scaffolding: The Scaffolding Scene as a Device  
for Penance and Reflection”. . . . pp. 6-25

Chapter II: “Imprisonment by Society”. . . . pp. 25-37

Chapter III: “Imprisonment of the Psyche”. . . . pp. 37-48

Chapter IV: “The Path Toward Transcendence”. . . . pp. 49-60

Bibliography. . . . pp. i & ii

Ashley Waggoner

ENG 5950

22 April 2013

**Introduction: Imprisonment, Punishment, and Progress in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter***

Often times a particular scene in a literary work becomes a metaphor for the overall sociopolitical themes and messages of the work as a whole. Prime examples of this are the opening prison and public scaffolding scenes of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which I analyze extensively in this thesis. The novel begins with its protagonist—Hester Prynne—being literally imprisoned for committing the sin of adultery. The prescribed punishment for such an offense is public hanging on a scaffolding apparatus. This crucial scene ties together many of the novel's elements and themes and becomes a revealing (in terms of the characters' feelings) literal and metaphorical meta-drama. Later in this story, it becomes apparent that the scaffolding scene forecasts a pervading condition of Hawthorne's characters. That is, the entire novel tells the story of characters imprisoned in a variety of ways—politically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually. Hester herself experiences each of these forms of imprisonment.

In terms of my key argument in this project, I specifically view Hester as an example of a character who is rebelling against the status quo reinforced by the kinds of imprisonment I have mentioned. Eventually, Hester becomes an agent for progress when she serves as a kind of counselor for women (and men) who feel entrapped by the rules prescribed by the social establishment, and also achieves a qualified transcendence over



her own imprisonment. In doing so, she represents a counter to a cyclical history of repression and punishment.

I also argue that the novel is a proto-feminist work, because Hester envisions a future female leader who will be a liberator of other women. Of course, some readers will object that Hester is not a transcendent figure, and perhaps even a victim of her situation. Although I concede that many critics of Hawthorne's work—particularly of *The Scarlet Letter*—disagree with my position, I nevertheless maintain that, as a result of Hester's work, those around her are made more aware of the fact that there are ways to overcome various forms of societal and personal punishment.

There are a number of reasons why I chose this particular thesis topic. First, I have always loved 19<sup>th</sup>-century American literature, especially works by the New England writers of that period. Secondly, I am immensely fascinated by the study of women's roles in society throughout history, as well as the ways in which women in American society have progressed (or not) since the 1600s. For these reasons, I chose to pursue a feminist angle for this project and make the case for Hester being a proto-feminist, progressive, and, ultimately, transcendent and triumphant character.

The main reason I chose to undertake this particular thesis project, and in the way that I have done so, however, is that each of the following thesis' four chapters pertains to an aspect of women's lives and roles within society that intrigue me on a personal level. Specifically, in each chapter, I focus on Hester's life's journey and her work, which affects her perception of herself, as well as society's perception of her. What is most intriguing to me about *The Scarlet Letter* is the fact that Hester is a teacher and counselor of individuals dealing with some sort of issue. In the current chapter of my own life's

story, I am a teacher of college students with learning and developmental disabilities. This career path, I feel, has created for me a certain self and social image. In addition, I also discuss the various types of legal, political, and social imprisonment and punishment that Hester endures throughout the novel. For the next chapter of my life story, I plan to attend law school and earn a J.D. degree in civil litigation so that I can help promote social justice. Likewise, the political aspect of this project is something I am extremely passionate about; in fact, I recently ran for a local office in my hometown. (I did not win that election, but I have vowed to continue running for different elected offices in order to be a strong, feminine voice for change and progress.)

And that brings me to my primary purpose in writing this thesis: My own life is, in a sense, imitating the literature I have been studying and writing about for the past year in a variety of ways, and I became very “close to” and emotionally, mentally, and spiritually invested in this project. For example, like Hester, I live in a very conservative area, and I am trying to use my life’s work as a vehicle for promoting social and political change in that area. While I have not endured persecution as a result of my actions, my experiences with politics thus far have made me painfully aware of the fact that women still have a long way to go before we fully transcend the oppressive constructs and notions of the past. My primary goal with this project is to use what I have learned these last few months as a means of helping women in my sphere further progress—in all the arenas I cover in it—thus giving this project a definite real-world application.

In terms of project organization, I have divided my thesis into four chapters—each one focusing a different facet of Hester’s journey from political prisoner to social outcast to introspective spiritual seeker to transcendent teacher and counselor of the

oppressed. To begin, Chapter I—entitled “On the Public Scaffolding: The Scaffolding Scene as a Device for Penance and Reflection”—sets the stage for the entire thesis, so to speak. There are three scaffolding scenes depicted in the novel, and Chapter I focuses on one in particular. In this pivotal scene, Hester faces punishment for her “crime.” Just as the punishment is about to be carried out, the townspeople watching from below the scaffold begin witnessing a very revealing (mainly of their own feelings) scene unfold. While Hester and her lover, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale are publicly confessing their sins, the Puritan onlookers begin to reflect upon their own feelings and begin to realize that they themselves have sins to repent of.

In Chapter II: “Imprisonment by Society,” I outline the consequences Hester and illegitimate daughter Pearl face as a result of being “different” within Puritan society. Hester, for example, is forced to wear a scarlet letter “A” for “Adulteress” on her dress as punishment. As a result, she and Pearl endure ignominy (public humiliation) on a daily basis. I also discuss Hester’s literal political imprisonment and the different elements of that scene as well here.

Chapter III is titled “Imprisonment of the Psyche.” This chapter is essentially a culmination of all the aspects and elements of the novel I have discussed previously. That is, Hester has been literally imprisoned, which has affected her personally, psychologically, and spiritually in various ways. More importantly, adopting this persona helps Hester find her true spiritual self, which ultimately allows her to help others do the same. Here, I use textual evidence (i.e., the fact that Hester bejewels the “A” to make it more noticeable, as opposed to succumbing to the shame and stigma wrought by this punishment) in order to argue that Hester ultimately transcends the label her society

places on her. In this chapter, I use and explicate passages from a couple of the novel's chapters—namely Ch. XVIII: “A Flood of Sunshine” and Ch. XX: “The Minister in a Maze”—in order to strengthen my case.

The fourth and final chapter—“The Path Toward Transcendenc”—outlines Hester's rise from social outcast to triumphant teacher and leader of women (and men) dealing with similar life issues. Hester travels to England with Pearl (who eventually marries very well), where they live for several years, and then Hester later returns to America (Boston). The novel's ending implies that Hester's work helps lay the foundation for subsequent generations of individuals seeking freedom from some sort of imprisonment and repression—especially after she returns to Massachusetts. In the novel's final chapter, Hawthorne describes the ways in which Hester teaches and counsels those who seek her advice. There are also a number to a prophetic vision Hester has of becoming such a leader. (One important point Hawthorne makes in the novel's conclusion, for instance, is that, as a result of Hester's good works, the “A” loses its stigma and actually becomes positively symbolic of Hester's life.) I discuss these plot elements in depth in Chapter IV.

Finally, I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. John Allison (my professor for ENG 5009: 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Literature during the spring 2010 semester), as well as my readers, Drs. Stephen Swords and Angela Vietto, for helping me successfully complete this project. I would also like to give a special thanks to Dr. Ruth Hoberman for all her guidance and assistance throughout the course of my research. I have enjoyed working with all these individuals tremendously, and hope to continue to have an ongoing professional relationship with all of them.

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## **Chapter I: On the Public Scaffolding: The Scaffold as a Device for Penance and Reflection**

Hester Prynne, the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous novel—*The Scarlet Letter* (1850)—endures several forms of imprisonment during the course of this complex, multi-layered story. Imprisonment is, in fact, such a prevalent theme in the novel that near the beginning of the story, Hawthorne describes a prison setting, where Hester is serving a sentence handed down to her by her fellow Puritans for committing the sin of adultery. However, the story's complexity lies in the fact that Hester (as well as other characters) experience other, more metaphorical and internal forms of imprisonment—political, societal, psychological, and spiritual.

Oftentimes a particular scene in a work of literature becomes a powerful, controlling metaphor for the entire storyline and sets the stage, so to speak, for the plot as a whole. Such is the case with the public confession and punishment scene in *The Scarlet Letter*. Accordingly, in this chapter, I will discuss the crucial first scaffolding scene and the ways in which the literal elements contained therein become symbolic of societal attitudes. In this scene, the literal punishment device becomes symbolic of the feelings of Hester, Dimmesdale, their illegitimate daughter, Pearl, and, just as importantly, the feelings of the townspeople, who are witnessing a revelatory meta-drama unfold atop the stage-like scaffolding device. Specifically, the supporting characters begin to realize their own faults while preparing to witness Hester and Dimmesdale publicly confess their alleged sins. Some literary scholars, including Deborah L. Madsen and Zelda Bronstein, have argued that Hawthorne is trying to make a commentary about the way in which close self-examination leads societies to seek to create social change, while other critics,

such as Erika M. Kreger, argue that Hawthorne makes no such statement whatsoever.<sup>1</sup> Relevant to this discussion is the French philosopher Michel Foucault's historical analysis of signs and symbols related to the concepts of discipline, punishment, and public repentance in his writings. While analyzing interpretations by a range of Hawthorne scholars and drawing on Foucault's work to contextualize my argument, I will also explain why my view of *The Scarlet Letter* combines what scholars have called "romantic" and "transcendental" views of the work. My point of view is in opposition to that of many Hawthorne scholars in the sense that while I interpret Hester as a transcendent, transitional—albeit flawed and not wholly successful—figure, these other scholars argue that Hester is a tragic figure.

