The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Edited by

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Foreword

Critical Responses in Arts and Letters is designed to present a documentary history of highlights in the critical reception to the body of work of writers and artists and to individual works that are generally considered to be of major importance. The focus of each volume in this series is basically historical. The introductions to each volume are themselves brief histories of the critical response an author, artist, or individual work has received. This response is then further illustrated by reprinting a strong representation of the major critical reviews and articles that collectively have produced the author's, artist's, or work's critical reputation.

The scope of *Critical Responses in Arts and Letters* knows no chronological or geographical boundaries. Volumes under preparation include studies of individuals from around the world and in both contemporary and historical periods.

Each volume is the work of an individual editor, who surveys the entire body of criticism on a single author, artist, or work. The editor then selects the best material to depict the critical response received by an author or artist over his/her entire career. Documents produced by the author or artist may also be included when the editor finds that they are necessary to a full understanding of the materials at hand. In circumstances where previous, isolated volumes of criticism on a particular individual or work exist, the editor carefully selects material that better reflects the nature and directions of the critical response over time.

In addition to the introduction and the documentary section, the editor of each volume is free to solicit new essays on areas that may not have been adequately dealt with in previous criticism. For volumes on living writers and artists, new interviews may be included, again at

the discretion of the volume's editor. The volumes also provide supplementary bibliography and are fully indexed.

While each volume in *Critical Responses to Arts and Letters* is unique, it is also hoped that in combination they will form a useful, documentary history of the critical response to the arts, and one that can be easily and profitably employed by students and scholars.

Cameron Northouse

Introduction

Whatever else may be said of *The Scarlet Letter*, the romance is virtually unique among works of American fiction: it has not lapsed from print in over a hundred and forty years. The history of its reception is, in fact, nothing less than a case-study in canon formation. As Wendell V. Harris has observed, moreover, "canons are made up of readings, not of disembodied texts."[1] Hershel Parker adds in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* that *The Scarlet Letter* has appealed "to tastes of changing generations in different ways."[2] The present volume is not so much a comprehensive sampling of critical approaches to the story, then, as a collection of documents—canon-fodder, as it were—which detail what Jane Tompkins has called, in a different context, "the politics of Hawthorne's literary reputation."[3]

The plan of the volume is simple enough. The various items in the first section silhouette the background and composition- history of the romance. Hawthorne began to write *The Scarlet Letter*, as these items indicate, after he lost his patronage job in the Salem Custom-House in June 1849. His dismissal was rationalized by much of the Whig press, though Epes Sargent in the *Boston Transcript* blasted the Polk administration for its failure to rise above petty partisan politics. Ironically, Hawthorne's firing would prove a blessing in disguise. Compelled by circumstances to earn his living by his pen, Hawthorne produced an eminently marketable book which the Boston firm of Ticknor, Reed and Fields shrewdly promoted well in advance of its publication with blurbs in such papers as the *Transcript*, the dowager of Boston polite society. James T. Fields, "one of the great geniuses of American literary merchandising,"[4] recounts in his memoir *Yesterdays with Authors* how he first encouraged Hawthorne to elaborate the "germ" of the story and cites several letters the author wrote him in late 1849 and 1850 as he worked on the romance. As Richard H. Brodhead explains, "It was

Fields, in 1850, who produced the book that clinched Hawthorne's fame: in his own lurid account, Fields, Chillingworth-fashion, forcibly dragged to light the half-completed manuscript that Hawthorne was keeping secret."[5] Though Fields obviously embellished the part he had played in the process of composition, Hawthorne freely admitted his debt to him in 1861: "My literary success, whatever it has been or may be, is the result of my connection with you. Somehow or other, you smote the rock of public sympathy on my behalf."[6] In my own piece on the composition-history, I trace the sources of the mistaken biographical tradition that Hawthorne began to write *The Scarlet Letter* literally on the day he was "decapitated" in Salem.

