The Scarlet Letter: Social Stigma and Art

The Scarlet Letter establishes marking as epistemology. As Hawthorne's Surveyor/narrator discovers the "rag of scarlet cloth" in "The Custom-House," then proceeds to write his romance, he demonstrates how the process of noticing, or marking in the sense of observing, holds him to a "single idea or line of argument" and leads to an analysis of the letter's meaning that transcends its significance either as artifact, when he finds it in the Custom-House, or as physical stigma, when he tells the tale he reads in the "sheets of foolscap." In order to tell the tale, the narrator must transcend his focus on the letter, which is tangible for him in "The Custom-House," so that in a sense, The Scarlet Letter, by its very existence, attests to both the process and the effects of marking.

In the analysis that follows, I interpret Hawthorne's fictional community with this process in mind. The Surveyor/narrator in "The Custom-House" establishes the hermeneutics by which the reader must come to terms with the romance. To mark Hester Prynne the way the Boston community does is to define her, or to attempt to do so. Her stigma defines the boundaries within which she must confine her individuality. Therefore Hester expresses the hidden conflicts and internal contradictions of Puritan behavior. However, when she dresses Pearl in the colors of her stigma, she reveals her own ability to resolve those conflicts. For Hester's isolation is social. Within the confines of her proscriptions, she finds personal strength and spiritual peace that transcend the material and social exigencies of her life. Dimmesdale, by contrast, expresses the metaphysical insecurity of his community. What I will describe, using a term from sociology, as Dimmesdale's social "discreditability" is akin to the religious pressure he feels to determine whether or not he is among "the Elect." His feelings of social discreditability
create the spiritual uneasiness of someone predestined to be included with "the Damned."

In creating an analogy between Dimmesdale’s inner conflict and the external conflict Hester Prynne feels as she confronts the Boston community, Hawthorne reveals the transformation by which metaphysical insecurities can manifest themselves as social actions. The “law” Hester and Dimmesdale broke threatens the very identity of their community. Further, as I will show, in his creation of Chillingworth, Hawthorne attempts to answer the question of the artist’s role in a community whose identity is informed by the paradoxical reliance on the revealed meaning of marks and signs in the face of uncertainty, their absolute mortal inability to know what has been preordained.

Hawthorne has found a symbol that contains his search in the romance much as Hester's stigma defines the parameters of her existence in the community. Hawthorne engages in a search if not for what is peculiarly American about the Puritan community, then at least for what insights an understanding of that community can provide. His narrator focuses on the scarlet letter as both a physical object and a tangible symbol in the construction of his allegory until its symbolic meaning is transcended, the allegory falls away, and the reader, like Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, the Puritan community, and the narrator himself, is left with what Hawthorne’s penultimate chapter titles "the revelation" of the scarlet letter. Hawthorne derives his aesthetic resolution by transcending the social, religious, and political themes in his fiction. Analogously, our own analysis of The Scarlet Letter explores that process by which marking leads to clearer knowledge of who and what we are.

I

Hawthorne chooses to introduce The Scarlet Letter with an essay that seems to be but indirectly linked with the tale that follows. He states a twofold intention: to establish his authority as editor for the romance; and to give a "faint representation" of his mode of life as a Surveyor of the Customs. "The Custom-House" itself must be read in light of the romance it accompanies, just as, in turn, the introductory essay illuminates some of Hawthorne's narrator's concerns in The Scarlet Letter.

In "The Custom-House," Hawthorne relates finding a "rag of scarlet cloth," which, "on careful examination, assumed the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A." He described his initial curiosity: "My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter and would
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not be turned aside. Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind” (p. 31). In prefacing the novel with “The Custom-House” essay, Hawthorne chooses to establish the occasion of finding the letter as the point of inception of the tale. More is at stake here than the writer’s history of the genesis of his work. Indeed, “The Custom-House” is actually part of the novel; The Scarlet Letter opens with Hawthorne’s somewhat prurient gaze: “My eyes . . . would not be turned aside.” We must regard the essay not as autobiography but rather as Hawthorne’s conscious fabrication of an introduction to his romance.

Hawthorne explicitly states in the opening pages that his narrator stands at some distance from himself, and that his narrator’s concerns will govern the structure of The Scarlet Letter. He claims that there are limits in the extent to which “an author, methinks, may be autobiographical, without violating either the reader’s rights or his own” (p. 4). Such limits do not approach full autobiographical disclosure. “The truth seems to be, however, that, when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates” (p. 3). Hawthorne’s limited narrator thus confronts one of the predominant concerns of the characters in the tales—who yearn for fellowship, yet fear that others will penetrate too far into their mystery. The Unpardonable Sin for the converts in “Young Goodman Brown” is to become “more conscious of the secret guilt of others, both in deed and thought, than they could now be of their own.” Hawthorne’s narrator wants “to find out the divided segment of the writer’s own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it”; at the same time, he wants to position a veil, to create limits of autobiography, that will serve to prevent “violation” of “the reader’s rights and his own.”

