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"A" is for Ambivalence : Hester Prynne's Conflicted Response to Motherhood in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract:

In this paper the author discusses the protagonist Hester Prynne's conflicted response to motherhood in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The author examines Hester's behavior towards her daughter, Pearl, as well as her relationships with her husband Roger Chillingworth and Pearl's father Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester's changing role in the town is also explored as she continues to quietly rebel against the patriarchy by making unconventional choices.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“A” IS FOR AMBIVALENCE: HESTER PRYNNE’S CONFLICTED RESPONSE TO
MOTHERHOOD IN HAWTHORNE’S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

by

Stephanie Morecraft Carlson

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts


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In September of 1849, approximately two months after his mother's death in Salem, Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne began writing *The Scarlet Letter*. Its heroine, Hester Prynne, a resident of Puritan Boston in the 1640's, is forced to wear the scarlet A for adultery after the birth of her daughter, Pearl, the result of a secret liaison with the well-regarded minister, Arthur Dimmesdale. Louise DeSalvo explains that Hawthorne wrote the novel as "a kind of elegy" (518) to his mother, who was left to raise three young children alone after being widowed, and that she most likely served as the model for Hester who remains a single mother throughout the novel. However, Thomas Mitchell, while acknowledging the emotional impact of Hawthorne's mother's death, asserts that the actual model for Hester is Margaret Fuller, feminist writer and friend of Hawthorne (532). Hawthorne began writing *The Scarlet Letter* less than two weeks after learning that Fuller had given birth to child out of wedlock (539) and that "Fuller inspired...the subject and the character" (539). Regardless of Hawthorne's inspiration, Hester is emblematic of motherhood, a Madonna-like figure whose life centers around her daughter and charitable service to the town. However, I will explain in this essay that Hester's embrace of the maternal role is more conflicted than it appears as she struggles to balance her own needs with those of her daughter and to claim the limited amount of power available to her as a woman in patriarchal Puritan society.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the time period in which Hawthorne created the character of Hester, True Womanhood was defined and praised in books, magazines and sermons. According to Barbara Welter, "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (151, 152). Motherhood encompassed all virtues as women were supposed to be pious and educate their children in Christian principles

and were supposed to set an example of purity before marriage and show no overt sensuality afterward. In addition, they were supposed to be both submissive to their husbands and to God, even if He took away a beloved child, and were supposed to limit their interests to the domestic sphere, considering it their patriotic duty to stay home and raise children. Welter, quoting George Burnap, explains that a true woman “feels herself weak and timid... (and) is in a measure dependent” (159). However, a contradictory message declared that women were natural nurses to their husbands and children and that a woman’s delicate nature could be suspended for a time in order to deal with biological practicalities of a sickroom. Unmarried women, as long as they remained virtuous, could become “unselfish ministers to the sick, teachers of the young, or moral preceptors with their pens, beloved of the entire village” (Welter 169). “Fallen” women, however, were not assigned a community role. Welter mentions a popular story by Fanny Forester in which Lucy, young and innocent, is taken advantage of by a “city slicker” (156), who gets her pregnant. After her baby dies, Lucy goes insane, and Welter points out “the frequency with which derangement follows loss of virtue” in novels of this time period, suggesting that a heroine’s “intellect was geared to her hymen, not her brain” (156). While Welter establishes this link, she doesn’t address the assumption that it’s natural for all women, even immoral or insane ones, to love children fiercely.

At the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester’s feelings of anger and fear don’t lead to the derangement mentioned by Welter, but they interfere with her ability to be an effective mother. When Hester first steps out of the jail and stands in front of the crowd, she clasps the infant Pearl to her breast “not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened onto her dress” (38). Viewing Pearl not as a beloved infant but as a symbol of shame, she decides that “one token of her shame would but

poorly serve to hide another” (38), and, in a momentary impulse of bravado, lets the crowd gawk at both. Hester’s behavior toward Pearl in this scene is particularly indicative of her ambivalence toward motherhood because, as Lois Cuddy points out, “Hester and Pearl have been isolated in a prison cell or ‘other darksome apartment of the prison’” and “have had three months to strengthen (their) bond” (153). Yet the gaze of the crowd quickly causes Hester to view this child, her only companion for the past three months, as a shameful object. Upon returning to the jail, she is understandably shaken by the hostility of the crowd, but also perhaps shaken by discovering the weakness and conditional nature of her love for Pearl. Hester is so agitated that the jailer thinks she requires “constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe” (Hawthorne 48). In the next sentence, though, the narrator refers to Hester’s behavior as “insubordination,” which indicates Hester is reacting with anger at her predicament.