From all indications, Hawthorne was unsure of the merit of the story even while he was completing it. "It is either very good or very bad—I don't know which," he reportedly told Fields. He confessed to a friend the day after finishing the manuscript that it was "positively a h—l-fired story, into which I found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light."[7] Still, it was immediately hailed, at least by some native literary folk cited in section two, as a minor masterpiece. *The Scarlet Letter* "set the seal upon an already promising reputation," as Bertha Faust has concluded.[8] On March 15, 1850, the day before it went on sale, the *Transcript* pronounced it "a first rate romance" which would prove Hawthorne belonged among "the first writers of our time." American reviewers would often compare Hawthorne, even in the first blush of his greatest success, to Addison, Steele, Goldsmith, Lamb, Scott, Irving, and Shakespeare; and before the end of the year Hawthorne's college classmate Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would rank *The Scarlet Letter* above Boccaccio's tales in the course of a lecture at Harvard.

The book soon proved to be more popular than even the publishers had anticipated, with some six thousand copies sold within the first six months. Hawthorne attributed its initial celebrity to the controversy which raged over "The Custom-House" introduction much as, later, Mark Twain thought the decision to remove *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the shelves of the Concord Free Library would "sell 25,000 copies for us sure."[9] Indeed, much of the critical commentary on *The Scarlet Letter* focused on Hawthorne's caricatures of his former co-workers in the introduction. He no doubt had planned to exact a little revenge on his political enemies in Salem in this part of the book. "I feel an infinite contempt for them," he admitted to his friend Horatio Bridge, "and probably have expressed more of it than I intended." This preliminary chapter soon provoked "the greatest uproar that ever happened here since witch-times."[10] In its review, the *Salem Register* excoriated Hawthorne for "vilifying some of his former associates,"

particularly William Lee and James Miller, in the "outrageous personalities which disfigure" the chapter. The "venomous, malignant, and unaccountable assault" on these venerable gentlemen, according to the *Register*, was akin to character-assassination and proved the prescient wisdom "of the Administration in relieving" Hawthorne of "dignified employment" within the government. These sentiments were widely expressed in many of the other Whig newspapers that had condoned or approved his removal some nine months earlier. Such Democratic papers as the New York *Evening Post*, however, protested that there had been no "malignant intention in the writer." Charles C. Hazewell, who subsequently claimed to have memorized every word of *The Scarlet Letter*, asserted in the *Boston Times* that Hawthorne "could hardly have said less at the expense of the miserable, wretched Vandals who dismissed him from office." In any event, Hawthorne was unrepentant: in his preface to the second edition of the romance, dated March 30, 1850, he insisted the opening sketch "could not have been done in a better or kindlier spirit" and he reprinted it without alteration. According to C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr., this preface to the second edition quelled the controversy, at least "as far as Hawthorne was concerned, although neither he nor the outraged Salemites ever forgot the matter."[11]

Another complaint about the romance—that it was demoralizing if not downright immoral—was leveled by most reviewers for religious periodicals. From this perspective, Hawthorne had designed the story to be a *succes de scandale*, a titillating tale about a fornicator, an adulteress, and their illegitimate child written in the best (that is, worst) French style. "We are painfully tempted to believe that it is a book made for the market," Arthur Cleveland Coxe opined in the *Church Review*. It is a "dirty story" with a "running undertide of filth" and "dissolute conversation" about "the nauscous amour of a Puritan pastor." Dimmesdale is, according to this logic, the central actor in the naughty novel, the most culpable sexual transgressor because he is the male aggressor. Hester is, by implication, but the "frail creature of his charge" whom he seduces. Such a view, with minor variations, was widely shared across the theological spectrum, from the Episcopalian poet Coxe and the Roman Catholic convert Orestes Brownson to the anonymous reviewers of the romance for the liberal Unitarian weeklies. Each of these critics predictably scorned Hawthorne's achievement: "it is utterly and entirely a failure" when read as a religious narrative, according to the *Christian Register*, because it "nowhere recognise[s]" the "peculiar office of Christianity in the conversion of sinners and their restoration to purity and peace." The *Christian*

Inquirer went so far as to claim that the characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, reprobates all, "suffer intensely, agonize acutely, but tenderly or truly they cannot feel. The mother and child do not love each other." This critic confidently predicted the tale "will not survive a temporary importance."

