

The Ruling Desire: Masculine Narcissism, Feminity, and *The Scarlet Letter*

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In this paper, I would like to discuss gender differences in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The four major characters in this novel, Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and Pearl, each foreground their sexual differences. *The Scarlet Letter* is composed of the unresolved tension between an autonomous female psyche and a tragic male interference. Hawthorne's characterization of Hester and Dimmesdale reveals complicating difference. The "feminine" in this narrative reveals not only the oppositional structures of sexual difference but also absolute sexual difference as a fantasy of manly self-absorption and hierarchical logic. I am using the terms "feminine" and "masculine" in a traditional or conventional sense. It will be useful to examine the novel from the feminine perspectives of Hester Prynne and Pearl as well as the masculine perspective of Arthur Dimmesdale.

Nathaniel Hawthorne is a male writer in a male-dominated patriarchal culture. The nineteenth-century women were at the very heart of sexist repression and exploitation. But, at the same time, it is evident that Hawthorne was considerably influenced by the feminism of his day. The first woman's rights convention had been held in 1848, the year before he began to write *The Scarlet Letter*. His sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody was a feminist; his wife, Sophia, was adamantly anti-feminist; one of his sisters, Elizabeth, was a feminist in inclination, while the other, Maria Louisa, was not.⁽¹⁾

Recently this novel has become focus of recent feminist critics' interests. They view Hester Prynne as a powerful woman rather than a victim. Feminist critics such as Jane Tompkins, Amy Schrage Lang, Judith

Fryer and Nina Baym are concerned with the origin of a woman like Hester. "Sophisticated feminist criticism," Nina Baym has suggested, "would be based on the presumption that the question of women is the determining motive in Hawthorne's works, driving them as it drives Hawthorne's male characters".⁽²⁾

There is another critical approach that is important in reading *The Scarlet Letter*. In chapter 11, Dimmesdale gazes into the mirror, viewing his face in a most powerful light. Hawthorne writes, "He thus typified the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not purify, himself. In these lengthened vigils, his brain often reeled, and visions seemed to flit before him; perhaps seen doubtfully, and by a faint light of their own, in the remote dimness of the chamber, or more vividly, and close beside him, within the looking-glass."⁽³⁾ He also searches for the image of his mother. I am interested in examining the relationship between Hawthorne and the lost mother in this story partly because *The Scarlet Letter* reflects Hawthorne's own psychological development. Hawthorne says in chapter 11 of *The Scarlet Letter*, "Now came the dead friends of his youth, and his white-bearded father, with a saint-like frown, and his mother, turning her face away as she passed by. Ghost of a mother, --thinnest fantasy of a mother, methinks she might yet have thrown a pitying glance towards her son!" (p.145)

Freud states that the son's guilt at the death of the father is associated with his wish to vanquish him, to destroy the father in order to sleep with the mother. Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex can be applied to Hawthorne's novel. Psychoanalytic critics look at the characters in novels according to their author's biographical materials because, they argue, the author's purpose in writing is to gratify some forbidden wish, an infantile wish or desire that has been repressed into the unconscious mind. The viewpoint of psychoanalytic criticism is also especially noteworthy in the case of rereading *The Scarlet Letter*.

1. Hester Prynne and Feminity

Hester Prynne is young, tall and beautiful, with an elegant figure, a

rich complexion, glossy dark hair, and deep black eyes. She comes from a genteel English family. Hester as a heroine is deeply implicated in the interrelated issues of gender, society, and law.

Hester inwardly becomes more alienated from her puritanical society while she outwardly performs deeds of mercy and kindness during her seven year period. She begins during this outcast to become aware of a revolutionary and socially radical mind in herself.

The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before. Men of the sword had overthrown and rearranged --not actually, but within the sphere of theory, which was their most real abode--the whole system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient principle. Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.(p.164)

If we refer to the concepts of Jacques Lacan, one explanation for language is that it is a realm of public discourses. A child enters the linguistic realm just as it comes to grasp its separateness from its mother; just about the time boys identify with their fathers, the family's representative of culture. The language learned reflects a binary logic that opposes such terms as active / passive, masculine / feminine, father / mother. In this regard, these feminist critics observe that the structure of language is phallogentric. A feminist language refuses to participate in masculine discourse. They attempt to expose representations of the phallic power to control and master women. Similarly, for Hester, "the world's law" may be associated with the "phallic" values patriarchal society. She has an extraordinary perceptiveness about Puritan social repression. Yet she is not entirely rebellious toward the law because she certainly accepts the judgment made against her of the seven-years exile. She socially subjects herself to the law. She does not then literally subverts "the world's law." It would be too simple to say that "the world's law" is bad from the feminist standpoint. I would say that she is not always opposed to "the world's law."