Part of Hester’s anger may stem from the hostile attitude of the women in the crowd, many of whom, out of Hester’s earshot, wished her to receive a stricter punishment, with one woman even advocating execution. The narrator describes these women as coarser and less delicate than the women of the present day 1850s and refers to them as “countrywomen” of the “man-like” Queen Elizabeth I, who “had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of the sex” (37). Here Hawthorne seems to acknowledge the Puritan male tendency to define women’s strength in male terms and the Puritan women’s embrace of this definition. In reference to the judgmental women in the crowd, Monika Elbert explains that, “In trying to come to terms with the powerlessness of woman in patriarchy, they have denied their gender differences, including the maternal privilege, and tried to outstrip the sternest Puritan judge and minister by becoming more male, more hard, than the toughest patriarch” (176). Elbert points out that historical

evidence of Puritan women shows that they were more supportive of each other in terms of childbirth and childrearing but Hawthorne's lack of historical accuracy is in the service of psychological truth. Many of the women in the crowd are beyond childbearing age and are jealous of Hester's youth and beauty. In addition, Hester has used her skill with needlework to turn the badge of shame, the scarlet A, into something golden and dazzling. As Elbert explains:

(Hester's) creative mothering and her creative artistry (the ornate embroidery of the letter for example) separate her from both male and female authority in this society. In fact, she quietly but defiantly mocks authority from the start, with her unconventional appearance. (182)

Most of the women in the crowd are disappointed that, other than wearing the A, Hester's punishment merely involves standing before them on the scaffold. One of the women is vocal in her beliefs that Hester deserves death. Nevertheless, all of the women quiet down in deference to the male magistrates, and it is the quiet of the crowd, not just of the women, but also of the men and children, that really unnerves Hester. It is a negation of her humanity and she feels "as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once" (41).

The crowd's terrible, awe-stricken silence is preceded by Hawthorne's comparison of Hester to Papist paintings of the Virgin Mary. The narrator says that the sight of Hester should remind a Papist of the Divine Mother only in contrast, because the "sacred image of sinless motherhood" (40) is far different from "the taint of deepest sin" (41) that accompanies Hester's maternity. Elbert cites Julia Kristeva's theory that historically there have been two ways of expressing the maternal in art, the "'pere-version' of Leonardo's paintings of the madonna" (182), which suggests heavenly and patriarchal approval of socially sanctioned motherhood, and the "mere-

version,” like Bellini’s madonnas, which “suggests being contained in one’s womb-like splendor and existing in solitude...a definition apart from male meaning” (182). Elbert points out that Hester is so threatening to the crowd because of her combination of the two types of maternity, joining the spiritual to the physical/sensual. Hester continues to disrupt existing conventions by refusing to answer when asked to provide the name of the father of her child, thus conveying the message “that men are not indispensable” (Elbert 179). In other words, Hester’s silence is a public declaration of her intent to raise her child herself without the involvement and protection of men.

Hawthorne clearly wants the reader to view the crowd negatively, except for the one young mother who quietly stands up for Hester against the other women and dies young, her compassionate voice in the community thus silenced,

as the harshness of the system destroys her. Hester can certainly find no support in this system, and so she subversively becomes the most feminine, least patriarchal, but strongest individual by becoming a sister of mercy, on her own terms (Elbert 185).

Because Hester’s sin is out in the open, she is free to understand suffering and offer mercy in a way that most of the onlookers are not, especially the guilty and weak Dimmesdale. In reference to the cleansing nature of her open punishment before God, he begs Hester, “Take heed how thou deniest to him—who perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself—the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips” (47). As for the rest of the crowd, later in the novel Hester senses the sinful burdens they carry, an ability that further serves to both link and contrast her to the Virgin Mary, not in the minds of the Puritans, but in the minds of contemporary readers. I am reminded of the wording of the Hail Mary prayer which asks Mary

to “pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.” This supernatural ability to see into others’ hearts is something Hester now believes she possesses as an added effect of wearing the scarlet letter, although she attributes this ability to “The Fiend” rather than to Heaven.