Closely related to the complaint about the moral effect of *The Scarlet Letter* were questions about its historical accuracy. That Hawthorne, in the introduction, professed to have discovered the very letter Hester had worn on her breast and "half a dozen sheets of foolscap" sketching her life seemed to suggest the basis of the story in fact. Henry T. Tuckerman asserted in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, for example, that the romance "is as reliable as the best of Scott's novels" in its "truth to costume, local manners and scenic features." Yet the religious reviewers were at pains to deny that any such scandal as Hawthorne depicted had rocked Puritan Boston. While Governor Bellingham and Reverend Wilson were historical figures, they argued, Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne were figments of Hawthorne's imagination and, indeed, were a slander to the faith of the colonial forebears. Andrew Preston Peabody, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard, concluded that Hawthorne had "defamed the fathers of New England"—again, Dimmesdale seems by implication to be the protagonist in this reading—"by locating his pictures of gross impurity and sacrilegious vice where no shadow of reproach, and no breath but of immaculate fame, had ever rested before." Similarly, C. C. Smith charged in the *Christian Examiner* that *The Scarlet Letter* "contains the grossest and foulest falsification of truth in history and personal character, that we have ever encountered."[12] His reticence to defend "those stern old Popery-haters" the Puritans notwithstanding, Orestes Brownson dismissed Hawthorne's characterization of them as precisely the sort of thing he would expect from "a moderate transcendentalist and liberal of the modern school."

The Scarlet Letter was almost immediately pirated in England, and the British reviews, a selection of which appear in section three of this volume, were perhaps even more favorable than the contemporary American notices. Henry Chorley, in an oft-reprinted comment on the romance in the June 15, 1850, issue of the London *Athenaeum*, described it as "powerful and painful."[13] In October 1851, the *English Review* praised it as "quaint," "passionate," "powerful," and "original," and rated Hawthorne "above all the authors of America" except Irving and perhaps Longfellow and Cooper. Eight months later, Samuel Smiles thought it "pure, severe, and truthful." This brand of comment was uncomplicated by either the topical overtones of Hawthorne's

introduction or the parochial worries of the religious reviewers. Indeed, the pseudononymous reviewer for the *New Monthly Review* in February 1852 defended Hawthorne from the didacticists on the very grounds from which they had complained: *The Scarlet Letter*, he declared, was fundamentally a story of sin and penance, if not repentance, set against the "vivid" and "graphic" backdrop of the "patriarchal era of New England life." This latter phrase also hints at a reading of the romance which emphasizes Hester's plight, her dual role as both sinner and victim of sexual subjugation. Her character, according to the *North British Review*, was "of a stronger mould" than Dimmesdale's: "Without being unwomanly, she is of far less effeminate texture than the man she loved so truly, and for whom she suffered so bravely." These British notices also acknowledge for the first time the ambiguity of the letter A, the mystic symbol the American had simply associated with the adulterous union of Hester and the minister. In all, the early British reviewers, including Margaret Oliphant, Richard Holt Hutton, and Leslie Stephen, underscored the psychological and even allegorical dimensions of the romance, especially of the chapter entitled "The Interior of a Heart," rather than (like the Americans) its satirical or theological implications. The romance was also translated into German and French within months of its original American publication and into dozens of other languages over the next hundred and forty years.

After his death in 1864, Hawthorne's reputation within the genteel tradition of American letters steadily improved. This rising tide also lifted *The Scarlet Letter* to the rank of a classic, as the various documents in section four may suggest. The romance was reprinted "with an impression or more almost every year" well into the 1880s by Fields, Osgood & Company and its corporate successors.[14] Herman Melville obtained the only copy he is known to have owned in 1870.[15] The low-priced "Little Classics" edition of 1875 was welcomed by the *Liberal Christian*, the renamed organ of New York Unitarianism, as "the most powerful, if not the most remarkable, of Hawthorne's works." According to the Unitarian clergyman Robert Collyer, *The Scarlet Letter* was an elaboration of Pauline holy writ. Unlike the sectarian reviewers of the first edition, E. P. Whipple claimed Hawthorne was but a type of Puritan after all: "If Jonathan Edwards, turned romancer, had dramatized his sermon on 'Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God,' he could not have written a more terrific story of guilt and retribution than *The Scarlet Letter*." In an essay for the *Catholic Presbyterian*, A. C. Roe summarized the entire plot as though it were a gloss on Proverbs 28:13. And Thomas Selby, in *The Theology of*

Modern Fiction, insisted that the characters who figure in the romance "represent influences providentially appointed to stimulate the laggard conscience" and concluded that Hawthorne "dramatises with transcendent skill some of those great facts of human nature which are at the very roots of all theology." The terms of this particular debate had scarcely changed since the romance was first published in 1850: it was still weighed and measured by standards of religious doctrine.