The narrator’s attempts recall another of Hawthorne’s characters, Mr. Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil.” In this tale, the “simple black veil, such as any woman might wear on her bonnet,” allows the minister to change himself into something awful, only by hiding his face. The artificial physical boundary the minister creates between himself and the people around him he intends as a symbol of the invisible separation that exists between them already. But it isolates him completely, separates him further from community, even though, on his deathbed, he consoles himself by viewing “on every visage a Black Veil.” Certainly the narrator of “The Cus-
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torn-House" does not intend such separation as makes of the minister a monster. And yet, without exploring the complexities of isolation that his arbitrary limits impose, he chooses, like the minister, to set up a tangible, physical emblem between himself and the narrative he is about to relate.\(^7\)

Hawthorne begins his exploration of the relationship between the townspeople and the mark with which they brand Hester by considering the corresponding relationship of narrator to symbol in "The Custom-House."\(^8\) More than Hawthorne's other novels, The Scarlet Letter approaches the problems of the working artist in terms of the physical mark or sign that both provides him with an analogical focus for his isolation and enforces that isolation. Studying the progression of the narrator's concerns in "The Custom-House" prepares the reader for social complications of marking that the ensuing narrative then considers.\(^9\)

Up to the moment in which he finds the letter, the narrator describes the gourmandise of the Custom-House officers. The Custom-House is the place for tales—not of shipwrecks or the world's wonders, but of the morning's breakfast, or tomorrow's dinner. The old Inspector likes to recount his past indulgences: "I have heard him smack his lips over dinners, every guest at which, except himself, had long been food for worms" (p. 19). He is fascinated with their fecundity in the face of old age and decay, and describes the Collector as a man "yet capable of flinging off his infirmities like a sick man's gown . . . and starting up once more a warrior" (p. 21). The General has a fondness for the "sight and fragrance of flowers," and the narrator writes: "The heat that had formerly pervaded his nature, and which was not yet extinct, was never of the kind that flashes and flickers in a blaze, but, rather, a deep, red glow, as of iron in a furnace" (p. 21).

He associates gourmandise with living a full life—for the Inspector has enjoyed much roast meat, twenty children, and three wives—but he finds that it also may be achieved during the indolence of sinecure. This pastoral view of sinecure initially leads Hawthorne's narrator to accept the job as Surveyor. Thus he comments, early in the essay, on the "strange, indolent, unjoyous attachment for my native town, that brought me to fill a place in Uncle Sam's brick edifice" (p. 12), and on the figure of the federal eagle, whose wing seems at the beginning of his tenure to shelter and protect, although her claws become her more significant attributes after he is fired. Further explaining his willingness to return to Salem, the narrator, in another reference to sustenance and tangibility, claims that "even the old Inspector was desirable, as a change
of diet, to a man who had known Alcott" or Brook Farm, Emerson, Ellery Channing, Thoreau, Hillard, or Longfellow (p. 25). His exposure to the transcendentalists has led him to "relish" more contact with the material world, and eating becomes the analogue for this contact that suits him best in the essay.

The narrator's fondness for the excessive sensuality of these old men, before he realizes at the end of the essay that their indolence is also a form of impotence, yields to his description of his own experience of physical sensation on finding the "rag of scarlet cloth." While he meditates, fascinated, on the origins and meaning of the scarlet letter, he "happens" to place it on his own breast. "It seemed to me,—the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word,—it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor" (p. 32). In this moment, the narrator comes closest in the essay to experiencing, himself, the sensuality of the Inspector or the furnace glow of the Collector's red "heat." In a turn of his own analogy, he emphasizes for the reader the significance of his experience by musing on what the Weighers and Gaugers must have thought of his hours spent pacing the floor, in contemplation of the letter. "They probably fancied that my sole object—and, indeed, the sole object for which a sane man could ever put himself into voluntary motion—was, to get an appetite for dinner" (p. 32). Yet he neither increases his appetite nor comes to terms with the letter. "My imagination was a tarnished mirror" (p. 34). Thus he realizes that as long as he stays in the Custom House, he won't be able to write. 

His lengthy descriptions of gourmandise and sensuality now serve to emphasize the narrator's isolation, when he finds himself unable to indulge in it. "It was a folly, with the materiality of this daily life pressing so intrusively upon me, to attempt to fling myself back into another age; or to insist on creating the semblance of a world out of airy matter, when, at every moment, the impalpable beauty of my soap-bubble was broken by the rude contact of some actual circumstance" (p. 37). In retrospect he realizes that "the fault was mine. The page of life that was spread out before me seemed dull and commonplace, only because I had not fathomed its deeper import" (p. 37). But whether or not at some future date the fragments he remembers will "turn to gold upon the page," "I had ceased to be a writer of tolerably poor tales and essays, and had become a tolerably good Surveyor of the Customs. That was all" (pp. 37–38). Thus, when he is politically "guillotined," as he terms it, he likens the
experience to that of a man who wants to commit suicide and, before he has the chance, is timely murdered.

In order to come to terms with the physical world, he has to remove himself from it, to spiritualize his burden, to make of his experience "a bright transparency," and not end up, like the old Inspector, making "the dinner-hour the nucleus of the day" (p. 40). His "decapitation" serves as his withdrawal from the world of physical sensations so that he states, "Henceforth it ceases to be a reality of my life. I am a citizen of somewhere else" (p. 44). Yet in ending he contrasts his own calmness throughout the procedure with the "blood thirstiness that is developed in the hour of triumph" for the victors. "There are few uglier traits of human nature than this tendency . . . to grow cruel, merely because they possessed the power of inflicting harm" (pp. 40–41).

II

With such an introduction, in which gourmandise becomes blood thirst, in which the eagle's wing becomes the blade of the guillotine, and for which the physical, tangible rag of scarlet cloth becomes both the vehicle of sensation and the emblem of separation and literary inadequacy, it is not surprising that the mark or brand in The Scarlet Letter becomes both a pathway to understanding (bringing the narrator into communication with his own divided segment, as it similarly acts to unite the townspeople) and a mark of separation not unlike the Minister's Black Veil. Thus the place to begin a discussion of the romance is its title and the narrator's initial exploration of the significance of the scarlet letter.