Due to the stresses of shame and disenfranchisement, Hester is sometimes unable to make loving and unselfish choices concerning Pearl. While standing on the scaffold, the agitated Hester “clutched the child so fiercely to her breast, that it sent forth a cry” (42). Cuddy, along with other critics, have noted Pearl’s tendency to act out Hester’s repressed emotions. Pearl cries in anguish at the trapped Hester’s voiceless desperation in front the crowd, but as Cuddy explains

Earlier in that same scene, Pearl behaves in a way that seems more symbolic than “real” when she holds out her arms to the stranger, Reverend Dimmesdale. However, her behavior is both fictionally viable and psychologically consistent with what we know about childhood development...since a child of any age responds more readily to the mother’s “unconscious attitudes” than even to her “conscious actions’ ...Pearl—for her mother—is reaching out to the only person in the community who can understand Hester’s anguish. (154)

I would argue that Pearl senses more than the fact that Dimmesdale secretly shares Hester’s guilt and sorrow. Pearl is acting out her mother’s feelings of longing for Dimmesdale and the acknowledgment that her strongest loyalty lies with him. Pearl senses that, in Hester’s current frame of mind, her bond with Dimmesdale is her first priority and protecting him is of the utmost importance. Here, Hester’s sensual and romantic side overshadow her maternal feelings and Pearl reaching for Dimmesdale represents this irony.

As mentioned, upon returning to the prison, Hester's jailers fear that she might harm Pearl, who sounds like she's suffering from colic, but who the jailers think has absorbed Hester's emotional turmoil along with her breast milk. I would argue that the first time in the novel that Hester acts from concern for her infant rather than her own distress is when the jailers call for the doctor, Roger Chillingworth, who is new to the settlement and using a false name. He is Hester's husband who was long thought to be lost at sea, and he motioned to her earlier from the crowd to keep his identity a secret. When he arrives at the jail, Pearl "lay writhing on the trundle bed" and her cries are so severe that he finds it necessary to "postpone all other business to the task of soothing her" (49). Hester, possibly out of frustration, has apparently given up trying to soothe Pearl in her arms and has left her in the trundle. Chillingworth mixes medicine with water, claiming that his studies in alchemy have made him as well trained as anyone with a medical degree. Hester, reasonably questioning his motives toward a child who is the product of her adulterous affair, says, "Wouldst thou avenge thyself on the innocent babe?" (49). Hester is left to determine for herself what is safe for her child. In this case, she puts aside her own feelings of revulsion toward Chillingworth and allows him to give Pearl medicine that calms her.

Three years later, though, Hester's emotional pain again overshadows Pearl's best interests. At the Governor's Hall, when the magistrates threaten to remove Pearl from Hester's care in order to provide her with a more "Christian" upbringing, Hester threatens to kill herself before allowing that to happen. Hester argues that Pearl is both her punishment and happiness, that "she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved" (72). Dimmesdale echoes Hester's reasoning, asserting that Pearl is Hester's path to salvation, "to remind her, at every moment, of her fall,-- but yet to teach her, as it were by the Creator's sacred pledge, that if she bring the child to heaven, the child will also bring its parent thither" (73). This is a heavy burden for any child, to

be the sole reason for a parent's purpose and happiness in addition to keeping that parent on track spiritually. Especially since, ironically, it is Dimmesdale's job as minister to spiritually nurture his flock. Although Hester speaks from desperation and it is unclear whether she would actually attempt suicide, if she did die, her daughter would be left without a strong maternal protector. After Dimmesdale intervenes and Hester is allowed to leave with Pearl, she remarks to Mistress Hibbins that, "Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man's book, too, and that with mine own blood" (75). As Elbert points out, joining Mistress Hibbins in the counter-cultural world of the witches seems like a rebellious act but only serves to reinforce the existing power structure. Elbert goes on to explain,

...the repressed outsiders are still in the same power struggle of demons and angels, only they seek power in exploring forbidden underworld forces. Baym describes their predicament appropriately: "The witches are rebels, but their rebellion arises from accepting the Puritan world view and defining themselves as evil...Because they view themselves as society views them, the witches indirectly validate the social structure." (186)

If Hester had indeed chosen to join the witches in response to receiving a negative custody ruling, she would have, as in the case of suicide, guaranteed the loss of all future contact with her daughter. Ironically, Hester's intense fear of losing Pearl leaves her open to bringing on the exact fate she is trying to avoid. Although certainly induced by the loneliness of her situation, Hester's need for Pearl is so overwhelming that, at times, she becomes too panicked and self-absorbed to make clear decisions about Pearl's welfare, especially in terms of her welfare beyond the present moment.

Cuddy remarks on Hester's passive behavior upon entering the Governor's Hall and on her subsequent need to make Pearl and Dimmesdale speak for her. Hester has heard rumors that some of the town's leading citizens want to remove Pearl from her care. However, "while mother and child await the entrance of the Governor and the other church fathers who will pronounce on the fate of them both, Hester seems unmoved by the gravity of her errand" (160). To me this seems the wrong time for a display of independence, and Hester would fare better by humbly revealing to the officials her intense fear of losing her daughter. While Pearl, expressing Hester's true feelings, lets out a scream, Hester ineffectually tries to silence her. Then Hester remains silent as Pearl ignores everything Hester taught her about the catechism and replies that she has no Heavenly Father. Cuddy explains that "Pearl's comment reflects once again the doubts and conflicts, the intellectual inquiry and religious rebellion, within Hester's own mind" (160). This is all well and good, but at such a crucial moment I see Hester's silence reflecting her ambivalence toward continuing on a lonely path as single mother to a challenging daughter. Regardless of her private beliefs, she could have pleased the officials and had a better chance of keeping Pearl if she had chastised Pearl for answering the question so irreverently. Instead of speaking for herself, though, Hester turns to Dimmesdale to rescue her, thus indicating the traditional role she is secretly hoping he will play, that of husband, father, and protector.