In most ways, however, the response to *The Scarlet Letter* had matured over the years. Though critical opinion was divided during Hawthorne's lifetime whether it or *The Marble Faun* was his masterpiece, the tale of Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl was by the 1870s generally conceded to have the better claim to the title. Gilderoy Griffin declared it "perhaps his greatest creation" in 1871, and W. D. Howells referred to it as "Hawthorne's supreme romance" six years later. The Boston *Women's Journal*, the leading suffragist journal in America, commended the so-called Red-Line edition of 1877 in tacit recognition of its feminist overtones, and Howells discussed at length Mary Hallock's illustrations for this edition in his review of it for the *Atlantic*. Hallock's portrayal of the scene at Governor Bellingham's mansion in chapter VII was, he wrote, "quite unapproached in power by anything in American illustrative art." By 1879, no less a luminary than Henry James hailed *The Scarlet Letter* as "the finest piece of imaginative writing yet put forth in the country" and Hawthorne's "most substantial title to fame." James's praise reverberated, like an echo in a closed chamber, through dozens of essays and critical introductions over the next fifty years. But James also subtly condescended to the "provincial" Hawthorne. He thought the romance was, if anything, filled with "too much" symbolism, such as the "mystic A" that appears in the sky after Dimmesdale's midnight vigil on the scaffold or the one the minister "finds imprinted upon his breast and eating into his flesh." Such contrivances, according to James, were foreign to "real psychology." He also disputed all claims for the historicity or realism of the romance: "The historical colouring is rather weak than otherwise," he noted; "there is little elaboration of detail, of the modern realism of research; and the author has made no great point of causing his figures to speak the English of their period." Still, James's critical biography—the first volume devoted to an American writer to appear in the English Men of Letters series—suggests the extent to which Hawthorne's fame was institutionalized during the Gilded Age. In 1883, he was accorded the paramount literary tribute: a definitive edition of his work in twelve volumes,

edited by his son-in-law George Parsons Lathrop and issued by Houghton Mifflin.[16]

Hawthorne was, by the turn of the century, the brooding crown prince of the *ars republica*. In an 1893 poll conducted by *The Critic* to select the greatest American books, *The Scarlet Letter* came in second, barely outdistanced by Emerson's *Essays*.[17] The same year, the Wesleyan weekly *Zion's Herald* pronounced it "Hawthorne's masterpiece of fiction," even if it was "not suited to the fancy of the multitude."[18] In 1904, the centenary of Hawthorne's birth, Theodore Munger cracked in the *Atlantic* that "it would be as safe to wager" on the "permanent high estimate of the Scarlet Letter" as on the solvency of the Bank of England. In his chapter on Hester Prynne in *Heroines of Fiction*, Howells made the case for it as "the modernest and maturest" of Hawthorne's romances. Unlike his friend James, Howells assumed the centrality of Hester to the plot, commended the "strong reality" in the material Hawthorne used to construct the story, and even defended the "stateliness of the dialogue" spoken by the characters. Similarly, in his Hawthorne volume for the American Men of Letters series, George Woodberry applauded the intense "sense of reality" of the romance, its critique of the harsh and forbidding Puritanism which ostracizes the heroine. The biographical critics of the Woodberry school attributed the melancholy that ostensibly marked all of Hawthorne's fiction to his Puritan ancestry, as if he had inherited their gloomy view of life. While Hawthorne distorted history in *The Scarlet Letter*, Woodberry asserted, he "symbolized historical New England by an environment that he created round a tragedy that he read in the human heart." The romance is, from this perspective, unremittingly sad and depressing, "a chapter in the literature of moral despair," its tone and expression shaped inexorably by the author's own "blood and breeding." According to William C. Brownell, Hawthorne was a fatalist who nurtured vicious habits. As Harry Thurston Peck sniffed in 1909, Hawthorne "was burdened with a secret pessimism which was ever a dark blot on his secret soul." The author had become, according to this critical estimate, the very type of character he had depicted in such tales as "The Minister's Black Veil" and "Young Goodman Brown." To such writers as Woodberry, Munger, Peck, and others of their stripe, in short, *The Scarlet Letter* was something of a Greek tragedy in modern dress, Hester an admirable and perhaps saintly heroine, the author an unhappy recluse if not a misanthrope. Ironically, the romance was not recommended for classroom use for precisely this reason. Because children should not "associate with those who are constantly dejected or morbidly sensitive," E. W. Barrett averred in the journal *Education*