Titles are markings, signposts; and they can also be misleading. In my high school English class, we equated the scarlet letter with what it "stood for"—adultery—and read Hawthorne completely as a moral road sign. We took our places as spectators among the Puritan community and either did not notice (or it was not "pointed out" to us) that the narrator's own concerns in the novel move quite beyond the literal and allegorical meaning the scarlet letter has for the townspeople.

The critical equivalent to this "moral road sign" interpretation of The Scarlet Letter is to read the novel as a study of guilt and isolation. Yet Hawthorne's narrator reveals in "The Custom-House" that what intrigues him about the letter he finds is its mystery, not an experience it referentially portrays. He discounts the actual sensual moment he experienced and, throughout the romance, focuses on the inherent meaning of the letter. Hawthorne distinguishes between stigma and moral guilt; and he interprets the letter as an
external mark or brand rather than as a referential reflector. As A.
N. Kaul writes, *The Scarlet Letter* "deals not with the sin of adultery
but with the diverse repercussions on human relationships resulting
from the consciousness of this sin." And thus, as Richard Chase
points out, "the adultery which sets everything going happens be­
fore the book begins." From the imaginary moment of its concep­

The romance opens with "a throng of bearded men" assembled in
front of the prison door. As they wait, the reader is placed among
them: we wait for something to emerge; it is clear that we are not
permitted an interior view. The aesthetic distance this "waiting"
produces allows the reader to share the narrator's ambivalence. We
want to look, and yet we do not want to look too closely. The ambiva­
lence inherent in the narrator's stance resembles the prurient
fetishism with which he fingered the cloth in "The Custom-House." There he allowed his mind to engage compensatorily in the mecha­
nism of reading the written history of the letter, which at first es­
caped his notice. In the narrative, the initial aesthetic distance pre­
vents both narrator and reader from engaging in those "burning"
sensations that the tangible letter produced.

The narrator also stands at a historical remove, further distanc­ing
the reader, and suggests an irony that recurs throughout. He
states, "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human
virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably
recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a
portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the
site of a prison" (p. 47). The disjunction between "human virtue
and happiness" and "practical necessity" sets up a paradox in the
opening chapters, when the magistrates demand that Hester confess
the identity of her accomplice. As Michael Davitt Bell writes, "This
contradiction between the supposed advocacy of liberty and the ac­
tual denial of it produced the central tension that informs the histor­
ical romance of New England." The demands the magistrates
make on Hester deny her liberty. The stigma they force upon her
thus expresses the paradox Hawthorne presents to the reader, and
by means of aesthetic and historical distance throughout the open­
ing scene, the narrator views the crowd while the crowd itself fo­
cuses on the scarlet letter. The reader stands back with the narrator,
viewing the letter as a mark, not of moral transgression, but rather
of community reaction. From the beginning, then, the novel studies
the social effects of marking—how it affects the victim, Hester; and
how the accusers and observers, the governors and townspeople,
differently interpret it. Hawthorne examines the multitude of per-
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perspectives a reader may adopt towards his narrator, his major characters, and his predominant symbol.18

The goodwives gathered around the scaffold interpret the mark as both tangible and symbolic punishment, and they generally agree that it is not severe enough. One woman states, "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead . . . little will she care what they put on the bodice of her gown!" A second replies, "let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart." And a third, described as the "ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges," states, "'What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead? . . . This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die!'" (p. 51). The town beadle, who "represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law" (p. 52), states that "iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine" (p. 54) when Hester emerges from her prison. As the members of the crowd express their understanding of the brand, it is evident that they share their interpretation of the stigma as a punishment that involves public spectacle.

The earlier work that most clearly anticipates Hawthorne's theme of marking as a stigma that brings punishment and disgrace to the bearer is "The Birthmark," the first tale in Mosses. In this story, Aylmer the alchemist marries a woman whose beauty is marred only by a small birthmark on her face, in the imprint of a tiny hand. Aylmer's attitude towards the mark destroys by degrees his recognition of Georgiana's beauty—and he determines to erase it from her face. "'No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection.'"19 The mark, making visible that imperfection, becomes a mark of shame. As the narrator comments, "It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain."20

Unlike the Boston townspeople, the marking agents for Hester's brand, Aylmer cannot claim responsibility for the birthmark, but his inability to live with it suggests more about his own "earthly imperfection" than Georgiana's. "Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once
for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present.” Aylmer invests the mark with its significance, thus transforming an ordinary birth defect into a metaphysical allegory. At the same time, his attempt to erase the mark symbolizes his “strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite.” In The Scarlet Letter, the same eagerness leads the townspeople to disregard Hester as a symbol of human imperfection and to view her instead as the actual flaw. She possesses their “birthmark,” which must be revealed, in an attempt to erase it in themselves.

When Hester emerges from the prison, the narrator extends the range of meaning her brand connotes. Her face, “besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes” (p. 53). In this context, the word “marked” associates Hester’s forehead with the brow of Cain; and biblically marked, the feature denotes either a curse or a blessing. At the same time, the scarlet letter is magical or mythological. “It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself” (p. 54).

The secular, theological, and mythological overtones of the mark become intertwined for the Puritans, “a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical” (p. 50). Thus Hester assumes a saintliness in spite of her criminality and the reader discovers that “those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped.” Furthermore, “to a sensitive observer, there was something exquisitely painful in it” (p. 53). The narrator sympathizes with this pain: “There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature, . . . no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do” (p. 55). He views this enforced revelation of shame as an outrage because it violates an individual’s privacy; it probes too deeply into the soul; and it encourages morbid curiosity in the spectators.