It would be more accurate to say that, as the representative of individuality, Hester is "attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment" (p.165). Hawthorne presents Hester as having certain freedoms or choices, despite to living in a repressed society. Yet he has Hester chosen to stay in an oppressed situation. Hester can freely leave Boston whenever she wants. She might go to Europe to "hide her character and identity under a new exterior"(p.79). She could fly to the dark forest to assimilate "the wildness of her nature" with "a people whose customs and life were alien from the law that had condemned her"(p.79). Why does she stay in Boston? The narrator suggests that she has a dream of "a union" : "There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution"(p. 80).

Why does Hawthorne make Hester's attraction for Dimmesdale her reason for staying in Boston? The importance of a "union" between Hester and Dimmesdale can be examined by noticing how Hester seduces Dimmesdale. Leslie Fiedler has remarked on the importance of the seduction theme in Hawthorne's text.⁽⁴⁾ Hawthorne's description of Hester's symbolic seduction reveals that Hester's passionate love becomes the vital core of her life. Hawthorne writes, "For several days, however, she vainly sought an opportunity of addressing him in some of the meditative walks which she knew him to be in the habit of taking, along the shores of the peninsula, or on the wooded hills of the neighboring country"(p.182). Since she feels that the seduction would constitute a "scandal," her passionate love for Dimmesdale is self-destructive. The child is the result of her passion, her "sin".

Pearl is significant in a discussion of Hester's passion for self-destruction. Significantly, Hester refuses to give Pearl her father's name. she is called only "Pearl". The old minister says, "Thou must take heed to instruction, that so, in due season, thou mayest wear in thy bosom the pearl of great price. Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee?" (p.111) For Lacan, the Father's rules (laws) refer to the concept of prohibition, which is related to the structure and order of language, and societal imperatives.

The child can enter the society only by abiding the Father's rules.⁽⁵⁾ Hester places Pearl outside of the influence of the Father's symbolic ordering. Since the Father's law regulates the powers of naming, owning, and ordering for a religious, legal, and economic structure, Pearl cannot be circulated within the terms of a symbolic, communal exchange. Although the society brings mother and daughter under the authority of the Puritan order, Hester resists her child's being taken into the patriarchal system. By examining portrayals and functions of Hawthorne's female characters, feminist critics exposed the patriarchal ideology implicit in *The Scarlet Letter* and showed how this tradition of systematic masculine dominance is inscribed in this narrative.⁽⁶⁾ Hester's rebellion shows her keeping her child away from patriarchal law though she submits herself to the punishment.

2. Arthur Dimmesdale and Masculinity

Hawthorne's portrayal of Dimmesdale renders a rich texture to gradual development of his masculinity. Now I am using the term "masculinity" to refer not only to the authority of the father in a family romance but also to the self-magnifying transcendence of male narcissism as the way to complete the divided self.

Let us first see Dimmesdale's masculinity in relation to Pearl. In chapter 19, Pearl goes to the other side of the brook. Hester asks Pearl to go to the minister, explaining that Dimmesdale loves them both. But Pearl hesitates to go to him. Pearl "fixed her bright, wild eyes on her mother, now on the minister, and now included them both in the same glance; as if to detect and explain to herself the relation which they bore to one another" (p.209). Pearl's behavior is strange because she keenly feels that Dimmesdale has consciously interfered with her relationship to her mother. Dimmesdale tries to urge Pearl to come over to him by anxious pleading. He exclaims to Hester, "Pacify her, if thou lovest me!" (p.210) As David Leverenz suggests, in his *Manhood and The American Renaissance*, Dimmesdale measures Hester's love of himself by seeing how Hester acts in this scene.⁽⁷⁾ Hester does not notice his threat, but Pearl is sensibly aware