Some scholars have interpreted the first of the novel's three scaffold scenes as Hawthorne's way of allegorically commenting on the important issues of his own time. Here, I will discuss the ways in which Hawthorne uses the novel as a means of expressing his view that, like the characters in the story, individuals in his own time have certain issues to reflect on. One key 19<sup>th</sup>-century sociopolitical issue that critics sometimes claim Hawthorne is addressing, for instance, is slavery. In "'A for Abolition': Hawthorne's Bond-Servant and the Shadow of Slavery," Deborah L. Madsen claims that scenes from the novel—particularly the scaffolding scenes—express Hawthorne's views on slavery and that just as 19<sup>th</sup>-century American society was made aware of the horrors of the "peculiar institution," the Puritan characters in Hawthorne's signature work begin to realize that they, too, are sinners as they witness the literal public confessions of Hester and her lover as the two social outcasts stand on the scaffold. (It is important to note that many critics find such an argument problematic in that Hawthorne



never really addressed the issue of slavery directly in his other writings, and was an ardent supporter of then-President Franklin Pierce, who took a definite pro-slavery stance during his term in office.) Madsen cites specific passages from *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as Hawthorne's other writings, including the essay "Chiefly about War-Matters," in order to substantiate her point of view regarding this subject. For example, she explains the analogy between 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan attitudes about punishment and imprisonment and those about slavery in 19<sup>th</sup>-century, ante-bellum America. According to Madsen:

From the first settlement of New England, alternative destinies have been foreshadowed for the New World: in contrast to the "Cittie upon a Hill" which Puritan leaders interpreted as the glorious destiny of their experiment, ominous tokens of human depravity have suggested an American destiny that is no more than a repetition of Europe's mistakes. Hawthorne uses the vocabulary of typology to stress the historical determination of these alternative visions of national identity and to underline the inescapable nature of the consequences that follow from the choice between them. Together with his concern over the psychological enslavement of white Americans by the ideology of slavery, this passage sets out Hawthorne's attitude towards slavery as a national evil which demands a national penance. (Madsen 216)

In other words, Madsen contends that the scaffolding scene symbolizes reflection and penance. In regards to the historical analogy, the scene is a metaphor for the way in which society is forced to reflect upon crucial moral issues when confronted with them. In this case, the attitudes and revelations of the Puritan characters in the novel are an analogy to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans' changing attitudes toward the practice of slavery,

hence the article's title. Indeed, the novel contains a number of passages that some scholars, including Madsen, believe to be allegorical references to the slave trade. For example, one passage in Chapter 7—"The Governor's Hall"—may be interpreted this way. In this chapter, Hester and Pearl visit the mansion of Massachusetts' Chief Executive, Governor Bellingham. In one particular passage, Hawthorne writes about Bellingham's indentured servant in an arguably allegorical manner:

They [Hester and Pearl] approached the door; which was of an arched form and flanked on each side by a narrow tower or projection of the edifice, in both of which were lattice-windows, with wooden shutters to close over them at need. Lifting the iron hammer that hung at the portal, Hester Prynne gave a summons, which was answered by one of the governor's bond-servants; a free-born Englishman, but now a seven years' slave. During that term he was to be the property of his master, and as much a commodity of bargain and sale as an ox, or a joint-stool. The serf wore the blue coat, which was the customary garb of serving-men at that period, and long before, in the old hereditary halls of England. (Hawthorne, *TSL* 206)

As this passage illustrates, the beliefs of the old British social hierarchy were so deeply ingrained in the American colonists that even though they had immigrated to the New World, they still held onto those beliefs. This fact is evidenced by the governor's mansion's very Old World architecture. The wooden, shuttered windows, for example, symbolize the way in which the very wealthy secluded themselves from the rest of society. Then, Hawthorne uses prison-themed language, such as "iron hammer" and "summons." The mansion, of course, is a type of prison for the governor's indentured

servant. Here, Hawthorne alludes to the practice of indentured servitude that took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the fact that many indentured servants (who also came to America from Europe and worked for a period of about seven years and were paid for their work) were replaced by slaves from Africa, who were the property of their masters and not paid for their work, as a means of keeping labor costs down. Like Hester, the male bond-servant wears a symbol of his social status—the blue coat—which servants in England also wore. It is important to note that the bond-servant was born free, but becomes a slave, as is the case with Hester. (In fact, Hawthorne refers to her as a “life-long bond-servant” several times in the novel.) Ultimately, however, this passage is Hawthorne’s statement about the concept of freedom. That is, only a select few—white, property-owning males—are truly free in America.

Even more to the point, Madsen also asserts that the slavery analogy applies directly to the scaffolding scene in that afterward, Hester and Pearl find a sort of personal liberation, whereas Dimmesdale remains enslaved and imprisoned in a variety of ways. Of this, Madsen writes:

Where Pearl and Hester find personal liberation within the restraints imposed by society, Dimmesdale finds himself enslaved by these social definitions. His words and actions are interpreted by the community so that they always offer proof of his reputed sanctity and godliness. Simply by confessing his sin, in the knowledge that his listeners will misinterpret the truth, he converts his own words into falsehoods. The awareness that he can so easily and hypocritically exploit his audience in this way is Dimmesdale’s most exquisite torture. (219)

Thus, Madsen explains the ways in which the social ostracism and stigma that results for a prisoner who is forced to confess his or her sins publicly forces witnesses to reflect upon their own moral values.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault discusses the various signs and symbols associated with punishment by means of public scaffolding. Foucault discusses this concept in a way that relates very closely to such scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*. For example, in Chapter 2—entitled “The Gentle Way of Punishment”—Foucault explains that convicts subjected to this type of punishment become symbolic of their offenses, much in the same way that Hester becomes a symbol of her sin via the letter “A” she is forced to wear. Foucault explains the way in which the prisoner becomes a lesson, a text for the whole community to read:

For the convict, the penalty is a mechanics of signs and interests, and duration. But the guilty person is only one of the targets of punishment. For punishment is directed above all others, at all the potentially guilty. So these obstacle-signs that are gradually engraved in the representation of the condemned man must therefore circulate rapidly and widely; they must be accepted and redistributed by all; they must shape the discourse that each individual has with others and by which crime is forbidden by all—the true coin that is substituted in peoples’ minds for the false prophets of crime. (Foucault, *DAP* 448)

In relation to the novel, Foucault’s explanation can be interpreted to mean that the guilty person becomes a societal scapegoat who ultimately forces spectators to

examine their own transgression, something which happens during the pivotal scaffolding scene involving Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl. One quotation from *Discipline and Punish* in particular relates directly to this scene. Quoting from the *Cahiers de doléances* (lists of complaints and reforms sent to the French Estates General in the late 1780s), Foucault stresses his point:

“Associate the scaffold with the most lugubrious and most moving commentaries, let this terrible day be a day of mourning of the nation; let the general sorrow be painted everywhere in bold letters. . . Let the magistrate, wearing black, funeral crepe, announce the crime and the added necessity of legal vengeance to the people. Let the different scenes of this tragedy strike all the senses, stir all gentle, honest affectations.”  
(DAP 450)

Here, Foucault outlines the way in which, as he believes, publicized physical punishment, as in the case of the scaffolding scene, becomes a vehicle for social and psychological control. That is, the audience makes observational judgments on the individual who is being punished, and the individual being punished internalizes those judgments. During the time Hawthorne was writing, prison reform—particularly the rehabilitation of prisoners—was a major national issue. Hawthorne eventually created a pro-reform character—Hollingsworth—in *The Blithedale Romance*. Ironically, though, Hollingsworth is an egotistical male chauvinist who is really only interested in gaining attention for championing the cause by appropriating a female character, Zenobia’s, fortune in order to do so. Hawthorne’s personal views regarding reform and reformers

are best characterized as mixed, as evidenced by the fact that he is neither entirely condemnatory nor wholly sympathetic in his depiction of Hester.

The scaffolding scene in the novel is pivotal in that even though Hester is the one being punished for adultery, the townspeople begin to examine their own transgression while watching the meta-drama between Hester and Dimmesdale (who are joined by daughter Pearl) play out on the public scaffolding. While Hawthorne depicts this scene in abstract, moralistic terms, Foucault's theory applies, because the onlookers are reflecting on the public punishment taking place, and then reflecting on their own social values and duties. One passage from Chapter XII: "The Minister's Vigil," for example, describes tension that develops between young minister Dimmesdale and elderly minister Mr. Wilson on the scaffold. This passage is significant, because the townspeople become aware of the tension between the two prominent ministers, which, consequently, makes the townspeople more aware of the tension among and within themselves.

As the Reverend Mr. Wilson passed beside the scaffold, clearly muffling his Geneva cloak about him with one arm, and holding the lantern before his breast with the other, the minister could hardly restrain himself from speaking.

"A good evening to you, venerable Father Wilson! Come up hither, I pray you, and pass a pleasant hour with me!"

Good heavens! Had Mr. Dimmesdale actually spoken? For one instant, he believed that these words had passed his lips. But they were uttered only within his imagination. The venerable Father Wilson continued to step slowly onward, looking carefully at the muddy pathway before his feet, and never once turning his head towards the guilty platform. When the light of the glimmering

lantern had faded quite away, the minister discovered, by the faintness which came over him, that the last few moments had been a crisis of terrible anxiety; although his mind had made an involuntary effort to relieve itself by a kind of lurid playfulness. (Hawthorne, *TSL* 248)

In this scene, Dimmesdale is reaching out to Father Wilson while he is on the scaffold, but Father Wilson does not hear Dimmesdale's plea. This symbolizes the way in which the old Puritan belief system dictated that anyone who did not conform to the social order be outcast. The lantern and Mr. Wilson's feeling of faintness symbolize the shift from the thinking patterns of the Middle Ages to those of the Era of Enlightenment in the sense that when an intellectual light was shed on archaic religious viewpoints, society began questioning those viewpoints, and individuals had crises of faith. This scene takes place at night, when no one is present to witness the tension between the two ministers, but the next morning, the village sexton finds a lost glove that belongs to Dimmesdale on the scaffold. The sexton then speculates that Satan placed the glove there to cast disrepute on Dimmesdale, a detail that highlights the superstitious nature of the Puritan belief system.