In spite of her social exclusion, Hester remains an object of curiosity; the invasion of her privacy is accompanied by a barrier to intimacy. The townspeople view her mark as punishment; the governors, as a witness to divine revelation; the narrator, as an object of manifest outrage; and Hawthorne and his reader, as a literal mask that obscures rather than reveals, a mystery that contains the paradox of “exquisite pain.” And in addition to her social stigma, Hester also bears the burden of the novel’s symbolism. “Giving up
her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion" (p. 79). Thus the narrator further marks Hester, speculating on her position as a social outcast and ignoring her personal history and character.25

III

By remaining within the geographical limits of the Puritan settlement when her punishment does not force her to do so, Hester expresses "a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghostlike, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still more irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it" (pp. 79–80). The brand that "marked" Hester's future, "has given the color" to her life, also gives it significance and meaning. But the narrator chooses to explore Dimmesdale, instead of Hester, in order to discover this meaning.26 At the same time, he avoids labeling the relationship that exists between the two characters. He states that Hester felt compelled to remain near someone "with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment" (p. 80), and asks, "Had Hester sinned alone?" (p. 86), yet he suspends an immediate answer to the question. The suspense that he creates enables him to explore the relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale, and between private behavior and social sin, the complexities of which their past history as adulterers would not explain. To narrowly define their relationship in the same way that the townspeople mark Hester would obscure the deeper and more abstract symmetry that emerges between their respective social situations. Hester and Dimmesdale are linked for Hawthorne, and both the reader's and the narrator's understanding of one character depends on understanding both. The complementary contrast between Hester's mark and Dimmesdale's "unmarked" involvement in the crime they commit against society, between Hester's externalization of her stigma and Dimmesdale's internalization of it, between public and private guilt, provides the novel with its dialectic and captures Hawthorne's imagination.

In Stigma Erving Goffman reviews the classical situation of the Greek scapegoat and provides a model of social exclusion that clarifies Hawthorne's dialectic. In modern society, according to
Goffman, stigma refers to the "situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance." His social "crime" may be only an undesirable differentness, a departure from the "normal" expectation. Goffman does not directly comment on the branding inherent in Puritan punishment, but his analysis clearly defines the motivations behind such action. "The term stigma and its synonyms conceal a double perspective: does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the discredited, in the second with that of the discreditable." In Goffman's terms, Hester Prynne has already been discredited, whereas Dimmesdale is only potentially discreditable. As *The Scarlet Letter* indicates, it is easier for an individual to manage being discredited, where the stigma is immediately visible to all members of the community, than with the constant possibility of becoming discredited—the state of being discreditable, Dimmesdale's state. Hester must learn to live with her punishment, but Dimmesdale cannot escape constantly redefining the crime and attempting to punish himself.

We may compare Goffman's description of the physically stigmatized individual with Hawthorne's portrait of Hester. The narrator writes, "it now and then appeared to Hester... that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. She was thus terror-stricken by the revelations that were thus made" (p. 86). Further, "in all her miserable experience, there was nothing else so awful and so loathsome as this sense" (pp. 86–87). Goffman writes, "We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one, and at the same time to impute some desirable but undesired attributes, often of a supernatural cast, such as 'sixth sense,' or 'understanding.'" That Hawthorne's narrator should impute to Hester such a "new sense" suggests the extent to which the Puritans re-create Hester when they label her. She resembles the converts in "Young Goodman Brown," who, because of the "sympathy" of their "human hearts for sin," experience a new ability to perceive the evils of others. But unlike Goodman Brown, who, without accepting final conversion, is nevertheless "turned away" from Faith by the meeting in the forest, Hester avoids the gloom of her occasional understanding. "Be it accepted as a proof that all was not corrupt in this poor victim of her own frailty, and man's hard law, that Hester Prynne yet struggled to believe that no fellow mortal was guilty like
herself" (p. 87). Hester has been given the power to tell her accusers who they are, yet she denies this power.\(^5\)

Conversely, Dimmesdale, turning inward as a result of Hester's branding, "longed to speak out, from his own pulpit, at the full height of his voice, and tell the people who he was" (p. 143). His tendency, "more than once," is to discredit himself fully before his congregation, to say to them, "'I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!'" (p. 143). He thinks, like the Reverend Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil," that he cannot tell them what he is without telling them what they are; and his "vague confessions" simply extend the compassion and admiration he receives from his listeners. Therefore, the narrator writes, "above all things else, he loathed his miserable self" (p. 144).

The effect of keeping his secret hidden, of internalizing his own guilt, removes Dimmesdale from the tangible world. He keeps nightly vigils, during which "visions seemed to flit before him," and in spite of the fact that Dimmesdale knows they are not tangible, yet "they were, in one sense, the truest and most substantial things which the poor minister now dealt with" (p. 145). The effect of this hypocrisy, as the narrator terms it, is to deprive his reality of its substance. Because Dimmesdale contains within himself, or thinks he does, the power to ease his chronic discreditability by public confession, as he continually fails to do so, he creates a barrier between himself and reality.\(^3\) That reality has public and social dimensions that he cannot face; his only reality becomes a self-created one. "To the untrue man, the whole universe is false,—it is impalpable,—it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist. The only truth that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect" (pp. 145-46). In metaphysical terms, Dimmesdale tries to define his own scarlet letter, to create his own meaning, in effect to create his own world, and places even Hester at a distance; no other human being exists in the world Dimmesdale creates for himself, and thus there are no elements in it of compassion, objectivity, or absolution.\(^4\)

The inherent contradiction in his attempt results from the effects of internalizing a symbol that possesses only public and social significance. The scarlet letter only operates as a stigma when it may be seen. The letter on her breast, visible and public, focuses the effect of Hester's stigma; she does not define it, but rather, it defines her. This visual manifestation of her separateness has the effect of freeing Hester from her initial guilt. Thus, at the end of seven years, the governors of the town recommend her letter be removed, and she
herself feels liberated from it during her encounter with Dimmesdale in the forest—she casts it aside into the bushes.