of what his "romantic father-like" plea implies. That is why Pearl resists Dimmesdale. In another scene, Pearl kisses her mother, after Hester has assumed the letter which acknowledges her sin. Pearl is washing away Dimmesdale's kiss. She does not like his kiss perhaps because he has not similarly displayed any sign of his part. It is perhaps because he will not acknowledge Hester and their child in public. But Pearl can keenly feel the narcissistic male fantasy in Dimmesdale's exclamation. Why is Pearl so alert to Dimmesdale's self-absorption? One explanation for this can be found in Pearl's lack of her father's name and Pearl's freedom from the powerful symbolism of the Father's law. His action is designed to arouse the role of the parent. Dimmesdale desires to change the relationship between Hester and Pearl into his self-absorbed drama of family romance by seeing himself in the narcissistic, authoritative image of father.

Dimmesdale's self-absorption continues. In chapter 20, we can see that Dimmesdale is excited by his decision to preach the important "Election Sermon". At the same time, he worries about the argument against the eternal life of the soul. Dimmesdale is in agony. He is Faustian in his suffering, which is partly caused by the distressing recognition of himself. He has carefully kept himself apart from the world precisely to preserve his pure self. He is not a truly religious man. One aspect of his endless brooding on his own sin is the self-absorption it implies. Dimmesdale is evidently possessed of his secret just as much as Chillingworth is. Keeping the secret causes his soul to be tortured.

Before Mr. 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 that that which opposed the impulse. (p.217)

Hawthorne suggests here that Dimmesdale's self is based on psychological

need, not necessary truth. The narrative is more interesting if see as Dimmesdale attempts to acquire his unified image of self from the divided self-image.

We can see a growing conflicted reflection in Dimmesdale's life. What is the act of writing for him? Dimmesdale attempts to write a statement in his sermon: "Here he had studied and written... There, on the table, with the inky pen beside it, was an unfinished sermon, with a sentence broken in the midst, where his thoughts had ceased to gush out upon the page two days before" (pp.222-223). The act of writing for Dimmesdale is a struggle between discourse and desire by negotiating nuances and implication of one's desire of conflicted self. Dimmesdale's act of writing is described as: "Left alone, ...Then, flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire, he forthwith began another, which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired" (p. 225). His fertile productivity of writing arises out of his desire of "an impulsive flow of thought and emotion".

The sermon is like the doubled sign which overhears itself in the ears of its addressee. In this regard, it is interwoven into both the private and the public. But the doubleness of the sermon's language may lead to a contradiction. One must consider how one should speak in public in order to communicate one's private desire to others. Dimmesdale does not remove a sentence in the sermon which read, "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some traits whereby the worst may be inferred!" (p.260) Dimmesdale's sermon realistically shows the public his intent dictated by his own desires. Dimmesdale shows he is deeply influenced by the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus. He can view words as stable and whole. He himself performs the fullest possible control over his meanings, sustaining an enviable coherence of sense in his writing.

Dimmesdale is satisfied with the sermon which is written by his own autonomous plots. Luce Irigaray mentions the narcissistic tendency of male knowledge in *This Sex Which Is Not One*: "But men insist that women can say nothing of their pleasure. Thereby they confess the limit of their own knowledge. For 'when one is a man, one sees in the woman partner a means of self-support, a footing on which to stand (oneself) narcissistically'".⁽⁸⁾

As D. H. Lawrence observes, Dimmesdale's speech is masturbatory,⁽⁹⁾ Dimmesdale's writing in this sense implies his narcissistic self-consciousness. His process of narcissism is similar to that of the Lacanian 'mirror stage'⁽¹⁰⁾ in which the infant makes an imaginary identification with its reflection in a mirror. This experience of the mirror stage has a metaphorical parallel of an unbroken union between the inner and the outer self, a perfect control that assures the immediate satisfaction of desire. Dimmesdale's narcissism is at the stage in which his self plays out its self-delighting consciousness.