in 1894, teachers should "reject" assigning *The Scarlet Letter* in favor of *Twice-told Tales* or *The Marble Faun*: "There is little in Hawthorne's character to place before our pupils."[19]

This fashionable brand of biographical criticism dominated Hawthorne scholarship over the next several decades. In the introductions to and comments upon a series of popular editions of the romance between 1919 and 1929, the author was routinely portrayed as the sombre heir of an austere and diseased Puritanism. "Old-fashioned Nathaniel, with his little-boy charm, he'll tell you what's what. But he'll cover it with smarm," as that Puritan-baiter D. H. Lawrence observed at the time.[20] "To whatever disadvantages New England birth and breeding exposes the artist, Hawthorne was exposed," Stuart P. Sherman opined.[21] He was "bone of the bone, blood of the blood of Puritan New England," according to Elizabeth Deering Hanscom. "An ancestral strain, no doubt," explains his obsession "with human nature under circumstances of sin," Ernest E. Leisy suggests.[22] The "old Puritan tradition" was "in his blood," wrote Carl Van Doren in 1920: "Some ancestral strain accounts for this conception of adultery as an affair not of the civil order but of the immortal soul." To be sure, Van Doren also outlines a psychoanalytical rather than narrrowly theological approach to the story reminiscent of its early British reception: "The newest schools of psychology cannot object to a reading of sin which shows Dimmesdale and Chillingworth as the victims of instincts and antipathies which fester because unnatural repressed while Hester Prynne is cleansed through the discovery of her offense and grows healthier by her confession." Sin in these terms is "a violation less of some supernatural law than of the natural integrity of the soul." Of course, such observations beg the question whether Hester, the ostensible "free spirit liberated in a moral wilderness,"[23] actually confesses her sin, and if so where in the narrative such an event is recorded. Surely not in chapter XVII, where she defiantly declares to Dimmesdale that "What we did had a consecration of its own." The vexing question of Hawthorne's affiliation with Transcendentalism also runs like a subtext through the scholarship of this period. Did the author intend to lampoon the movement in Hester, as Sherman implies, or was his writing "touched" with "transcendental doctrines," as Hanscom and Leisy claim? In 1927, in any case, William Lyon Phelps pronounced *The Scarlet Letter*, with pardonable hyperbole, "the greatest book ever written in the Western Hemisphere," one of "the fifteen best novels of the world." Translated into Chinese three times since 1934, the romance has served as a standard introduction to American literature in both pre- and post-revolutionary China.[24] For

better or worse, it has been required reading in middle- and high-school English courses throughout the U. S. for much of the recent past, enshrined in the list of books three generations of adolescents have been taught to despise.

Over the past half-century, *The Scarlet Letter* has become an academic shibboleth, prompting dozens of New Critical, contextual, psychoanalytical, feminist, New Historical, post-structural, and other readings. In 1971, Roy R. Male outlined "the ways in which Hawthorne's work has responded to rapidly shifting expectations during the last two decades" in *American Literary Scholarship*:

> In the fifties it rewarded the explicatory and mythic analyses of the New Critics; in the mid-sixties it survived, at the cost of some diminution, the rigorous inquest of the new historicists and the neo-Freudians; and now his fiction seems more vital than ever for readers aware of new developments in psychology and related fields.[25]

These modern readings, represented in this volume by the selections in the fifth section, are all indebted, at least indirectly, to the work in the 1930s of Perry Miller, who reclaimed the Puritans as a topic for serious intellectual inquiry, and Randall Stewart, who demythologized the events in Hawthorne's life. In his histories of early New England, Miller corrected the caricature of the Massachusetts Bay colonists as thin-lipped philistines, even as they had been portrayed in *The Scarlet Letter*; and, in his biographical notes and sketches of the author, Stewart revised the mistaken estimates of Hawthorne's character. In his view, Hawthorne was a fairly normal and well-adjusted fellow, albeit a closet Christian. Stewart's work, coupled with the New Critics' emphasis upon the intrinsic qualities of the text, finally freed Hawthorne scholars from the biographical barrel in which they had been confined like frogs.