Ironically, Dimmesdale's own discreditability, as time passes, becomes a permanent barrier between himself and the community. Discreditability contains within itself the seeds of self-perpetuation. It is clear that such is the case from the opening of the novel, for the townspeople attribute mystery as well as meaning to the scarlet letter—Hester wears a blatant token of her secret actions (her adultery) in part because she has been secretive (refusing to reveal the father of her child). Hester's punishment must be as manifest as possible because it then reduces the Puritans' awareness of mystery.

Assigning a label attaches significance to an action or a tendency in a character that has previously escaped naming or notice. For the Puritans, assigning the label of the scarlet letter suggests their necessity to be able to equate content with form, thereby controlling content. The name "adultery" becomes a container for those passions in Hester that led to her initial encounter with Dimmesdale. It becomes equally a form that contains, controls, those same passions in the Puritans themselves. Just as Hester lives peacefully with her stigma because it is visible, so the Puritans manage hidden and formless emotions by externalizing them in a sign. Assigning a label does more than control meaning, however; it also obscures it. The act of externalization reflects the Puritan refusal to recognize.\(^{35}\) Hester unconsciously exploits this refusal when she dresses Pearl—the child of her wildness—in the costume of her stigma, red cloth trimmed with gold thread.\(^{36}\) Thus the Puritan view of the human condition contains a central paradox, that signifying should obscure significance.

The scaffold itself, for Hester in the novel's opening scene, and for Dimmesdale later, symbolizes the revelation of mystery. Dimmesdale in particular associates the physical structure of the scaffold with the public recognition that will ease his "ugly" evenings of self-torture and substanceless visions. He thus climbs the scaffold on which Hester stood seven years previously because "there might be a moment's peace in it." His vigil there fails to bring him peace because "the town was all asleep. There was no peril of discovery" (p. 147).

It is not surprising that Dimmesdale might think such a vigil would ease his mind, given the substanceless state of the mental world he has constructed for himself. Thus, for a moment, it is as if he exposes the whole world, the whole of his world, to his secret:

And thus, while standing on the scaffold, in this vain show of expiation, Mr. Dimmesdale was overcome with a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right
over his heart. . . . Without any effort of his will, or power to restrain himself, he shrieked aloud: an outcry that went pealing through the night, and was beaten back from one house to another, and reverberated from the hills in the background. . . .

"It is done!" muttered the minister, covering his face with his hands.

"The whole world will awake, and hurry forth, and find me here!"

But it was not so. (p. 148)  

Dimmesdale continues to stand on the scaffold while another clergyman passes by. Again, for a moment, Dimmesdale feels himself discovered. He imagines himself remaining in his place at dawn, when the whole world would find him. Only Hester and Pearl appear, however, and join him on the scaffold at his request. When he takes Hester's hand, "there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart" (p. 153). Hester revitalizes Dimmesdale, she supports him momentarily, yet this support only confirms his isolation. "With the new energy of the moment, all the dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life, had returned to him" (p. 153). By cutting himself off from the possibility of publicly accepting his own complicity in Hester's crime, Dimmesdale fails to share the control the townspeople achieve by their insistence on revealed meaning. This control creates a social structure that supports the individuals within it.  

By transforming truth into "the veriest falsehood," Dimmesdale deprives himself of the moral and psychological support inherent in the Puritan system. "In no state of society would he have been what is called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within his iron framework" (p. 123). He does not discover the full force and extent of society's conventions until he has broken them, then set himself apart from that society by hiding his transgressions. In this way he finds himself without support, since the very attempt of his parishioners to give him aid in the form of a physician becomes the external force that contributes to his deterioration. Even Hester relies on this support. The narrator states when Hester emerges from her confinement that her "first unattended footsteps from the threshold of her prison" are possibly more torturous than the agony of public spectacle because "the very law that condemned her—a giant of stern features, but with vigor to support, as well as to annihilate, in his iron arm—had held her up, through the terrible ordeal of her ignominy" (p. 78). Only a strong individual can survive when the support is gone; and thus, although Hester falters in her first steps from the prison, she survives. Hester's
strength even in her excommunication derives partly from the community, for by remaining she serves a social function. She achieves an uncomfortable place in the social structure but a place nevertheless. The meaning of her mark is the social role she plays—that of the moral outcast.

Dimmesdale continues to derive his sustenance from Hester even at his death. In the last scaffold scene, he makes his public confession: "With a convulsive motion, he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation. For an instant the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle; while the minister stood with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory." But he cannot sustain, alone, his moment of triumph. "Then, down he sank upon the scaffold! Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom." She asks him, "'Shall we not meet again?'" His last words mock her question. He tells her, "'Hush,'" reminds her of "'the law we broke,'" and as he continues, his attention turns back again, finally, on himself: "'God knows; and He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost forever! Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!'" (pp. 255–57, my italics).