Foucault's concept of public discipline, as outlined in *Discipline and Punish*, inspired me to title this chapter "On the Public Scaffolding: The Scaffold as a Device for Penance and Reflection." Foucault's ideas also relate to Hester's situation, because the literal punishment device becomes a symbol of Hester's social, psychological, and spiritual imprisonment and eventual transcendence, all of which I will outline in subsequent chapters. What is more, Foucault discusses (as does Hawthorne in the novel) the ways in which public punishment forces society to re-examine its own concepts of morality and value systems. Hester, as a result of such a dynamic relationship between

Hester and her community, becomes a transitional figure who envisions the dawn of a more enlightened era and the coming of a liberated female leader and teacher who will help others attain freedom.

Both Bronstein and Madsen use textual evidence to defend the argument that Hester represents a transitional figure that symbolizes the coming of a more enlightened era through raising awareness of the unjustness of Puritanical forms of punishment. In “The Parabolic Ploys of *The Scarlet Letter*,” Bronstein expounds upon ideas expressed by Madsen. Bronstein, for instance, cites passages from the novel in which Hawthorne describes the crowd’s reaction as Hester emerges from her prison cell in order to take her place upon the public scaffolding, which becomes the stage for a dramatic, revelatory (of Hester and Dimmesdale’s, as well as the crowd’s feelings, about what is taking place) confession scene. Bronstein cites the novel’s second chapter, which offers an extremely detailed account of these revelations and reactions. Bronstein discusses the ways in which the narrator of the story describes the scene, as well as the crowd’s reaction to what it is witnessing. She writes, “In Chapter 2, for example, the narrator comments on the people who have assembled in the marketplace to await Hester Prynne’s emergence from prison. The “sympathy that a transgressor might look for from such bystanders, at the scaffold,” he [the narrator] says, was “meager” and “cold” (Bronstein 195). Bronstein’s argument differs considerably from those presented by Madsen, however, since Bronstein contends that Hawthorne is promoting a decidedly conservative point of view regarding punishment and repentance, whereas Madsen suggests that Hawthorne favors a more liberal perspective on such issues (Bronstein 190-195).



In addition, Bronstein cites a particular passage of *The Scarlet Letter* that illustrates the spectators' reaction to Hester. This passage reads: 'There was very much the same solemnity of demeanour [sic] on the part of the spectators; as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made vulnerable and awful.' (Hawthorne, *TSL* 77 in Bronstein 195). Here, Bronstein outlines the various traits exhibited by the Puritan spectators—piety, reverence, reliability, dignity, and sobriety. Interestingly enough, Bronstein argues that Hawthorne is, in a sense, upholding Puritan values, while commenting rather negatively on the values of his own time. Again, she cites specific passages from the primary text as evidence to support her claim. For example, the following passage can be interpreted as Hawthorne's way of praising the Puritans and criticizing his contemporaries:

The scene was not without a mixture of awe, such as must always invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature, before society shall have grown corrupt enough to smile, instead of shuddering, at it. The witnesses of Hester Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity, but had none of the heartlessness of another social state, which would find only a theme for jest in an exhibition like the present.

(Hawthorne, *TSL* 83-84)

Bronstein contends that, in the second passage, the phrase "another social state" and the fact that Hawthorne calls his own society "corrupt" are possible evidence of Hawthorne's belief that Puritan society was truly morally upstanding, while post-Era of Enlightenment

America was morally corrupt. Also, Bronstein claims that Hawthorne seems to be conveying an overall message that punishment was actually more effective in Puritan society than in later years, because prisoners and witnesses alike were forced to reflect upon the harsh consequences of violating both legal and moral laws in those days. Still, Bronstein notes that Hawthorne seems to contradict himself by creating supporting characters that present divergent points of view, very much the opposite of the Puritan stereotype and much more aligned with the social and political attitudes of Hawthorne's contemporaries:

In the opening scene, the townspeople, airing their views on the disciplinary measures that the magistrates have imposed on Hester, show little deference to official authority. Remembering that Hawthorne wrote for an age that celebrated numerical majorities in politics, we note that he presents seven speakers who express among themselves two points of view. Five "old dames" deplore what they regard as the magistrates' too-charitable sentence. The "ugliest and most pitiless" of these women would like to see Hester hang. (195)

I concur with Bronstein that Hawthorne is not explicitly advocating a completely progressive point of view in the novel. However, I disagree with her because I do not believe that Hawthorne is insinuating that the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritans were morally superior to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans. Rather, I interpret these passages as Hawthorne's way of illustrating the ways in which American society has gradually accepted more enlightened moral, social, political, and religious attitudes. He actually goes so far as to advocate progressive ideals as a means of improving society and the lives of individuals. Hawthorne provides evidence of this point of view, for example, in "The Custom-House"

(introductory section to the novel). In this essay, Hawthorne explains his commitment to ensure that his children escape the confining worldview of an earlier, less progressive era:

I felt it almost as a destiny to make Salem my home; so that the mould of features and cast of character which had all along been familiar here—ever, as one representative of the race lay down in his grave, another assuming, as it were, his sentry-march along the Main Street—might still in my little day be seen and recognized in the old town. Nevertheless, this very sentiment is an evidence that the connection, which has become an unhealthy one, should at last be severed. Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Hawthorne, “The Custom-House” 128)

Hawthorne clearly states that he does not want his children to be brought up in Salem, Mass., and the upcoming generation should question the traditions and ideas of their communities in order for those communities to survive and flourish. Moreover, he says that continuing certain traditions and perpetuating certain ideas could actually be detrimental to the welfare of a society. Finally, Hawthorne expresses the very progressive viewpoint of one who advocates leaving behind a better nation and world for his children. When examined within the context of Hawthorne’s own time, it is likely that Hawthorne had deep moral and political concerns about harmful traditions, such as slavery and the oppression of women, considering the content of “The Custom-House.” In relation to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester’s life mission symbolizes the viewpoint

expressed in “The Custom-House,” because Hester represents a transitional figure and social reformer who seeks to create a better world for daughter Pearl and other members of the upcoming generation.

A number of Hawthorne scholars also contend that he was a proponent of progressive ideology. I concur with Bronstein’s assertion that the introduction of characters with divergent viewpoints symbolizes Hawthorne’s belief that there ought to be shifts in societal attitudes about justice, specifically, to a more progressive point of view in order to ensure a better, more just society for future generations. One way Hawthorne does so is by emphasizing Hester and Pearl’s complex mother-daughter relationship throughout the novel. For these reasons, my interpretation of the scaffolding scenes is far more closely aligned with that of Madsen. That is, like Madsen, I believe these scenes to be symbolic of societal reflection on its concepts of and attitudes toward social justice, equality, and human dignity.

A number of critics, such as Charles Child Walcutt, have examined various readings of *The Scarlet Letter*. In “*The Scarlet Letter* and Its Modern Critics,” Walcutt discusses several different interpretations—orthodox Christian, tragic, romantic, transcendental, and relativist—of the novel and particular parts of it. My own reading of the novel is a combination of the romantic and the transcendental, a compromise that relates to the theme of social change through discipline and reflection. Walcutt explains the ways in which the different readings of the novel lead readers to interpret it differently from one another:

Romantic readings rest on the premise that society is guilty of punishing individuals who have responded to a natural urge. No absolute sin has been

committed by Hester and Dimmesdale; society has “sinned” against nature. Man is good; institutions are bad because they thwart nature. From this premise one may investigate the perversion or deterioration of the natural good in Hester and Dimmesdale through the *sense* of sin which society forces upon them. Or one may see Hester at least as living a heroic but tragic defiance of society’s code, finally defeated not by any sort of inner failure but by the misfortune of Chillingworth’s discovery of the planned escape or by the minister’s having been tormented until he has strength left to act for his own good. (Walcutt 253).

Walcutt goes on to explain the various aspects of the transcendental reading the novel:

The transcendental reading balances between the orthodox idea of absolute sin and the romantic denial of it, for although it scorns the idea of a sin of passion and rejects the stubborn mores of the community, it does judge the lovers guilty of sin in not being true to themselves. (254).

My reading of the novel is most closely aligned with a combination of the romantic and transcendental readings in that I believe that Hawthorne is essentially saying that it is the natural order of history for individuals within a society to question certain aspects of social institutions and mores that they feel no longer serve society or, in some cases, do more harm than good. For this reason, I also agree with critics like Madsen, who insist that Hawthorne makes a political statement about the issue of slavery through the scaffolding scenes. Specifically, Madsen and I both interpret the crowd’s reaction and repentance of its own sins as an analogy for the way in which 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans began questioning the morality of slavery. I agree with Walcutt’s description of the romantic and transcendental interpretations of the scaffolding-related passages, because I

interpret Hester and Dimmesdale to be enslaved by their community, as a result of the fact that the institutionalized belief systems and mores of that particular community will not allow them to openly live life as a couple.

In addition, I concur with the romantic reading of the novel in that such an interpretation insists that Hester is made the scapegoat of a rigid society that persecutes her because she is a self-reliant individual. Walcutt explains: "Romantic readings will not consider sin as sin but blame society for its persecution of the self-reliant individual; they do not see that for Hawthorne the social consequences of sin were a part of its punishment" (258).

Most importantly, I agree with Walcutt that both the romantic and transcendental readings suggest that the only real sin that Hester and Dimmesdale are guilty of are not those committed against an objective standard of morality; rather, these two characters are guilty of sinning against their own subjective, intuitive moral compasses. Here, Walcutt compares and contrasts the romantic and transcendental readings: Romantic and transcendental readings are both monistic in denying that there is any marked breach between natural impulse and moral good, but the latter affirms a universal order against which the individual may sin by a failure to obey his intuition of good (259).

More importantly, Walcutt explains that these two types of readings advocate the point of view that Hester becomes heroic following the scaffolding scene. For example, if one interprets the novel in one or both these ways, he or she will come to view Hester as a transcendent figure, whose stubborn refusal to be brought down by the social ridicule she faces on the scaffold, as well as in her everyday life, makes her a prototype of a liberated woman. Ultimately, Hester's work on behalf of others symbolizes that of 19<sup>th</sup>-

century reformers—especially abolitionists and women’s suffrage activists—whose efforts may not have been immediately fulfilled but nevertheless paved the path to creating real social change. (I will explore this concept later in this thesis.)