After Dimmesdale's encounters with Hester in the forest, he becomes insane: the wholeness of his self totally collapse within him. Hester unsuccessfully attempts to save him from his self-destruction. He has become a passive and helpless victim of his own forbidden and threatening impulses. After having experienced what he interprets as a new birth, Dimmesdale smiles and wears a face of gaiety. What makes Dimmesdale change? He decides not to live in the world. He could have gone to Europe with Hester and Pearl. He thinks it impossible to live that way. With a kind of superhuman decision, he diverts his powerful energy to one crowning achievement which is preaching the sermon of his life. Theorizing on the character of desire and its relation to denial, Leo Bersani has stated:

Our desires are of course also--and perhaps primarily repressed. A sense both of the forbidden nature of certain desires and of the incompatibility of reality with our desiring imagination makes the negation of desire inevitable. But to deny desire is not to eliminate it; in fact, such denials multiply the appearances of each desire in the self's history. In denying a desire, we condemn ourselves to finding it everywhere.⁽¹¹⁾

Dimmesdale's self-negation is the sublimation of his libidinous desires rather than a sign of his having won emotional and mental freedom. Dimmesdale himself recognizes that the release of unchecked desire serves on another level: it frees his imagination and enables him to write the most powerful sermon of his career. His flight into the forest and subsequent self-knowledge allow him access to previously unconscious powers

associated with the repressed self. If we are to apply mythical reading of American fiction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale's self-transcendence is made successful by his flight from the town to the forest.⁽¹²⁾ Dimmesdale may embody the definitive American theme, "the American Adam". At the same time, however, we should remember that Dimmesdale's self-negation is related to his self-dramatizing which leads to what David Leverenz calls a "female sense of self as vulnerable victim".⁽¹³⁾ Dimmesdale becomes a feminized narcissistic hero. While Hester's subjectivity keeps her gender intact and can survive, Dimmesdale's subjectivity is mixed with the other gender and dies.

3. Conclusion

Some critics think that Dimmesdale is the main character of *The Scarlet Letter*. Other critics argue that the more important character is Hester. From a feminist critic's viewpoint, Nina Baym says that New Critics of the 1950s wanted to diminish the importance of Hester because Hester is "a flawed" character.⁽¹⁴⁾ Dimmesdale was considered to be the true protagonist in the romance. The interests of critics in the 1950s were fixed to such concepts as order, authority, and organism. Hester's values were associated with the ideas of passion, self-expression, freedom and independence. Hester was regarded as a subordinate character by New Critics for a long time. As Baym remarks, of the New Critics' view of *The Scarlet Letter*:

I have come to the regretful conclusion that some of the unwillingness, perhaps much of it, to recognize Hester as the protagonist came from a more covert aspect of the New Critical social ideology, its strong sense of appropriate male / female roles and its consequent conviction that it would be improper for a woman character to be the protagonist in what might well be the greatest American book.⁽¹⁵⁾

She implies that New Critic aesthetics canonized masculine values through their teaching, lecturing, and writing of American literature. More importantly, They have influenced the standards by which American

literature is judged. Similarly, the readings of *The Scarlet Letter* has often focused on the universal male psyche.

We have concentrated on how gender themes in *The Scarlet Letter* can be interpreted by psychoanalysis and feminist criticism in *The Scarlet Letter*. Now that we are sure that we should formulate more insightful readings of *The Scarlet Letter*, the next step is to question the narrowness in reading American literature in general because American literature has remained largely unexamined by a limited approach to a small group of writers.

Notes

1. See Nina Baym, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother: A Biographical Speculation," in her *Feminism and American Literary History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 36-56.
2. Nina Baym, "Thwarted Nature: Nathaniel Hawthorne as Feminist," *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Fritz Fleischmann, (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1982), p. 62.
3. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), p. 145. All further references to this work will be included in the text.
4. See Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960, rpt, 1992), p. 224. Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beast Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," in her *Feminism and American Literary History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 14.
5. Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 108-109.
6. See Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Culture Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 3-39. Judith Fryer, *The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century America Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 74-84.
7. David Leverenz, *Manhood and The American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 34-41.
8. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 97.

9. D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1923, rpt, 1977), p. 96.
10. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 1-7.
11. Leo Bersani, *A Future For Astyanax: Character And Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyars, 1969) , p. 6.
12. See R.W.B Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 114.
13. David Leverenz, *Manhood and The American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 276.
14. Nina Baym, "The Significance of Plot in Hawthorne's Romances," *Ruined Eden of The Present: Hawthorne, Melville, And Poe*, ed. G.R. Thompson and Virgil L. Lokke (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1981), pp. 49-53.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.