By the late 1930s, then, *The Scarlet Letter* had become something more than a great novel by a child of the Puritans. F. O. Matthiessen, for example, devoted over a dozen pages of *American Renaissance* (1941) to a detailed analysis of its structure and design. Indeed, as Tompkins fairly observes, the text of the romance has been continually reinvented over the years: "*The Scarlet Letter* is a great novel in 1850, in 1876, in 1904, in 1942, and in 1966, but each time it is great for different reasons."[26] Nevertheless, its place in the canon has never been seriously disputed. It remains one of the most frequently reprinted works of American fiction, and it appears in its entirety in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, the most decentered of the new recanonized collections. The Norton Critical Edition of the

romance, the standard college classroom text, recently entered its third edition in the past thirty years. It also remains the standard against which all other stories of the period are measured. After reading "the many novels by American women authors about women, written between 1820 and 1870," for example, Nina Baym did not "hit upon even one novel that I would propose to set alongside *The Scarlet Letter*"[27]—a frank admission for which she has been roundly criticized.[28] Yet even Tompkins, a radical protestant in the present literary reformation, does not claim "that the novels of Stowe, Fanny Fern, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps are good in the same way that *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter* are."[29]

Over the past fifty years, in any event, the meaning and significance of Hawthorne's romance have been hotly debated. Given his celebrated remark about the "d——d mob of scribbling women" with whom he competed in the literary marketplace[30] and his patronizing private comments about Margaret Fuller, who may have figured as a model for Hester Prynne, Hawthorne answered the so-called "woman question" of his day with a resounding No! in thunder—or so it has been widely assumed. In "Hawthorne's Hester and Feminism" (1939), the first article on *The Scarlet Letter* to appear in *PMLA*, Neal Frank Doubleday carefully distinguished between Hester's and Hawthorne's views; that is, according to Doubleday, "in his treatment of Hester, Hawthorne embodies his criticism of a movement contemporary with him." In "Pearl and the Puritan Heritage" (1951), Chester E. Eisinger reexamined the Puritan influence on the romance, though hardly in the simple-minded manner of the biographical critics earlier in the century. Employing the contextual method of the new discipline of American Studies, Eisinger contended that the figure of Pearl, in particular, may be best understood "by reference to the Puritan theories of nature and liberty." The elf-child "is the hypostatization, in miniature, of the Puritan conception of nature and notion of the state." The story in which she appears in less a realistic treatment of Puritan life than an allegory which illustrates Puritan ideas. Darrel Abel, in "Hawthorne's Hester" (1952), shared and elaborated Doubleday's view that *The Scarlet Letter* exhibits the "inadequacy" of its heroine's philosophy of "romantic individualism." Hester's "breach of her marriage obligations" is tinged with Godwinism, Abel argued, and the Puritans' condemnation of her adultery is in their terms no more harsh than it is illogical.

Nina Baym, one of the most perceptive of Hawthorne's contemporary critics, has forcefully disputed this judgment of Hester. "Hawthorne's work presented me with a teacher's dilemma" in the