Still, other critics take a completely different view of crime and punishment as presented in the novel and completely counter the argument that Hawthorne is making some sort of sociopolitical analogy in the scaffolding scenes. For instance, Erika M. Kreger—author of “‘Depravity Dressed Up in a Fascinating Garb’: Sentimental Motifs and the Seduced Hero(ine) in *The Scarlet Letter*”—argues that, if anything, Hester is a victim who brings her punishment upon herself and actually becomes a corruptive, even emasculating influence on Dimmesdale. Kreger calls attention to Hawthorne’s language to stress the point:

Like the self-absorbed heroine [Hester] whose exaggerated emotion leaves her vulnerable to a lustful man’s manipulations, Dimmesdale, whose “thought and imagination were so active, and sensibility so intense” (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 124) is left open to evil influences. The minister’s introspective order of the mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of a creed, and wore its passage deeper with the lapse of time,” eats away at his strength (p. 123). He is reduced to a “poor, forlorn creature (p. 141), cast in the role of the victimized girl at the mercy of the conscienceless seducer played by Chillingworth [Hester’s estranged husband].” (Kreger 323)

In “*The Scarlet Letter* as Civic Myth,” Brook Thomas examines various alternative points of view regarding the different signs and symbols presented throughout the novel—particularly the scaffolding scenes. Thomas, like Kreger, questions the notion that the

“A” Hester is forced to wear, for example, designates the novel’s protagonist as a potential change-agent. Unlike Kreger, however, Thomas does offer up interpretations that suggest that, as I believe, the characterization of Hester may indeed be Hawthorne’s way of foreshadowing impending sociopolitical change. In fact, Thomas explains that Hawthorne’s introduction of the concept of good citizenship is a relatively modern and liberal idea that did not originate in America until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, according to this type of interpretation of Hester’s symbolic role, she is indeed symbolic of a future cultural shift toward a more enlightened way of thinking in regards to religion, gender roles, and crime and punishment. (Thomas explains that the Puritan concept of a *good citizen* is one who simply obeys Puritan laws, something that Hester is arguably the antithesis of.) More importantly, such an interpretation argues that Hawthorne advocates a liberal point of view in his signature work. Thomas discusses the concept definition of *citizenship* in both the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries:

When Hawthorne inserts the nineteenth-century term *good citizenship* into a seventeenth-century setting he subtly participates in a persistent national myth that sees U.S. citizenship developed in colonial New England. Hawthorne’s participation in this myth is important to note because much of his labor is devoted to challenging its standard version. According to the standard version, conditions for democratic citizenship flourished the moment colonists made the journey to the “New World.” If the people in the 13 colonies were officially subjects of the king, the seeds of good citizenship were carried across the Atlantic, especially by freedom-loving Pilgrims, who found a more fertile soil for civic participation than in England. (Thomas 182)



Thomas goes on to cite various textual examples of ways in which Hester embodies the modern concept of *good citizenship*, including the novel's ending, in which Hester returns to Boston, Massachusetts, after spending several years in Europe following her persecution by public scaffolding. Upon Hester's return to America, she becomes a sort of teacher and counselor for the needy and downtrodden citizens of Boston. According to Thomas, "Hester in her unselfish commitment to her community has by most measures earned the label *good citizen*" (183).

In *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, Sacvan Bercovitch analyzes and examines the symbolism of the "A" from a decidedly liberal, "transcendental" perspective. In a chapter entitled "The A-Politics of Ambiguity," Bercovitch outlines the dualities of the symbolic implications of the "A," as well as the dualities of the various societal roles Hester plays:

*The Scarlet Letter* is the story of a stranger who rejoins the community by compromising for principle, and her resolution has far-reaching implications about the symbolic structures of the American ideology. First, the only plausible modes of American dissent are those that center on the self: as stranger or prophet, rebel or revolutionary, lawbreaker or Truth seeker, or any other adversarial or oppositional form of individualism. Second, whatever good we imagine must emerge—and, properly understood, *has* emerged and is continuing to emerge—from things as they are, insofar as these are conducive to independence, progress, and other forms of pluralism. And third, radicalism has a place in society, after all, as the example of Hester demonstrates—radicalism, that is, in the American grain, defined through the ambiguities of both/and,

consecrated by the tropes of theology (“heaven’s time,” “justice and mercy,” “divine providence”), and interpreted through the polar unities at the heart of American liberalism: fusion and fragmentation, diversity as consensus, process through closure. (Bercovitch 30-31)

Thus, for Bercovitch, Hester embodies the spirit of American liberalism. Specifically, Hester represents American society’s transition from adherence to Puritan ideology to assimilation of Enlightenment-Era thinking. She is a woman who endures adversity and emerges to become a leader of other marginalized individuals. She also manages to merge aspects of both the secular and spiritual by taking the radical path of embracing a compassionate, questioning form of spirituality that allows her to navigate the outside world and help those negatively affected by it. By looking inside herself, Hester finds ways to alleviate the suffering of other troubled individuals. Through her transition from social outcast to spiritual and intellectual leader for the downtrodden, Hester Prynne ultimately exemplifies a transitional figure who privileges the Puritans’ ideal of redemption above their obsessions with guilt and punishment.

## Chapter II: Imprisonment by Society

A second type of imprisonment Hester endures is imprisonment by society. Even though she is eventually freed from her legal, literal punishment, she becomes permanently branded a social outcast (most literally by the scarlet “A” for “Adulteress” she is forced to wear to remind her and others of her “sin”). Hester deals with her social ostracism in a variety of ways that, I believe, make her a subversive yet transcendent figure. For example, instead of concealing the “A” in shame, Hester decorates the “A” and wears it as a sort of badge of honor. It is important to note, however, that Hawthorne clarifies that Hester remains troubled by the fact that others occasionally call attention to the “A.” Significantly, Hester begins to flout the Puritan social order in a variety of ways, most notably the way in which she and daughter Pearl segregate themselves from the larger community and seem to seek and adopt a decidedly alternative form of spirituality. During her time in exile, Hester takes stock of who she really is and her mission in life. She ultimately returns to Massachusetts and becomes a counselor, teacher, and leader of women (and men) who have had a similar life experience to her own. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which Hester is imprisoned by society, as well as how she copes with being labeled a social outcast.

Not only do a range of scholars, including Sacvan Bercovitch and Suzan Last, favor this interpretation I have expressed, but also the evidence from the novel strongly supports it. For instance, in Chapter 4—“The Paradoxes of Dissent”—of *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, Bercovitch discusses Hester’s rebellion against the Puritan social order throughout the course of the story. Bercovitch explains that Hester’s dissent is paradoxical in that she becomes almost a saint as a result of her rebellion. In addition,

Bercovitch contends that the primary reason that Hester is ultimately a heroic figure is not the fact she embraces any sort of feminism, radical politics, or alternative spirituality; rather, Hester is heroic in that she becomes radically self-reliant and individualistic (Bercovitch 120-121). As Bercovitch stresses in his analysis of Hester's meeting with Dimmesdale in the forest:

That paradox is best symbolized by the discarded/restored A; the problem of dissent it entails is articulated most fully in Hester's impassioned forest appeal, which Hawthorne extends over two chapters: "The Pastor and His Parishoner," and "A Flood of Sunshine," where they decide to leave New England. At the center, as though to dramatize the dynamics of cause and effect, he reviews Hester's radical development. (121)

These two chapters offer readers a very interesting perspective on sin, punishment, ignominy (public scorn), self-reliance, individualism, and liberation. For example, in Chapter XVIII—"A Flood of Sunshine"—Hawthorne presents a portrait of a woman who has actually been set free by her past ignominy. Rather than casting Hester as an imprisoning symbol, Hawthorne tells the tale of a woman whose adversities and social ostracism have made her stronger and prepared her to become a leader with great empathy for the suffering of others. Of this paradox, Hawthorne writes:

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest, that was to decide their [Hester and

Dimmesdale's] fate. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,--stern and wild ones,--and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss. (Hawthorne 290)

Thus, Hester is heroic for having had some very challenging, heartbreaking life experiences and surviving them. She has indeed lived a difficult life, and hasn't always made all the right decisions. For these reasons, she is a realistic heroine who is able to reach out to and help others cope with their own problems, because she has been to some very dark places along her own life's journey. Most importantly, Hawthorne is saying in the final sentence of this passage that Hester, for all the awareness and clarity she has acquired, she still has much more to learn, as well as some ideas to rethink or unlearn. For these reason, Hester is truly heroic, because she is an ever-evolving, dynamic character and realistic, multi-dimensional woman that others can relate to, as opposed to a static, stagnant character who never learns any important life lessons in order to benefit the lives of others in any way.

When viewed from a liberal, transcendentalist interpretation, this is Hawthorne's way of saying that Hester is heroic in that instead of allowing symbols such as the "A" and her life experiences to further stigmatize her, these symbols come to signify her

qualified triumph over her adversity. More importantly, she has acquired a wisdom that allows her to see moral wrongs and social inequities that she would not have been made aware of otherwise. I believe this passage illustrates the paradoxical nature of Hester's emotions and experiences, because even though she has acquired worldly wisdom, she has also paid a heavy emotional price for her behavior. Specifically, she lives the remainder of her life in virtual exile, and her relationship with Pearl is sometimes strained, because Pearl wants a different kind of life for herself.

Bercovitch emphasizes that much of the available literary criticism of Hester's journey does not do enough justice to her return to Boston. In relation to the central theme of this thesis chapter, it is important to note that Hester performs most of her self- and socially redemptive work in the years after moving back to America from England. In Chapter 1 of *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*—"The A-Politics of Ambiguity"—Bercovitch explains that Hester has become an independent, self-aware woman—albeit in a paradoxical way. That is, Hester's liberation is paradoxical in that although she has discovered her life's purpose (counseling and teaching other troubled individuals), she herself does not benefit directly from her work. In addition, Hester acquiesces to the symbolism of the "A", even though that symbolism has arguably changed over time. (I will discuss this matter more in-depth in Chapter IV of this thesis.)