Four years later when Pearl is seven, Hester wonders, after reflecting upon the dismal fate of women, if "it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide" (102). Franny Nudelman explains that, "it is when Hester considers killing herself and her daughter that Hawthorne concludes, in an uncharacteristically decisive moment, that 'the scarlet letter had not done its office' (147)" (201). Although the scarlet letter had not quashed Hester's rebelliousness, Pearl's presence, according to Nudelman,

“provides for Hester’s rehabilitation” (201). Nudelman points to Richard Broadhead’s Foucauldian model of antebellum parental discipline in which the child emotionally attaches to the loving parent and then “implants” the parent “as an inwardly regulating moral consciousness” (205). According to Nudelman, the mother-child bond serves to discipline the mother as well as the child, because “Rather than simply replicating parental authority, the child receives the impression of discipline, then turns it outwards again, transforming the mother, originally the agent of discipline, into its object” (206). In this case, Pearl’s presence would temper Hester’s impulsivity and remind her of the wrongness of ending her own life or Pearl’s.

Leland Person compares Hester’s suicidal and infanticidal urges to those experienced by slave mothers who saw no other escape from the torment inflicted upon themselves and the torment that would be inflicted upon their children in the future. Although Person concedes that Hester was advantaged by being racially white, he argues that the Puritan crowd’s expectations about who might emerge from the prison door place Hester in a position of otherness along with bond-servants, undutiful children, Quakers, Indians, and witches (209). Person asserts that Hawthorne, who did not actively campaign for abolition, uses Hester’s racial ambiguity to ironically the examine the “presumptions of white female abolitionists like Margaret Fuller” who “in arguing the case for women’s emancipation...links women and slaves, effectively commandeering the subject position of black women for her own rhetorical and political purposes” (209). Person then compares Hester’s unwillingness to publicly name the father of her child with the same behavior in the slave mother. He states that “Dimmesdale’s impregnation of Hester after the ‘middle passage’ that separates her from her husband resembles a white master’s miscegenetic coupling with a slave woman, at least in its analogous imbalance of power” (211). Dimmesdale, as the religious leader of the community, possesses the right to remove his child from her

mother, just as a slaveowner could do with his own secret and illegitimate child. Person cites Elbert as terming Hester's refusal to name her child's father as a "feminist gesture of defiance, a defiant 'sin against patriarchy'" borrowing a phrase from Julia Kristeva (212). In my opinion, Hester's identity as an adulteress also puts her in a similar position as a slave mother. Her living situation, in a small cottage with her child, aligns with the slave quarters in which families were separated and men lived away from the women and children. Though rape doesn't occur in the book, like a slave mother, Hester is vulnerable to sexual assault and powerless to insist on its punishment. Who would believe in the innocence of a "fallen" woman, much less care about her pain and suffering? Certainly, the women in the town would think Hester had gotten what she deserved, just as the white wives of slave owners turned a blind eye to the mixed-race babies on the plantation.

Unlike a slave mother, though, Hester can defy authority by making her child visually appealing in terms of clothing. Pearl, clad in finery designed and sewn by Hester, is a constant reminder to both the community and Dimmesdale of the forbidden love. When Pearl is three and at the Governor's Hall, she is described as wearing "a crimson velvet tunic, of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread" (65). The scarlet letter itself is described in similar terms, when Hester first steps outside the jail and "On the breast of (her) gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A" (39). In the next sentence, referring to the sumptuous nature of Hester's needlework, the narrator uses the word "fertility," further linking the A to childbirth and thus to Pearl and linking the production of clothing to natural reproduction. When Hester and Pearl appear at the Governor's Hall, the narrator remarks that anyone who beheld Pearl couldn't

help but be reminded of the scarlet letter and that Pearl “was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life” (65).