mid-1960s, Baym has recalled.[31] "I found it impossible to teach *The Scarlet Letter* to undergraduate students according to interpretations of that work then current." Whereas Doubleday had read the romance as a covert satire of Hester's misguided individualism, Baym averred that "Almost nothing that she does in *The Scarlet Letter* can be labeled as an example of romantic individualism." Whereas Abel and many New Critics had argued that the romance centered on the minister, that its plot consists of a "struggle between God and the Devil for the soul of Arthur Dimmesdale," Baym has repeatedly insisted upon Hester's "place as protagonist" of *The Scarlet Letter*.[32] She has been particularly critical of the attempts by such critics as Male, Richard Harter Fogle, and Hyatt Waggoner to remake Hawthorne in the image of a neo-orthodox Calvinist. In "Passion and Authority in *The Scarlet Letter*" (1970), Baym contends that Hawthorne deliberately misrepresented Puritanism in the romance as "a self-satisfied secular autocracy," that "what Hawthorne does give us" in the way of religious dogma "bears little resemblance to Puritan theology." Thus he "must be held accountable as one of the first shapers of that myth of the Puritans which turned them into dour Victorians." The Boston of *The Scarlet Letter* is "an authoritarian state with a Victorian moral outlook," a patriarchal community "dedicated to preserving the values and purposes of aging men." Dimmesdale, the youngest of these patriarchs, refuses to own his paternity of Pearl lest he "be thrown out of what is, to him, Heaven—the society of elders." On her part, however, Hester becomes after seven years of ostracism "what she was at most only implicitly before, a rebel." Her embroidered letter is "a masked defiance of the authorities," as the townswomen remark. Just as Pearl represents Hester's transgression, Chillingworth is the literal incarnation of the minister's guilty conscience. Yet, on the whole, Hester is the more sympathetic figure. She "must reject the judgment of the letter, no matter how she tries to assent to it; and Dimmesdale must take that letter on himself, no matter how much a part of him struggles to resist." These "two versions of the struggle between self and society," Baym concludes, are similarly "gloomy," for Hawthorne "does not believe that true self-fulfillment is possible."

Robert E. Todd offers yet another perspective on Hester's character in "The Magna Mater Archetype in *The Scarlet Letter*" (1972). Though Joseph Levi published a psychoanalytic interpretation of the romance as early as 1953,[33] Charles Feidelson and Frederick Crews fully legitimated this approach in the mid-1960s. Still, Crews devoted most of his chapter on *The Scarlet Letter* in *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (1966) to Dimmesdale's repression

of his self-destructive libidinal impulses. In his Jungian reading of the story, Todd identifies Hester, whose dual or ambivalent nature has been much remarked by earlier critics, with the "anima" or bipolar Magna Mater. Even in the first chapter, when she emerges from the jail as if from a womb with Pearl at her breast, her "kinship with the Great Mother is strikingly evident," according to Todd. In her relations with Dimmesdale, she is "both a source of destruction and death" and "a source of love and rebirth." Their meeting in the forest, depicted in "a succession of images that are important symbols of the elemental womb-tomb character of the Magna Mater archetype," results in Dimmesdale's psychic rebirth or, in Jung's term, "individuation." Holding the dying minister in her arms after his revelation of the stigma on his breast, Todd concludes, "Hester is the latter-day equivalent of the Magna Mater as the Pieta, who receives the crucified Jesus, embracing him in death as in birth."

In the present moment of critical dissensus, the romance has continued to inspire a wide variety of disparate approaches and readings. As Ross C Murfin has recently noted, "A great work of literature such as *The Scarlet Letter* elicits a host of different interpretive responses, no one of which stands alone or is entirely adequate to unpack its significance."[34] The best of these recent studies, such as Elizabeth Aycock Hoffman's "Political Power in *The Scarlet Letter*" (1990), focus on issues of gender and sexuality. Following Michel Foucault's lead in *Discipline and Punish*, Hoffman contends that "Hawthorne's failure to give Hester's individualism complete expression evolves from the restrictive terms of the discourse that he employs." The introduction to the romance functions as "a personal 'allegory' of the author's experience with conformative pressures" in the Salem Custom House. After his public "decapitation," Hawthorne thought he was free of those pressures and free to criticize them: "The publicly punished Hester plays out this aspect of the author's life." The "punitive relation between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale" suggests the extent to which "Hawthorne's concept of the self-reliant, self-willed individual is inseparable from the political powers of discipline." In the parallel relation of Pearl and Hester, he attempted to describe a more natural or benign form of discipline and valorized it "by replacing the intervention of overtly political powers of discipline with that of a child whose 'uncanny' behavior reminds the parent of the 'wild' past." Lacking the "self-perception" Hester gains through the surveillance of Pearl, "Dimmesdale cannot obtain the higher truth regarding justice" that she realizes. Yet, in the end, Hawthorne's "literary model" of discipline "subverts his critical observations about the expediencies of