According to Bercovitch, Hester assumes various societal roles after returning to Massachusetts. Bercovitch cites passages from the novel in which Hawthorne writes that Hester becomes an "angel or apostle of the coming revelation" and "a marginal dissenter" (*TSL* 344-45). Therefore, Hester—who never fully transcends the stigma of her past—still inhabits the margins of Boston society; however, she creates a positive image for

herself as a result of her good works. More importantly, she becomes the prototype for female teachers and leaders who will carry on the work she has started. And, even though Hester becomes loved and respected among her followers, she always views herself as guilty of her past “sins”—and therein lies the paradox of Hester’s transformation, as well as the reason why Hester decides to stay in New England, in order to ensure that Pearl receives her inheritance from Roger Chillingworth (Hester’s estranged husband)—perhaps a way of trying to make amends with Pearl (Bercovitch 3).

Certain passages from the novel itself highlight this paradox, particularly one found in Chapter V—“Hester at Her Needle.” In this passage, Hawthorne writes:

What she [Hester] compelled herself to believe,—what, finally, she reasoned upon, as her motive for continuing a resident of New England, was half a truth, and half a self-delusion. Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her daily punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom. (Hawthorne 187)

I interpret this passage as a statement of the fact that even though Hester gains respect from society following her return to America, she nevertheless continues to punish and ostracize herself. That is, Hester believes that she is indeed guilty of the sin she was originally convicted of. As the narrator—who always maintains narrative distance from Hester’s situation and never endorses her actions and beliefs—states in the passage above, however, Hester is now only guilty in her own mind. Even though she was once declared guilty of adultery, the language of this passage suggests that she has atoned for that sin through her good works. This is one of the reasons why I believe the novel

advocates a liberal point of view in regards to its political and religious message. Thus, Hester symbolizes a transitional figure that represents the shift from Puritan religiosity to Enlightenment-era thinking that occurred in America between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In addition, I do not view Hester as a martyr; instead, I view her as a flawed heroine. Even though Hester is arguably imprisoned by her own self-concept, she nonetheless achieves a sort of freedom by helping others become free of various forms of imprisonment. What is more, Hester's rebellion against the socially accepted model of womanhood makes her a transitional figure who is dynamic and not only grows in various ways personally, but she also helps others grow and overcome various forms of imprisonment.

In "Hawthorne's Feminine Voices: Reading 'The Scarlet Letter' as a Woman," Suzan Last outlines ways in which Hester transitions from outright social outcast to eccentric social leader. Last cites various passages from the novel to substantiate her argument. For example, one passage in particular explicitly alludes to Hester's radical (for the 17<sup>th</sup> century) questioning of the accepted social order. Of this revelation, Hawthorne, peering into Hester's psyche, writes:

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind, with reference to the whole race of womanhood. *Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?* As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. (*TSL* 134).

Here, Hester is making the crucial life decision to not succumb to society's accepted view of women. That view, of course, is that women should be subservient to men in both the private and public spheres. Hester has decided that



she will not accept that view and, instead, decides to challenge the existing social order and the idea that women could be happy through subservience to it by encouraging other women to do the same. For herself, Hester has decided that she will not be subservient, either.

Last also discusses the ways in which Hester subverts her society's attempts to label her on the basis of her physical appearance (i.e., the wearing of the "A" and what it is "supposed" to symbolize). Specifically, Last contends that Hester becomes a defiant heroine by playing up the "A" by sewing jewels and decorative embroidery onto it. In doing so, Hester presents a decidedly proto-feministic challenge to the traditional symbolism originally assigned to the "A." Last outlines the ways in which Hawthorne's language and gender politics are intertwined:

The narrative calls attention to the "feminine" discourse of silence and gives it a power as great or greater than the *logos* of patriarchy. Her refusal to name the father of her child confounds the leaders of the community. This refusal to be bound to a "father," even if beyond the laws of marriage, gives Hester a greater individuality. She does not conform to an acceptable model of womanhood that reflects the man to whom she might belong; she belongs to no man in her community, and thus projects her own meaning. She belongs to the community as a whole—as the negative example, as the abjected, sin-infected "other"—but, in the eyes of the community, she is no man's wife, sister, mother, daughter. She is simply Hester Prynne, wearer of the scarlet letter. The letter they have "sentenced" her to wear attempts to define her as a transparent sign—as

a transgressor of man's laws, if not as a lawful reflector of a man. The attempt, however, backfires—Hester's needle subverts the interpretive code. (Last 360)

Last devotes a great deal of her criticism to the subject of Hester's analysis of Hester's use of art to subvert the conventions society seeks to impose:

Slowly, she subverts the intent of shame by transforming the object of law into an object of art, with its own semiotic system of meaning. By going beyond the sumptuary regulations, the symbol becomes lawless instead of representative of the law. She has obscured and confused the legal intent of the symbol by making it an illegal accessory. (361)

Therefore, in challenging and subverting the patriarchal social order through feminine, intellectual creativity, Hester becomes a revered and venerated teacher and leader of those in need of some sort of counsel. More importantly, her actions are symbolically analogous to the way in which 19<sup>th</sup>-century reformers challenged the social status quo in regards to issues like slavery and ultimately proved, through intellectual creativity that such forms of oppression were illegal and immoral. Last explains the importance of non-verbal communication through symbols, particularly Hester's needlework:

Without benefit of a suitable language, Hester communicates through her feminine artistry of needle-work—an artistry that the narrator recognizes as “almost the only one within a woman's grasp” (*TSL* 76). The women in the community recognize her non-verbal, feminine form of communication, and thereby recognize—perhaps nothing so definite as their own “outlaw” status as women under patriarchal rule—but possibly a vague sense of the insufficiency of the patriarchal system of language and law to adequately represent and to serve

the “unspeakable” needs and desires of women. They come to her with “their sorrows and perplexities,” seeking her counsel and sympathy as someone who has been a public victim as they are private victims. Only in this non-verbal, semiotic system can she begin to take control, to some degree, of her identity; and only through the use of this semiotic power can she subvert the patriarchal symbol of punishment placed on her breast, as well as the patriarchal power placed over all the women in the community. (361)

While Last introduces the idea that Hester is challenging the patriarchal social order through an amalgamation of feminine creativity and defiant artistry, Zelda Bronstein expounds upon this idea in “The Parabolic Ploys of the Scarlet Letter.” Unlike Last, however, Bronstein argues that Hester is primarily punished by Puritan society for the crime of adultery—not political subversion. In fact, Bronstein argues that the novel is not to be read politically at all:

Two tropes link the equivocal treatment of public authority examined earlier with this subversive representation of the Puritans. In the first, sexual intolerance serves as a metaphor for political intolerance. The narrator’s Tocquevillean allegations about the “despotic” public are borne out by society’s persecution of Hester for adultery, not political dissent. There is no political dissonance in the *The Scarlet Letter*. To all appearances—and appearances are what matter to the public—Hester and Pearl are the only deviants in Boston, and their marginality springs from sexual transgression. Hester thinks politically radical thoughts, but as she never acts on them, they cannot account for the harsh treatment society dispenses to her and her daughter. (Bronstein 205)

In other words, Bronstein contends that Hester's thoughts, even though they are debatably politically radical in nature, are irrelevant to her punishment. I disagree very strongly with Bronstein's argument, because I believe that Hester's thoughts and punishment are most definitely connected. Bronstein does, however, note that if one reads *Scarlet Letter*, as well as "The Custom-House"—Hawthorne's "Introductory" to the novel, he or she will detect a hint of liberalism in Hawthorne's own thought processes regarding the key issues of his time:

The conflation of politics and sexuality can be understood in terms of a second pivotal metaphor: procreation figures literary production. This figuration emerges only when "The Scarlet Letter" is read in tandem with "The Custom-House." As critics have remarked, the Hawthorne of the "Introductory" identifies with Hester Prynne as both sinner and artist: the two roles go together. (205-206)

When read from a pragmatic perspective, this passage alludes to the fact that Hester makes the best of her situation—and even triumphs over it to a degree—but still must come to terms with her past and the limitations of her reality. In addition, I interpret Hester as a transitional figure and visionary who has revelations of a coming prophetess and leader who will help emancipate future generations of women. Hester ultimately becomes a heroine to other social outcasts, primarily because she returns to the scene of her punishment after a period of soul-searching in England and, instead of succumbing to her community's constricting social mores, she openly flouts them via the embroidered "A"—which has now come to symbolize Hester's defiant triumph. And although she remains a "bond-servant" to her lingering shame of her past "sin," Hester manages to become a respected and intellectually creative leader of downtrodden, disenfranchised

individuals. In fact, she even has visions of a woman—possibly herself—becoming a prophetess and leader of the next generation who will help that next generation overcome the strict social mores of Hester’s day. Even though Hester ultimately realizes she will more than likely not be that leader—and never fully transcend the A’s stigma--her optimistic vision of the revelation of a higher truth that will set the next generation free from the suffering of the previous one allows Hester to be an effective counselor nonetheless. In Chapter XXIV: “Conclusion,” Hawthorne writes of Hester’s prophetic vision:

Women, more especially,--in the continually recurring trials of the wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion,--or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought,--came to Hester’s cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counseled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, 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 confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make

us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! (Hawthorne 344-345)

In this crucial passage, Hester concedes that she and members of her own generation will not be able to fully right the wrongs committed by those in positions of power and injustices committed by social institutions. She does, however, express her belief that there is hope that the upcoming generation will create more dramatic social change and that a woman who has lived a positive, purposeful life will become its leader. This leader will successfully encourage her followers to overcome their pain, adversity, and sorrow by focusing on performing good works for others, thus uplifting society as a whole. In addition, this passage emphasizes the idea that those who have a providential sense of history tend to view the emergence of such transitional figures as the beginning of positive social changes that will more than likely take generations to completely come to fruition, as well as the fact that those changes do not happen without much disappointment, effort, and struggle. Most importantly, it states the age-old truism that those who openly question social injustice more often than face social ostracism and experience internal psychological torment in their own time, but they usually later become revered.