Hester’s motives in dressing Pearl so differently from the other Puritan children are complex. Certainly, Hester is motivated by the same defiance that causes her embellish the scarlet A, thus asserting a measure of control by forcing people to acknowledge the beauty that exists alongside the shame. Lois Cuddy explains that Puritan children were dressed as miniature adults, so even as Hester herself outwardly appears to conform, Pearl’s clothing represents Hester’s inner rebellion, one that is tacitly accepted by society (159). Cuddy adds, “Little wonder that the ‘child could not be made amenable to rules,’ for she reflects not only the beauty and brilliance of her mother but also the ‘disorder’” (159). Nudelman notes that in the colonial period, the public nature of a criminal’s punishment was meant to educate the community and deter future crime, while in the early nineteenth century, the isolation of the penitentiary was supposed to reform criminals by making them think deeply and repent (196). “But,” explains Nudelman, “in Hester’s case isolation and contemplation lead not to remorse and reform but to continued disobedience” (201). This disobedience continues to manifest itself in Pearl’s behavior, such as when Pearl is being questioned by the officials at the governor’s mansion. A conscientious slave mother, however, would have ensured that her child learn the appropriate way to respond to the white masters, as it could have meant not only the continued togetherness of the family but also the difference between life and death.

Regardless, since Hester earns her living from needlework, she has an economic motive for advertising her skill through the scarlet A and Pearl’s luxurious garb. The narrator tells us, “By degrees, nor very slowly, her handiwork would now be termed the fashion” (55) and that Hester’s embroidery appeared on robes for “the installation of magistrates” (54) as well as

funeral wear and christening gowns. Hester could certainly be taking pride in her talents and using Pearl as a way to show off. There is also the possibility that Hester dresses Pearl like “a wild tropical bird, of rich plumage” (71) to draw Dimmesdale’s attention to his daughter. Physically frail and cerebral, Dimmesdale, by his own account, shrinks from contact with children because of their boisterousness. Perhaps Hester is trying, whether conscious of it or not, to entice him into noticing Pearl by highlighting her beauty. Later in the novel when Hester and Dimmesdale speak privately in the forest, it is clear that Hester yearns for a traditional family life in which she and Dimmesdale share the experience of loving and admiring their daughter.

No matter the reason, though, Hester causes Pearl pain by dressing her differently from the other children and also by also thinking of her as different. It would have made Hester happy to hear the sounds of Pearl’s voice mingling with the voices of other children, but Hester tells herself “this could never be” (61). She then echoes the sentiments of the community that “Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, she had no right among christened infants” (61). Although Hester eventually finds a place in the community by offering kindness and care to those afflicted and suffering, Pearl is never granted an opportunity to display her better qualities to her peers. As Hester’s constant companion in public, “the child comprehended her loneliness; the destiny that had drawn an inviolable circle round about her, the whole peculiarity, in short, of her position in respect to other children” (61). The other children, of course, respond to differences in others as most children do, with curiosity and staring. Pearl, however, has a hostile response to this:

If the children gathered about her, as they sometimes did, Pearl would grow positively terrible in her puny wrath, snatching up stones to fling at them, with

shrill, incoherent exclamations, that made her mother tremble, because they

had so much the sound of a witch's anathemas in some unknown tongue. (61)

Hester is so shaken because any hint of witchcraft would put Pearl, and herself by association, in peril of being hanged. Therefore, the flashiness of Pearl's clothing leads to a dangerous chain reaction; it contributes to her ostracism, which leads her to wilder and more combative behavior, which could possibly lead to a charge of witchcraft.

On the other hand, Hester is dazzled by Pearl's creativity in solitary play, transforming objects of nature into characters in dramas, though she is disturbed that Pearl "never created a friend, but always seemed to be sowing broadcast the dragon's teeth, whence sprung a harvest of armed enemies, against whom she rushed to battle" (62). It saddens Hester deeply that Pearl recognizes so young the adversarial nature of life, but Hester fails to take any action to alleviate Pearl's suffering. One solution would be to leave the colony and sail back to England where she and Pearl could lose the stigma of the scarlet letter in the anonymity of a crowded city. Later in the novel, the rapidity and ease with which Hester secures passage for herself, Pearl, and Dimmesdale attests to the feasibility of such a plan. Yet, until Dimmesdale's death, Hester chooses to remain in a community that ostracizes her daughter.