The allegorical tone of the revelation of the letter in the third scaffold scene pushes the reader towards a simplistic interpretation of Dimmesdale's "salvation" or "crucifixion." When Dimmesdale calls God's witness to his own sins and forgives his enemy (Chillingworth), he intensifies the crucifixion atmosphere of the scene, but his last words dispel it. And Hawthorne refuses, in his last chapter, to definitively comment on Dimmesdale's death. The appearance of allegory, on the contrary, adds to the complexities of Hawthorne's tale; it provides even more of a mask on the mystery by reinforcing that mask with the very elements of social structure his novel tries to penetrate; Dimmesdale publicly confesses his sin before a world that does not distinguish between law and religion, and Hawthorne does not clarify whether the crime the minister has committed is social or spiritual.

In the tales, the allegory often seems clearer. Perhaps this is because the alignment of narrative sympathies is not as complex as it becomes in The Scarlet Letter. As a type of the self-infested socially
diseased character, Roderick Elliston seems clearly a Dimmesdale figure. In "Egotism; Or, The Bosom Serpent," Hawthorne writes,

> All persons chronically diseased are egotists, whether the disease be of the mind or body; whether it be sin, sorrow, or merely the more tolerable calamity of some endless pain, or mischief among the cords of mortal life. Such individuals are made acutely conscious of a self, by the torture in which it dwells. Self, therefore, grows to be so prominent an object with them that they cannot but present it to the face of every casual passer-by. There is a pleasure—perhaps the greatest of which the sufferer is susceptible—in displaying the wasted or ulcerated limb, or the cancer in the breast; and the fouler the crime, with so much the more difficulty does the perpetrator prevent it from thrusting up its snake-like head to frighten the world; for it is that cancer, or that crime, which constitutes their respective individuality.

Elliston has a clearer knowledge of the path to his own salvation than Dimmesdale does. Whereas Dimmesdale associates religious confession with the tie that will heal his humanity, Elliston tells Herkimer, the friend, when he asks whether there exists a remedy for this "loathsome evil," "'Yes, but an impossible one. . . . Could I for one instant forget myself, the serpent might not abide within me. It is my diseased self-contemplation that has engendered and nourished him.'" Elliston's "salvation" comes from his wife Rosina, who in a moment of "hope and unselfish love," tells him to forget himself, and as he does so, the "bosom serpent" can be heard moving off through the grass. The ending of *The Scarlet Letter* contrasts decidedly with the ending of the tale, for although Dimmesdale succeeds momentarily in confessing his stigma, which had been the cure he prescribed for himself, he does so in such a way as to compromise the moment by claiming God's grace. Thus, he rejects the only real aid that could "save" him in this moment—if we read it in the light of "Egotism"—to respond to Hester's implicit plea for Dimmesdale to forget himself.

The end of the novel leaves uncertain more than Dimmesdale’s salvation. The nature of his crime and the extent of his own complicity in it also remain ambiguous. To understand this uncertain ambiguity, we may again examine Hawthorne's introductory essay to *The Scarlet Letter*. In "The Custom-House," the narrator is expelled from his job as Surveyor of the Customs as a matter of political reform. His description of this reform is curious in light of Dimmesdale's attempt to turn the scaffold—the structure of public punishment—into a cross. He talks about the "political guillotine"—also a structure of punishment—that has "decapi-
tated" the Surveyor in him. Whatever basis there may be for the narrator's "unceremonious ejectment" (and he suggests that he may have been lax in performing his duties, preferring to roam among mankind rather than confine himself to political activity), he implies also that any breach of political faith would have been construed with theological severity. Thus political activities become "narrow paths" from which he chooses to diverge, and by his expulsion, he earns "the crown of martyrdom." In addition, as I mentioned earlier, the narrator describes his release as the good fortune "of a person who should entertain an idea of committing suicide, and, altogether beyond his hopes, meet with the good hap to be murdered" (p. 42); Dimmesdale shares the psychological lassitude characteristic of the narrator and finds himself fortunate enough to die after he has made his public confession. The narrator of "The Custom-House" is not altogether displeased "to observe the blood thirstiness that is developed in the hour of triumph" by his political enemies; and he observes, "The moment when a man's head drops off is seldom or never, I am inclined to think, precisely the most agreeable of his life. Nevertheless, like the greater part of our misfortunes, even so serious a contingency brings its remedy and consolation with it" (p. 41).

The narrator has been released from his own inability to write amid the sensual and material atmosphere of the Custom House. He comes to blame as well the political structure of which he is a part for the torpor of his own imagination.

An effect—which I believe to be observable, more or less, in every individual who has occupied the position—is, that, while he leans on the mighty arm of the Republic, his own proper strength departs from him. He loses, in an extent proportioned to the weakness or force of his original nature, the capability of self-support. . . . The ejected officer . . . may return to himself, and become all that he has ever been. But this seldom happens. . . . Conscious of his own infirmity . . . he forever afterwards looks wistfully about him in quest of support external to himself. (pp. 38–39)

Dimmesdale's need for the support of social and theological structure, and his inability to remove himself from it in order to test his own renewal, earn the sympathies of the ejected Surveyor/narrator, whose subsequent exploration of the meaning in the scarlet letter is tinged with his own experience. The death of Dimmesdale becomes a martyrdom; and Hawthorne chooses the allegory of romance, a mode that ironically obscures more than it reveals.43

The Scarlet Letter, seen from the perspective of the narrator's concerns in "The Custom-House," thus becomes a consideration of the relationship between the individual and his sociopolitical and
sociotheological roles. The individual who possesses a freely ranging imagination that does not adhere to the “narrow paths” of political and theological vision may find himself ejected, like the Surveyor. Dimmesdale’s weakness merits the sympathy of the narrator because of its universality but also because Dimmesdale’s inability to accept his sensibility and his materiality resembles the narrator’s own. For the narrator seeks, in the atmosphere of the Custom House, a change of diet from Emersonian spirituality; he finds it, momentarily, in the sensation the scarlet letter produces when he marks himself by placing the letter on his own breast; and he returns to it, in imagination, during his meditations on the letter.