### **Chapter III: Imprisonment of the Psyche**

In the first two chapters of this thesis, I discussed Hester's political punishment by public scaffolding apparatus and societal imprisonment and ostracism via the stigma of the symbolism of the "A," respectively. In this chapter, I will discuss Hester and other characters' psychological imprisonment. While the scaffolding and the "A" are external forms of punishment that cause society to react to Hester in various ways, Hester's

psychological punishment is largely self-imposed. Throughout the course of the novel, Hester examines her life choices and embarks upon her mission of service to others as a means of atoning for her perceived sins. Although she never completely transcends her internalized feelings of persecution, Hester arguably succeeds in transforming the “A” from a symbol of social ostracism to one of intellectual creativity and social change.

A number of passages from the novel depict Hester’s psychological state at different points within the storyline. For example, in one such passage in “Chapter XIII: Another View of Hester,” the narrator outlines Hester’s psychological dilemma:

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind, with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. (Hawthorne, *TSL* 134)

In this passage, Hawthorne is, of course, giving readers a look into Hester’s psyche. I interpret this quotation as Hawthorne’s way of depicting his protagonist’s psychological ambivalence about her future and women’s roles in society. She is torn between two points of view. Specifically, Hester is simultaneously questioning the prescribed rules and moral codes of her society (that is, she has long since decided that she does not accept those rules and codes for herself; therefore, she seeks to help others free themselves from the constricting aspects of those rules and codes) and conceding that women of her generation will more than likely never achieve significant freedom and liberation. Ultimately, I believe, Hester’s inner turmoil and eventual revelation lead her to

discover her primary purpose in life—which is to be a teacher and comforter of women, the downtrodden, and the oppressed.

Later, Hawthorne presents Hester as a representative “everywoman” who undergoes a psychological transformation allowing her to serve as a feminist leader/teacher prototype—a kind of prophetess:

A tendency to speculation, though it may keep woman quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (Hawthorne, *TSL* 260)

Here, Hester ponders her future and whether she will really ever transcend the stigma of her past actions and persecution. She indirectly expresses her desire to try to rise above her situation by working to become a change-agent who will begin to break societal barriers (particularly those regarding gender conventions) by becoming a leader and teacher of women who have faced similar adversity. At the same time, the passage reflects Hester’s liability to become overwhelmed by doubt and despair. These two passages have a decidedly dark tone, and another related passage reveals Hester as experiencing dark, even suicidal thoughts. This problem is clear as Hawthorne continues to describe Hester’s frame of mind:

Thus, Hester Prynne, whose heart has lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind; now turned aside



by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. There was wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere. At times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide.

The scarlet letter had not done its office. (*TSL* 261)

This is a key passage for several reasons. First, it illustrates that Hester is questioning her very existence. Secondly, the language serves as a metaphor for personal change in the sense that when an individual starts to make changes in his or her life, the change initially causes emotional discomfort and unrest within the individual. For instance, language such as “There was a wild ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere. . .” indicates the fear and uncertainty that Hester is feeling at the point in time. Even familiar surroundings seem scary and unfamiliar to her, and she feels that she does not belong anywhere. The passage also contains phrases like “dark labyrinth” and “an insurmountable precipice,” both of which refer to Hester’s state of mind. Facing an uncertain future, Hester’s thought process resembles a dark maze of uncertainty and various paths she could take, all with uncertain outcomes, as well as a host of obstacles. Simply put, Hester feels lost. As for the “insurmountable precipice metaphor,” it describes Hester’s arrival at a critical “crossroads” along her life’s journey. She has already overcome a number of serious obstacles, which are described as a “deep

chasm” that she has come back from. Hester must now decide whether to carry on or be brought down by past, present, and future stumbling blocks to personal growth and progress. Just as Hester must make a choice of whether to progress or regress, societies often reach points in which their members must decide whether to embrace progress or become stagnated. In addition, Hester represents an analogy to the social-change agents of Hawthorne’s day in that such individuals chose as a way to bring about various forms of social change (e.g., abolition of slavery; women’s suffrage) amid extreme opposition and hostility from the sociopolitical establishment of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Sacvan Bercovitch discusses the dualistic symbolism of the “A” and its application to this idea of progress versus stagnation in Chapter Four—“The Paradoxes of Dissent”—of *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*. Focusing on Hester’s return to America, Bercovitch outlines the ways in which the letter’s symbolism changes throughout the novel. Specifically, Bercovitch theorizes that, at the beginning of the novel, the “A” symbolizes oppression and a loss of Hester’s individuality. Later, however, Hester transforms it into a symbol of creativity and individuality. In addition, Bercovitch provides various examples of ways that the novel and its message symbolize the attitude and mindset of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Bercovitch describes the ways in which Hester uses the “A” to express her individuality, as well ways that it can be interpreted as symbolic of changing societal attitudes in a young, growing nation:

Hester's individuality emerges through her capacity to make the general symbol her own, an act of appropriation through dissent whose office is fulfilled at the end, when she returns to New England accompanied both by rumors of Pearl in Europe and by hopes of better things in store for America. That liberal both/and includes an alternative either/or: the concept of an un-American place of freedom, Europe; the possibility of an American nonliberal future, some still undetermined "surer ground of mutual happiness" whose structure will contravene those of actual individualism. (Bercovitch 152)

Therefore, Bercovitch argues that the "A's" symbolism is paradoxical, because it is initially meant to be a symbol of punishment whose intended office is to dehumanize Hester. In this sense, the scarlet letter fails to do its office, since Hester transforms it into a symbol of individuality. As for the symbol's larger sociopolitical meaning, the "A" symbolizes a new nation's struggle to find its own identity amid lingering attitudes, traditions, and symbols of the Old World. Finally, Hester's own state of mind represents these paradoxes; primarily, she struggles to become a fully emancipated woman as a result of her inability to fully extricate herself from her past.

Frederick Crews analyzes Hester's psychological struggles and mental imprisonment extensively. Crews' view of Hester partially concurs with my own. He and I both view Hester as a woman who has overcome great obstacles and

finds ways to make the best out of a less-than-ideal situation. In addition, both Crews and I interpret Hester as a visionary, transitional character. We differ with each other, however, in regard to the way in which we interpret Hawthorne's message. Specifically, Crews reads Hawthorne as being a conservative moralist, while I perceive Hawthorne as a more progressive writer.

In Ch. VIII—entitled “The Ruined Wall”—of *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes*, Crews outlines the psychological aspects of *The Scarlet Letter*. Specifically, he focuses on Hester's various psychological states throughout the novel. For example, Crews analyzes and discusses Hester's reasons for returning to America, citing, for example, the fact that Hester decides she “wants a more real life”—an allusion to the novel's ending. Crews argues that Hester does not return to Boston to perform good works on behalf of others as a result of moral conviction; instead, Crews interprets Hester as a woman who is simply worn out from her years of struggle while living on the fringes of society. Crews emphasizes the way in which Hester not only ultimately concedes that women in her society face many obstacles, but she also has a revelation of a time in which female leaders will rise up and work to create real changes in regards to society's attitudes about gender roles. In the following passage, Crews explains why he believes Hester is a visionary, transitional character:

To counterbalance this impression we have the case of Hester, for whom the drama on the scaffold can never be completely over. After raising Pearl in a more generous atmosphere she voluntarily returns to Boston to resume, or rather to begin, her state of penitence. We must note, however, that this penitence seems

to be devoid of theological content; Hester has returned because Boston and the scarlet letter offer her “a more real life” (C, I, 262) than she could find elsewhere, even with Pearl. This simply confirms Hawthorne’s emphasis on the irrevocability of guilty acts. And though Hester is now selfless and humble, it is not because she believes in Christian submissiveness but because all passion has been spent. To the women who seek her help “in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion” (C, I, 263), Hester does not disguise her conviction that women are pathetically misunderstood in her society. . . . (Crews 152)

According to Crews’ theory, Hester’s early passion causes her to sin. He is also asserting that Hawthorne presents a rather conservative, moralistic point of view and that readers are to view Hester as a victim of both her own psyche and a slave to her ignorance of the realities of the existing social order, which is caused by her unbridled passion. Still, Crews points out that Hester does find some degree of emotional and psychological solace through her revelation about the coming of a female leader who will liberate future generations of women, and she shares this idea with those who seek her counsel. Crews explains, “She [Hester] assures her wretched friends that at some later period “a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (C, I, 263). Crews notes that he does not believe that Hawthorne personally agreed with this prediction but that its inclusion into the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* has “retrospective importance.” What is more, Crews states, “Hawthorne’s characters originally acted in ignorance of passion’s strength and persistence, and so they became its slaves” (Crews 152). Nevertheless, this

revelation, coupled with Hester's subsequent actions, allows Hester to transcend her situation and make some good come out of her experiences.

Meanwhile, Hester's lover, Dimmesdale ends up being brought down by his psychological state, specifically, he is unable to fully extricate himself from social conventions—a stark contrast to Hester's situation. Prior to this, however, Dimmesdale begins experiencing a series of life-changing thoughts and feelings following a meeting with Hester in a forest. The novel's forest scenes symbolize the characters' different psychological states in a variety of ways, primarily as a symbol of the characters' state of being in a moral wilderness, a state of uncertainty.

Several passages in Chapter XX—"The Minister in a Maze"—illustrate this symbolism in vivid detail. In this chapter, Dimmesdale has a life and mood-altering meeting with Hester and Pearl in a forest. This forest is a series of blocked views and narrow pathways—a kind of physical maze—which symbolizes the much more challenging psychological maze Dimmesdale finds himself trapped in. Immediately following the meeting with Hester, Dimmesdale becomes infused with a new, vibrant, optimistic energy.