An argument can be made that Pearl's exclusion from the strict, patriarchal Puritan society help her form an affinity with nature and an independent spirit. Pearl is not intimidated by men and charms Governor Bellingham and Good Master Wilson, who tries and fails "to draw Pearl betwixt his knees" (71). Later, in the crowd waiting to see the procession, she charms the shipmaster in the same way and eludes his kiss but gains a gold chain. On the night when the guilt-ridden Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold, Pearl is unafraid of both him and Roger Chillingworth. Miffed that Dimmesdale refuses to promise that he will join hands with her and

her mother in broad daylight, she pretends to know the answer to Dimmesdale's question about Chillingworth's real identity but then only whispers nonsense in Dimmesdale's ear. Perhaps Pearl senses both Hester's frustration with Dimmesdale and her desire to tell him the truth about Chillingworth. According to Nudelman:

While the letter isolates Hester, Pearl negotiates between her mother's concealed interior and the Puritan community: expressing Hester's character, Pearl also inflicts the community's demands on her. (207)

Nudelman explains that Pearl succeeds in punishing Hester in ways that the community fails, because, as the community becomes desensitized to the scarlet letter, Pearl's curiosity about it grows. Cuddy points out that, "Though Hester attributes Pearl's teasing about the scarlet letter to 'an evil spirit that possessed the child,' in fact Pearl's interest in the letter is quite understandable" (158). Not only is the letter visually appealing and unique, which would naturally attract a child's curiosity, but Hester's heightened emotional response to Pearl's attention to the letter gives Pearl a sense of power. In addition, Pearl reveals identification with Hester's creativity when she makes an "A" out of eelgrass on the bodice of her dress (158). As Cuddy explains:

Instead of walking in her mother's shoes, as little girls do, she identifies with the thing that makes her mother unique in the community, and uncomfortable as a mother, 'the letter A, --but freshly green, instead of scarlet!' (p.271)

Clearly Pearl's activities, which cause such discomfort to the wearer of the scarlet letter, are reinforced not by her own wickedness or demonic influences but by the reactions of her mother and by her identification with this parent who is always in attendance. (158)

Here, I see Hester's discomfort with the eelgrass letter to also contain a note of jealousy, which is not only indicated by the color green but by the fact that Pearl has her life ahead of her and has a strong chance of experiencing a fate happier than Hester's. The fresh, natural eelgrass letter also signifies Pearl's youth and vigor, something any parent can't help but envy at times.

Hester succeeds in being somewhat accepted by the community by taking on a charitable, maternal role toward all. In order to ensure the survival of the newly established Puritan community, a woman was expected to behave maternally toward those who were not her biological children. Wednesday Martin cites a 1689 census for the Plymouth Township, Massachusetts Bay Colony that reveals a high rate of remarriage and goes on to explain that, since men's and women's economic roles at this time were so interdependent, women caring for stepchildren was necessary for the survival of both the family and the community (124). The expectation that women are naturally loving caretakers and should never resent any caretaking demands placed upon them, an expectation that Martin still finds evidence of today, is one that Hester uses to her advantage. In addition to providing clothing and food for the poor, who often insult her, Hester serves at the bedsides of the sick and dying.

In such emergencies, Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one...Such helpfulness was found in her,--so much power to do, and power to sympathize,--that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength. (Hawthorne 99)

Hester, the uncomplaining, tireless nurturer, earns the community's respect. However, the public's memory of her misdeeds is long and people feel compelled to whisper her scandalous story to any new arrivals.

If Hester's hard work and good deeds can't ever fully redeem her in the eyes of the community, then why does she stay for the first seven years of Pearl's life? Her initial reasoning is that she will be able to more fully atone in the place of her sin, but this is described as "half a truth, and half a self-delusion" (54). It is implied, therefore, that, at least at first, Hester's motive for staying is to remain near Dimmesdale. In this relationship, she assumes a maternal role, attempting to protect Dimmesdale from his enemy, Chillingworth, who has intuited the connection between Dimmesdale and herself. She is also maternal in the sense that she requires nothing, not even financial support, from Dimmesdale. She allows him to remain a perpetual adolescent concerned almost exclusively with his own health and studies. Hester's love, though, also has a tough, disciplinarian side. She knows that Dimmesdale, in the words of Nan Lei, is "worn out by the torture of the Puritan moral modes (and) his inner conflicts" (2164), yet she refuses to rescue him by publicly revealing that he is Pearl's father. The choice to reveal this information is Dimmesdale's, and though Hester will protect him from Chillingworth's harmful intent, she will not protect him from the negative effects of his own lack of courage and integrity. Lei, in analyzing the associations with the protagonist's name, points out that "'Prynne' sounds like 'prune,' a word with the meaning of 'cut out parts of something and purify'" (2166). Although Lei relates this to Hester trying to disavow the negative parts of herself and purify herself through unselfish deeds, this can also relate to her use of silence as a way to force Dimmesdale to purify his own conscience.