His inability to revive it again, by purely metaphysical speculation, leads him to sympathize with Hester’s intellectual coldness. Hester’s life turns “in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought” when she is marked out from the rest of her society. But “the world’s law was no law for her mind,” and thus she contemplates an abstract and individual revolution:

Men of the sword had overthrown nobles and kings. Men bolder than these 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 it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.

It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. (p. 164)

How do we understand a passage like this after reading "The Custom-House"? That the narrator wants to believe that the sphere of theory is the “real” world? That freedom of speculation incites more serious revolutions than "the flesh and blood of action"? Hawthorne’s treatment of Dimmesdale, if these are simply rhetorical questions, may be read as a justification of his own methods. He permits the "thought" to suffice, without releasing the "flesh and blood" that, from time to time in The Scarlet Letter, suggests its presence just beneath the surface. Hawthorne thus controls the passions inherent in his subject and leads Henry James to remark: "Puritanism, in a word, is there, not only objectively as Hawthorne tried to place it there, but subjectively as well. Not, I mean, in his judgment of his characters in any harshness of prejudice, or in the obtrusion of a moral lesson; but in the very quality of his own vision, in the tone of the picture, in a certain coldness and exclusiveness of treatment."
The Scarlet Letter

I

The manipulation of content in Hawthorne's recurrent meditations on the form of the scarlet letter is most evident and most problematic in the narrator's treatment of Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth is, as many critics have pointed out, a type of the artist figure in Hawthorne's studies of the artist in isolation. But Chillingworth has failed as an artist; his very creation negates the life he attempts to portray. Like Aylmer in "The Birthmark," Rappaccini in "Rappaccini's Daughter," Ethan Brand, and Owen Warland in "The Artist of the Beautiful," Chillingworth commits the unpardonable sin of the artist who denies or destroys life by transforming it into art.

During Chillingworth's first interview with Hester, the narrator describes him as a person with special visual powers.

"Believe me, Hester, there are few things,—whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought,—few things hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unre­servedly to the solution of a mystery. Thou mayest cover up thy secret from the prying multitude. Thou mayest conceal it, too, from the ministers and magistrates, even as thou didst this day, when they sought to wrench the name out of thy heart, and give thee a partner on thy pedestal. But, as for me, I come to the inquest with other senses than they possess. I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy. . . . Sooner or later, he must needs be mine!" (p. 75)

Like the stigmatized Hester, Chillingworth possesses "other senses" than those of ordinary human perception. He can discern the nonmanifest invisible thoughts and secrets of men. Whereas Hester shuns this sense, however, Chillingworth cultivates it, and in the forest meeting between Hester and Dimmesdale at the end of the novel, Dimmesdale points the moral of Chillingworth's story: "That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart" (p. 195). By the alignment of the narrator's sympathies with Hester and Dimmesdale in this scene, Dimmesdale's judgment becomes the reader's as well. The curious and problematic aspect of this sympathy, however, is that the chapters that focus on Chillingworth before he assumes the role of daemonic agent in Dimmesdale's suffering treat him with some compassion. He is described, in effect, as a counterpart of the narrator himself.

The ability to discern the nonmanifest, to determine the meanings hidden in visible signs, is the province of the good artist as well as the evil one, and such curiosity initially motivated the narrator's attraction to the "rag of scarlet cloth." When the reader meets Chil-
lingworth for the second time (in chapter nine, "The Leech") it is clear that the narrator himself has suspended his judgment of the physician. Both good and evil tendencies are inherent in the narrator’s description. "His first entry on the scene, few people could tell whence, dropping down, as it were, out of the sky, or starting from the nether earth, had an aspect of mystery, which was easily heightened to the miraculous. He was now known to be a man of skill; it was observed that he gathered herbs, . . . like one acquainted with hidden virtues in what was valueless to common eyes” (p. 21). The source of his arrival, whether from the sky or "the nether earth," becomes a subject of mystery for the townspeople. Nevertheless, again, Chillingworth possesses special vision, and what he finds in his probing, which (the narrator elsewhere describes) Chillingworth accompanies with "a cautious touch, like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern” (p. 124), are the "hidden virtues in what was valueless to common eyes.”

In addition, as part of his artist’s power, Chillingworth possesses a clear vision of relationship between the manifest and the non-manifest. During one discussion with Dimmesdale, late in their acquaintance, Chillingworth describes some weeds he once found growing on the grave of a dead man. "They grew out of his heart, and typify, it may be, some hideous secret that was buried with him, and which he had done better to confess during his lifetime. . . . These black weeds have sprung up out of a buried heart, to make manifest an unspoken crime” (p. 131). Here Chillingworth resembles the narrator of the Twice-Told Tales or Mosses in drawing his moral. The narrator of The Scarlet Letter also resembles Chillingworth, in his own exploration of the relationship between manifest and nonmanifest forms, between the complementary public and private effects of stigma on Hester and Dimmesdale.