The excitement of Mr. Dimmesdale's feelings, as he returned from his interview with Hester, lent him unaccustomed physical energy, and hurried him townward at a rapid pace. The pathway among the woods seemed wilder, more uncouth with its rude natural obstacles, and less trodden by the foot of man, than he remembered it on his outward journey. But he leaped across the plashy places, thrust himself through the clinging underbrush, climbed the ascent, plunged into the hollow, and overcame, in

short, all the difficulties of the track, with an unweariable activity that astonished him. (Hawthorne, *TSL* 304)

Later in the chapter, as Dimmesdale makes his way farther back into town, the town begins to look different to him. Even though all the objects and people in the town appear familiar to Dimmesdale, he realizes that he is changing. These perceived external changes reflect the internal changes Dimmesdale is undergoing as a result of his meeting with Hester. At this point in the story Dimmesdale undergoes a definite transformation from a deeply religious, studious man to one who is spontaneous and more liberated in his thinking.

This phenomenon, in the various shapes which it assumed, indicated no external change, but so sudden and important a change in the spectator of the familiar scene, that the intervening space of a single day had operated on his consciousness like the lapse of years. The minister's own will, and Hester's will, and the fate that grew between them, had wrought this transformation. It was the same town as heretofore; but the same minister returned not from the forest. He might have said to the friends who greeted him,-- "I am not the man for whom you take me! I left him yonder in the forest, withdrawn into a secret dell, by a mossy tree-trunk, and near a melancholy brook! Go, seek your minister, and if his emaciated figure, his thin cheek, his white, heavy, pain-wrinkled brow, be not flung down there like a cast-off garment!" His friends, no doubt, would still have insisted with him,--"Thou art thyself the man!"—but the error would have been their own, not his. (*TSL* 305)

Dimmesdale begins changing in every possible way—mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. More importantly, his friends' and parishoners' reaction to Dimmesdale upon his return home symbolizes the way in which change affects everyone and everything in the changing person's life, and that change is initially uncomfortable. Dimmesdale especially senses these internal changes as he nears home:

Before Dimmesdale reached home, his inner man gave him other evidences of a revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling. In truth, nothing short of a total change of dynasty and moral code, in that interior kingdom, was adequate to account for the impulses now communicated to the unfortunate and startled minister. At every step he was incited to do some strange, wild wicked thing or other, with a sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional; in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse. (*TSL* 306)

Dimmesdale essentially experiences a growing sense of personal freedom in this scene. After having spent a life enslaved to Puritan social conventions, Dimmesdale starts believing that he may be able to liberate himself from those constraints. He even entertains ideas of doing socially unacceptable things at first, but he concludes that he needs to use his newfound mental and spiritual liberation for positive purposes. As he begins to feel increasingly free, Dimmesdale becomes compelled to liberate others from their trials and tribulations. Following this transformation, changes begin taking place for Dimmesdale's parishioners during his meeting with them. For example, he counsels an elderly widow who has experienced much loss and sorrow. After meeting with Dimmesdale, she becomes filled with a new sense of joy (*TSL* 306-07).



Even though Dimmesdale does some good for others and begins to feel more joyous himself, he is deeply troubled at this point. He begins questioning his sanity:

“What is it that haunts and tempts me thus?” cried the minister to himself at length, and striking his hand against his forehead. “Am I mad? Or am I given over utterly to the fiend? Did I make a contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood? And does he now summon me to its fulfillment, by suggesting the performance of every wickedness which his most foul imagination can conceive?”  
(*TSL* 308)

This crisis of faith leads Dimmesdale to write an Election Sermon that is based upon his revelations. Dimmesdale’s experience in the forest has forever changed him. Upon returning to his study to finish writing the Election Sermon, Dimmesdale realizes that he has changed.

Following this period of reflection, Dimmesdale becomes filled with a new fervor and finishes writing the Election Sermon, which will be the last one he ever delivers. It appears that this sermon might mark a new beginning for the reverend (“There he was, with the pen still between his fingers, and a vast, immeasurable tract of written space behind him!” (*TSL* 312)), and he becomes infused with a new spiritual energy. That outcome, however, is not to be. Instead, Dimmesdale dies shortly after delivering the Election Sermon, his death brought on by years of internal torment and depression. While everything that has transpired brings about Dimmesdale’s literal end, Hester begins life anew and, in her own way, actually manages to, if not fully transcend her past per se, envision the coming of a future female leader. This vision infuses Hester with

hope and allows her to continue her work, which gives the women in her sphere of influence hope for better days ahead.

#### **Chapter IV: The Path Toward Transcendence**

Throughout her life's journey, Hester Prynne endures various forms of punishment—political, societal, and psycho-spiritual. Each of these types of punishment affects Hester in a variety of ways. In addition, those around her are also affected by the events depicted in the novel in various ways. Hester ultimately finds methods of coping with her reality and becomes a teacher and counselor for other troubled souls. More importantly, even though she does not fully overcome the stigma imposed by the symbolic “A” she is forced to wear as a symbol of her past crime/sin, she does manage to create some semblance of a “normal” life for herself and others and achieves a sort of transcendence by way her good works.

Sacvan Bercovitch discusses the “A’s” symbolism and its relationship to Hester’s transcendence in *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*. In Chapter VII—“The Return of Hester Prynne”—Bercovitch focuses primarily on the portion of the novel that takes place during the years following Hester’s return to America from England. In this chapter, Bercovitch opens with an overview of the ways in which the “scarlet letter had not done its office.” Bercovitch explains that, while some readers may interpret this sentence as Hawthorne’s way of stating that the “A” symbolizes an ultimate lack of narrative closure, Hawthorne is actually stating the opposite:

His [Hawthorne's] very emphasis on the negative, the "not done," invests the letter with a discreet function, an office whose fulfillment (in due time) will be the mark of narrative closure. It reminds us, as does everything else about the novel, from title to plot, that the letter has a purpose and a goal. (Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 194)

Bercovitch goes on to discuss the ways in which Hawthorne gives readers closure by saying that the scarlet letter does not do its office. According to Bercovitch, the way Hawthorne crafts the ending of the novel is what gives readers this sense of closure. Hawthorne's primary method of doing so is by giving Hester herself closure through her work with others and vision of a coming time in which a powerful female leader will emerge. Bercovitch explains Hester's progress toward transcendence and the transformation of the "A" from a negative symbol to a positive one as a result of Hester's good deeds; specifically, Hester morphs the letter from a symbol of "Adultery" to one of "Able" and "Admirable":

Her [Hester's] cottage becomes a meeting ground for dissidents—particularly, unhappy young women chafing (as Hester had) under Puritan restrictions—and she takes the opportunity to make it a counseling center for patience and faith. In effect, she urges upon them a morphology of penitence (not unlike the official Puritan "preparation for salvation")—self-control, self-doubt, self-denial, a true sight of sin, and hope in the future, involving some apodictic revelation to come. Hester's "badge of shame" becomes the "mystic" token of integration. (Bercovitch 195)

Therefore, by counseling other troubled individuals in her home, Hester achieves a degree of spiritual transcendence over the letter's original negative symbolism. Still, Bercovitch points out that the novel's ending is "not some formulaic Victorian happy ending" (*The Rites of Assent* 195). Instead, the sense of narrative closure is achieved by the combination and ultimate reconciliation of all the elements and symbols that have been an integral part of Hester's daily life throughout the novel. Bercovitch discusses these symbols and elements and the ways in which they come together at the conclusion of the novel:

Hester's return effectually reconciles the various antinomies that surround her throughout the novel: nature and culture, sacred and profane, light and shadow, memory and hope, repression and desire, angel and adulteress, her dream of love and the demands of history and community. (195)

In "Citizen Hester: *The Scarlet Letter* as Civic Myth," Brook Thomas discusses the various readings of the novel. Specifically, Thomas explains the ways in which recent political readings of the novel and romantic interpretations of it are intertwined, because the love story between Hester and Dimmesdale symbolizes the possibility of new beginnings and the shift to a civil society. Thomas implores readers to combine political and romantic interpretations of the novel and states that overlooking the significance of the romantic aspect in favor of a purely political one compromises one's understanding of the whole novel's symbolism:

Of course, most readers of *The Scarlet Letter* do not need to be reminded that its mythopoetic power lies in its love story. All the more noteworthy, therefore, that recent political readings of the novel have tended to divert

our attention from the love story or downplay its significance. What those readings fail to acknowledge is that the love plot is a vital part of Hawthorne's civic vision because it is in the love plot that he explores the possibilities of life in civil society. He does so by working on/with the great exceptionalist myth that America offers the hope for a radical break with the past and the promise of a new start. (Thomas 185-86)

In addition, Suzan Last describes the narrator's shifting voice as a symbol of coming social change (and, consequently, a shift in the "A's" symbolism) in "Hawthorne's Feminine Voices: Reading *The Scarlet Letter* As a Woman." According to Last, the way in which the narrator speaks in multiple, ever-changing voices symbolizes a changing society that is trying to find its own identity. What is more, the narrator's voice changes in such a way throughout the novel that makes the narrator sympathetic to Hester and gives the novel a decidedly feminine voice:

It is the juggling of the multiple voices, perspectives, and ideologies that makes the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* speak with a feminine sensibility. The narrator maintains a constant push-pull relationship with his past, one moment identifying with his patriarchal ancestors and co-workers, the next condemning them. (Last 354)

This shift in the letter's symbolism serves as a metaphor for changing societal attitudes—specifically, the shift from a Puritanical mindset to a more enlightened one. Hawthorne describes these changes—as well as the combination of all the symbols of elements that have shaped Hester's journey—in the novel's penultimate chapter—"The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter." In this chapter, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale delivers

what will become his final sermon, as he dies at the end of this chapter. At the conclusion of Dimmesdale's Election Sermon, he implores his audience, which is gathered once again in the town square at the site of Hester's ignominy—the scaffold, to take another look at the scarlet letter that Hester is still wearing and then reveals that he is also wearing one:

With a convulsive motion he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation. For an instant the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was centred on the ghastly miracle; 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. (*TSL* 338)

At this moment, Dimmesdale reveals to his parishioners that he, too, has sinned. This stunning revelation ultimately paves the path toward Hester's liberation and transcendence. She achieves a sort of closure when, following the revelation of Dimmesdale's scarlet letter, Hester, Dimmesdale, Pearl, and Hester's estranged husband, Roger Chillingworth, come together and collectively acknowledge all that has transpired over the last few years. Most importantly, Dimmesdale publicly recognizes Pearl as his daughter, thus signifying the end of years of mental and spiritual anguish for both Dimmesdale and Hester as a result of keeping Pearl's paternity a secret:

Pearl kissed his [Dimmesdale's] lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were a pledge that she would grow up amid joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but

be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled. (*TSL* 339)

This passage signifies the way in which one generation's recognition of its transgressions and mistakes gives the next generation hope, and Pearl's tears symbolize a cleansing and healing of past wounds. Hester is now free to move on and find some form of liberation, and there is hope that Pearl will be able to do the same. This chapter is especially poignant, given the fact that Dimmesdale literally dies at the end of it. He makes peace with Hester, Pearl, and Chillingworth as he takes his final breath, which I interpret as being symbolic of the way in which every generation eventually passes away, taking its conventions with it, leading to the beginning of the next generation, which is alive and infused with new ideas that change society. Even so, each new generation struggles to find its own voice and completely rid itself of the negative aspects of the previous one. Hawthorne depicts this coming shift by describing the multitude of onlookers becoming suddenly vocal, after having been previously silent:

That final word came forth with the minister's expiring breath. The multitude, silent till then, broke out in a strange, deep voice of awe and wonder, which could not as yet find utterance, save in this murmur that rolled so heavily after the departed spirit. (339)

Significantly, an influential reviewer from Hawthorne's own time saw Hester as the heroine of a proto-feminist tale. In her 1850 review of *The Scarlet Letter*—originally published in *The Saturday Visiter*—abolitionist and feminist journalist Jane Swisshelm presents a strong argument for this case. Swisshelm focuses primarily on the Election Sermon and the changes that take place within Pearl and outwardly for Hester following

Dimmesdale's passing at the conclusion of the novel. For example, Swisshelm writes of Pearl and Hester:

Pearl's nature appears changed from the time of her father's death, and she becomes gentle, affectionate-comprehensible. She and her mother disappear for some years, and then Hester returns to the cabin alone. It is supposed from signs that Pearl is the wife of some nobleman in a foreign land, but Hester voluntarily returns, takes up her old badge of shame, lives and dies in the cabin by the sea side, and finally sleeps beside her lover.

(Swisshelm)

Swisshelm makes an extremely strong case for Hester being a transcendent, triumphant, and proto-feministic literary character. Swisshelm questions the notion of Hester as an eternally deeply flawed character. She does so by specifically questioning the common interpretation of the novel as Hawthorne's way of trying to teach readers a moral lesson; in fact, Swisshelm goes so far as to completely debunk that notion altogether:

'If he [Hawthorne] meant to teach the sinfulness of Hester's sin—the great and divine obligation and sanctity of a legal marriage contract, and the monstrous depravity of a union sanctioned only by affection, his book is the most sublime failure of the age. Hester Prynne stands morally, as Saul did physically amongst his contemporaries, the head and shoulders taller than the tallest. She is the most glorious creation of fiction that has ever crossed our path.' (Swisshelm)

Therefore, Swisshelm views Hester as a literary heroine, as do I. I also concur with Swisshelm that Hawthorne presents Hester as morally superior to other characters.



That is, both Swisshelm and I interpret Hester as actually being morally superior to those judging her. As I explain in earlier chapters, Hester serves as a transitional figure who helps those around her see the truth regarding spiritual matters, as well as one who symbolizes an impending societal shift in thinking regarding morality and social conventions. Swisshelm makes an equally cogent argument for this case at the conclusion of her review:

. . . If Hawthorne really wants to teach the lesson, ostensibly written on the pages of his book, he had better try again. For our part if we knew there was such another woman as Hester Prynne in Boston now, we should travel all the way there to pay our respects, while the honorable characters of the book are such poor affairs it would scarce be worth while throwing a mud-ball at the best of them.  
(Swisshelm)

In addition, I interpret portions of the novel's last several chapters as Hester's way of stating her belief in a future time in which women will be leaders and teachers, and society will adopt an overall creative, enlightened perspective. For example, Hester outlines this unique theological perspective (perhaps most aptly categorized as antinomianism—a direct refutation of Calvinism), which is based on the concept of human nature and natural rights in Chapter XVII—"The Pastor and His Parishoner"—during a meeting with Dimmesdale. Hester tries to convince Dimmesdale that there is still hope for him to achieve happiness and transcendence over the stigma attached to him:

"Thou art crushed under this seven years' weight of misery,"  
replied Hester, fervently resolved to buoy him up with her own energy.

“But thou shalt leave it all behind thee! It shall not cumber thy steps, as thou treadest along the forest path; neither shalt thou freight the ship with it, if thou prefer to cross the sea. Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened! Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew! Hast thou exhausted possibility in the failure of this one trial? Not so! The future is yet full of trial and success. There is happiness to be enjoyed! There is good to be done! Exchange this false life of thine for a true one. Be, if thy spirit summon thee to such a mission, the teacher and apostle of the red men. Or,— as is more thy nature,— be a scholar and a sage among the wisest and the most renowned of the cultivated world. Preach! Write! Act! Do any thing, save to lie down and die! Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear without fear or shame. Why shouldst thou tarry so much as one other day in the moments that have so gnawed into thy life!—that have made thee feeble to will and to do!—that will leave thee feeble to will and to do!—that will leave thee powerless even to repent! Up, and away!”

*(TSL 288-89)*

Here, Hester foreshadows a time in which society will abandon the Puritan religious concepts of original sin and predestination in exchange for a form of theology that embraces ideas like free will, good works, and second chances. She tells Dimmesdale to have hope for this coming future and to be happy, as well as that he can start a new life—free of the baggage of the previous one. Hester also alludes to the possibility of Dimmesdale teaching and preaching to Native Americans—which I

interpret as an allusion to an impending inter-faith spiritual movement. These concepts are further alluded to in the following chapter—“A Flood of Sunshine.” This chapter is laden with nature imagery and the characters’ relationship to nature, which symbolizes the concept of natural rights as opposed to religious legalism. In one passage in this chapter, for instance, Hester and Dimmesdale’s spirits are awakened and enlivened while communing with nature during their meeting in the forest:

Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth—with the bliss of these two spirits! Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world. Had the forest still kept its gloom, it would have been bright in Hester’s eyes, and bright in Arthur Dimmesdale’s! (*TSL* 293)

The language of this quotation symbolizes the imminent shift from a legalistic theological perspective to a more heart-based one.<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne alludes to a possible future in which spirituality is infused with the concept of love. For Hester and Dimmesdale, specifically, this passage suggests that love can and does triumph even over the darkest moments. In terms of its sociopolitical application, the passage foreshadows a period in which creativity, advocacy for human rights, and unconditional love are guiding principles.

Finally, I believe the very last paragraph of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* to be a crucial one, for several reasons. In the novel’s final few sentences, Hawthorne states that while Hester is permanently branded with the “A” (the symbol is literally etched into her tombstone, which, significantly, marks a grave dug next

to Dimmesdale's), the symbol transforms from one of shame to one that is synonymous with hope for a brighter future—something that Hester foreshadows through a vision she has toward the end of the novel:

. . . And, after many, many years, a new grave was delved, near an old and sunken one, in that burial-ground beside which King's Chapel has since been built. It was near that old and sunken grave, yet with a space between, as if the tombstone served for both. All around, there were monuments carved with armorial bearings; and on this simple slab of slate—as the curious investigator may still discern, and perplex himself with the purport—there appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald's wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend; so somber is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow:--

*“On a field, sable, the letter A, gules.” (TSL 345)*

Even though this direct quotation from the novel, in a sense, contradicts my key argument, its significance should not be ignored. Hester's grave stands as a reminder to observers that although society's attitudes about women have changed and evolved since Hester's time, the specter of the persecution of women who dared challenge the status quo still very much haunts society. The “ever-glowing light gloomier than the shadow” symbolizes this remaining stigma. Hester may have found creative ways to transform the “A” from a negative to a positive symbol through her good works, but at least a small vestige of the “A's” original stigma endures for eternity. I interpret Hawthorne's language regarding the letter to be a statement of the fact that while progress has been

made in many other areas, there remains much work to do in terms of changing sociopolitical attitudes about women and their role in society. This gloomy light serves as a reminder to future generations of observers that there is hope for a better future, but in order for real change in regard to women's rights and gender equality to occur, society needs to start focusing more on women's positive actions, as opposed to negative ones.

In this concluding paragraph of Nathaniel Hawthorne's signature work, readers are presented with the epitaph summarizing the life of Hester Prynne—a woman once accused of the sin of adultery and punished for that sin in a variety of ways—politically, socially, and spiritually. After years of enduring these various forms of punishment, Hester comes near to transcending her circumstances through becoming a teacher and counselor of others living on the fringes of society. While Hester never fully overcomes her past, the scarlet letter she is forced to wear as a symbol of her original sin transforms from a negative symbol of punishment to a positive, enlightening symbol of hope for the emancipation of future generations from various forms of punishment and oppression through her good works on behalf of other troubled souls. The letter still carries some of its original stigma, but the “ever-glowing point of light”—although it is a dim one—symbolizes a faint ray of hope for a better future, as well as a warning for future generations to not repeat the mistakes of previous ones. Toward the end of the novel, Hester envisions a coming time in which a female leader will successfully achieve the goals she cannot. For these reasons, Hester Prynne—the protagonist and eventual heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*—serves as a prime example of a transcendent, transitional, and triumphant literary character.

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<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 2, “The Gentle Way of Punishment,” of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains that public confession was a common method of punishment for prisoners in Europe and the U.S. colonies prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (*DAP* 448-450).

<sup>2</sup> This is an allusion to the concept of the psychology of the head and heart, a conflict both Hester and Dimmesdale face throughout the novel. This concept—in relation to the novel—is discussed by Herman Melville in his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” as well as by Donald A. Ringe in the article “Hawthorne’s Psychology of the Head and Heart (JSTOR: *PMLA*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Mar., 1950), pp. 120-132).”

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