Dimmesdale's adolescent behavior is most fully expressed in the scene in the woods in which Hester tries to warn him about Chillingworth and explains that Chillingworth was once her husband. Dimmesdale, reputedly an honorable man of God who should be well-versed in forgiveness, initially responds with a self-centered petulance to her keeping this knowledge from him. He doesn't see she was acting in his best interest and refuses to forgive her. It is only when she grasps him to her and he is too weak to escape her grip that he relents. Although he says he forgives her "freely," in the description of his reply he sounds like he still wants her to feel guilty, as he replies "at length with a deep utterance, out of an abyss of sadness, but no anger" (118). This anger is short lived, however, as Dimmesdale becomes elated and invigorated at the thought of escape. He employs another adolescent tactic, though, of trying to avoid blame by casting it on someone else. He tells Hester the two of them are clearly sinners, but "We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world... That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin" (118). Shortly after this, Dimmesdale panics at the thought of Chillingworth revealing his secret, and he turns to Hester to tell him what to do. As Elbert explains, "Throughout the narrative, Dimmesdale appears as a motherless child" (191) and his feelings of abandonment lead him to seek Hester as a surrogate. She is the one who formulates their plan for escape and later secures passage for herself, Pearl, and Dimmesdale on a ship bound for Bristol, England. In the forest scene, however, Elbert observes that Dimmesdale "seems jealous of Pearl's desire for Hester's attention in a type of uncontrolled behavior bordering on sibling rivalry. Dimmesdale retreats from children because he himself is a child who needs maternal nurturing" (191). As Dimmesdale admits, he has been afraid of Pearl and other children in the past and when Pearl has a temper tantrum in the woods, he is so panicked that he begs Hester to do anything to make it stop. Dimmesdale needs to be the sickly one, the one who requires special treatment along with

peace and quiet. The unpredictable needs and behavior of children threaten to disrupt the orbit of adults fawning over him and he can't tolerate the loss of attention.

Elbert argues that Hester's relationship with the weak Dimmesdale is part of her journey to liberate herself from "the world of the fathers... (and) repossess the mother" (193). When she married, Hester left her biological father behind but found herself with another father figure in Chillingworth. She abandoned him "in favor of a child, Dimmesdale, who she can mother" (193). Elbert goes on to explain that Chillingworth's hope of finding a warm home and hearth with Hester "shows that her maternal grasp extends even to him; she has the potential to 'mother' even this father" (193). I would argue that, throughout the novel, Chillingworth attempts to continue to play a fatherly role in Hester's life. Once he admits to her that it was a mistake for an older, crippled man like himself to marry a lively young woman like herself, he takes the fatherly position of trying to protect her from an unsuitable match with the self-centered Dimmesdale. His investigation and critique of Dimmesdale's character is, of course, primarily motivated by jealousy. However, Chillingworth's disruption of Hester and Dimmesdale's planned escape across the Atlantic serves to save her from a lifetime of catering to Dimmesdale's needs at the expense of her own. Early in the novel, Chillingworth tells Hester,

I find here a woman, a man, a child, amongst whom and myself there exist the closest ligaments. No matter whether of love or hate; no matter whether of right or wrong! Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me. (52)

Chillingworth says this in a threatening way, but perhaps his sinister demeanor hides softer feelings toward Hester. At some level, he cares about her happiness, as evidenced by his choice to leave his fortune to her beloved child.

Hester, unfortunately for Pearl, is desperate for Dimmesdale's approval. Although Hester has withstood ill treatment from the community for years, "the frown of this pale, weak, sinful, and sorrow-stricken man was what Hester could not bear, and live" (118). Hester also needs Dimmesdale to approve of Pearl and tries to sell him on their daughter's good points by saying,

"Dost thou not think her beautiful? And see with what natural skill she has made those simple flowers adorn her? Had she gathered pearls, and diamonds, and rubies, in the wood, they could not have become her better. She is a splendid child! But I know whose brow she has!" (124)

In spite of Hester's best efforts to forge an instant bond between the two people she loves, Pearl is too horrified that her mother isn't wearing the scarlet letter to interact with Dimmesdale. After Hester, who enjoyed the freedom of discarding the cloth with the shameful embroidered letter, puts it back on to placate Pearl, she tries to sell Pearl on Dimmesdale by saying,

"We will have a home and fireside of our own; and thou shalt sit upon his knee; and he will teach thee many things, and love thee dearly. Thou wilt love him; wilt thou not?" (127)

Pearl, however, intuitively senses Dimmesdale's shame and remains distant. She is bothered that they won't be walking back into town together as a family and she observes Dimmesdale's habit of holding his hand over his heart. When Dimmesdale awkwardly kisses her brow, she goes to the brook and washes it off.

For seven years, Hester views Pearl as a symbol of her union with Dimmesdale. Gazing at Pearl at a distance in the forest, she and Dimmesdale experience the unfamiliar and romantic sensation of shared pride and wonder at their child and consider her existence to be of great significance. The narrator summarizes their feeling by explaining,

Be the foregone evil what it might, how could they doubt that their earthly lives and future destinies were conjoined, when they beheld at once the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met, and were to dwell immortally together? Thoughts like these—and perhaps other thoughts, which they did not acknowledge or define—threw an awe about the child, as she came onward. (124)

The reality of willful Pearl, of course, is different from the ideal child viewed from a distance. Cuddy observes that during the time when Hester performs unselfish duties for the town, Pearl's behavior is outrageous enough for people to say she's been touched by the devil (163). Nudelman asserts that Pearl not only embodies Hester's rebellious side but exaggerates it and that, in a time when the town is less interested in the scarlet letter, Pearl continues to call Hester's attention to it, thus forcing Hester to continually examine her flaws (207). According to Nudelman,

Hawthorne emphasizes the punitive potential of maternal transmission. In this narrative maternity is not a means to social continuity but rather a horrific form of stasis in which the sinning mother is eternally subjected to herself, her present irrevocably bound by the misdeeds of her past. (208)

In the final scaffold scene, however, Pearl's representation of Hester's emotions serves to free Pearl. When it becomes clear that Dimmesdale is dying and Hester is losing both her future plans and what has been the guiding purpose of her life for the past seven years, Hester freezes in horror. It is Pearl who steps forward to kiss Dimmesdale goodbye. As Nudelman explains, this action "relieves Pearl of her revelatory and punitive functions" and leaves her "free to become a woman" (209). Hester, though, is still under the sway of Dimmesdale. She tries one last time to

secure confirmation of her importance to him by whispering that, since they endured so much hardship in this lifetime, they will surely be granted an eternity together in the afterlife.

Dimmesdale hushes her and says that God has already been merciful by providing afflictions and humiliations to purify him of his sins. He thinks God is being merciful by allowing him to die rather than letting him live a new life as a family with her and Pearl. Although Dimmesdale's death is tragic for Hester, it frees her to act in Pearl's best interest and leave the settlement. When Chillingworth dies and bequeaths property to Pearl in both England and America, Hester disappears with Pearl to Europe. It is debatable whether she would have left if Dimmesdale was alive and there was still a chance of them being together.

Hester's final major decision in the novel is unconventional in terms of motherhood. Pearl has presumably married well in a Catholic country in Europe, yet Hester returns to the Massachusetts Bay Colony to her little cottage. Instead of being present as a grandmother for Pearl's child, she is "seen embroidering a baby garment, with such lavish richness of golden fancy as would have raised a public tumult, had any infant, thus appareled, been shown to our sober-hued community" (154). Hester sends the garment across the sea to Pearl while she herself remains to counsel the afflicted, especially women who have seen troubles like her own. It is unclear why Hester chooses the path of becoming a mother figure to wayward girls. Perhaps, as some believe, she wants to return to the place of her great love affair with Dimmesdale. Perhaps, as Nudelman suggests about the earlier relationship between Hester and Pearl, Hester is uncomfortable around her daughter because Pearl reminds her of her past indiscretions. Or perhaps she feels Pearl doesn't need her as much as these troubled women do. In the novel's first scene, the rose bush outside the prison door is reputed to have "sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson" (Hawthorne 36), indicating a parallel between Hester and the historical figure who

“was imprisoned, tried, and finally banished for espousing the inaccessibility of spiritual character” (Nudelman 195). Although Hester knows she could never be considered a prophetess due to her “impure” behavior, her silence on the reasons for her return, hidden even from the reader, mirrors Hutchinson’s stance that private belief cannot be publicly inferred, that a contrast often exists between interiority and appearance. Indeed, as JM Coetzee points out, “The Hester of our reading does not accept the story of her life that is foisted on her by the magistrates...a story encapsulated in the letter A. She has a different story, which she keeps buried in her breast. This makes her a continual ironist” (42). Coetzee further explains that while the letter A tells the story of adultery to the community, Hester’s own interpretation could be the flattering Able or, as Coetzee hints, A could stand for “asshole”, the label Hester secretly applies to her judges.

At the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester comforts the troubled women she counsels. “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” (155). This echoes the sentiments of Margaret Fuller, who wrote in 1845, well before the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*,

We would have every path laid open to women as freely as to man...we believe the divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no discordant collision, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue.

Yet then and only then, will mankind be ripe for this, when inward and outward freedom for woman as much as for man shall be acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession. (489)

The Scarlet Letter ends with the deaths of both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, symbols of male domination weakening until they disappear. This, along with the echoing of Fuller's words, suggest that men as well as women will never be happy until women are treated as equals and valued for all of their aspects, not only their maternity.

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