The relationship that develops between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth provides the artist-physician with his eventual opportunities for discerning the invisible—at the minister’s expense. However, in its initial stages the friendship grows out of mutual respect and attraction. The narrator states, "This learned stranger was exemplary, as regarded at least the outward forms of a religious life, and, early after his arrival, had chosen for his spiritual guide the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale” (p. 120). In spite of the narrator’s comment on the "outward forms," which qualifies the sincerity of Chillingworth’s spiritual life, the passage does not indicate that Chillingworth, on his arrival, conceals evil intentions in his attraction for Dimmesdale. The narrator describes the relationship that develops between them as symbiotic—"these two men, so different in age, came gradually to spend much time together” (p. 123).
In spite of Dimmesdale's lack of what the narrator calls "liberal views," he enjoys Chillingworth's presence; they mutually attract each other. The passage that describes Dimmesdale's fascination is complex and intriguing from a critical point of view. After the narrator suggests that Dimmesdale needs the "iron framework" of theology to insure his peace of mind, he adds:

Not the less, however, though with a tremulous enjoyment, did he feel the occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect than those with which he habitually held converse. It was as if a window were thrown open, admitting a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study, where his life was wasting itself away, amid lamplight, or obstructed day-beams, and the musty fragrance, be it sensual or moral, that exhales from books. But the air was too fresh and chill to be long breathed, with comfort. So the minister, and the physician with him, withdrew again within the limits of what their church defined as orthodox. (pp. 123–24)

The language of this unusual passage, "tremulous" and "freer atmosphere," suggests that Dimmesdale finds a potential liberation from his guilt in the "occasional relief" of his attachment to Chillingworth. It is not necessary to use twentieth-century language to describe this freedom; Hawthorne's own phrase, "the flesh and blood of action," accurately describes the sensibility Dimmesdale briefly encounters. Chillingworth and Dimmesdale approach an intimacy in their frankness that threatens the minister; for Dimmesdale, the air is "too fresh and chill," possibly because it is removed from his accustomed confines, and he forces the withdrawal (in the narrator's own language) into the "orthodox."

Hawthorne does not make the nature of this intimacy explicit, although the "withdrawal" of the friendship into conventional bounds is accompanied by Dimmesdale's and Chillingworth's joint move into a pious widow's house, the walls of which are decorated with a tapestry representing "the Scriptural story of David and Bathsheba, and Nathan the Prophet, in colors still unfaded, but which made the fair woman of the scene almost as grimly picturesque as the woe-denouncing seer" (p. 126). The Biblical story of David and Bathsheba is one of adultery; Nathan the prophet chastises David while he is king concerning his conduct in sending Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, off to the wars to be killed so that his adultery will not provoke God's wrath. Thus the tapestry is an emblem of the human situation in The Scarlet Letter. Implicit in Hawthorne's presentation of this detail, however, the only one of its kind in The Scarlet Letter, is also David's earlier history, his homosexual relationship with Jonathan. Dimmesdale's attraction for Chillingworth, if not homosexual in origin, at least contains the
seeds of a human intimacy that frightens him. Thus Chillingworth's initial admiration for Dimmesdale, when forced back within what the church defines as orthodox, becomes twisted, and he assumes the role, not of Jonathan, but of the "woe-denouncing seer."

After *The Scarlet Letter* passes its concluding scaffold scene, Hawthorne's narrator once again takes up the subject of this relationship between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. The narrator condemns Chillingworth's actions, saying that "This unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge; and when, by its completest triumph and consummation, that evil principle was left with no further material to support it,—when, in short, there was no more devil's work on earth for him to do, it only remained for the unhumanized mortal to betake himself whither his Master would find him tasks enough, and pay him his wages duly" (p. 260). After making this point, however, the narrator recommends mercy in the reader's judgment of Chillingworth:

It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry, whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom. Each, in its utmost development, supposes a high degree of intimacy and heart-knowledge; each renders one individual dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another; each leaves the passionate lover, or the no less passionate hater, forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his object. Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions seem essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and lurid glow. In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love. (pp. 260–61, my italics)

Once again the narrator uses the metaphor of sustenance, as in his earlier use of "flesh and blood," to describe the symbiosis of love and the parasitic thwarting of hatred.

F. O. Matthiessen's discussion of Chillingworth is particularly relevant in this context. He writes, referring to the chapter "The Leech and His Patient," "The irony of the title lies in the fact that though the old physician knows Dimmesdale's bodily weakness to be due to a deeper sickness of the spirit, and though he is determined to discover its cause, he is actuated not by the hope that he may suggest a cure, but that he may suck out his patient's very vitality."47 In the portrait of Chillingworth, the reader discovers that revenge may turn into a perverse but life-sustaining force for the avenger. The connotations of "blood-thirsty" become transformed into those of "blood thirst," thirst for the "flesh and blood of action," of experience—similar to the need for a "change of diet" that led
Hawthorne's narrator to serve as Surveyor, similar to the lack of materiality in Dimmesdale's life that led him into his intimacy with Chillingworth, similar to the adultery that serves as a prelude to the romance and leads to the townspeople's perverse exclusion of Hester Prynne.

In this connection, it is enlightening to compare Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. For like Chillingworth, Dimmesdale also depends for his own sustenance on another human being—Hester. And during at least two crucial moments in his life, he receives the strength he needs—the first during the midnight scaffold scene that I have already discussed; and the second during his encounter with Hester in the forest, after which he returns to town a new man, filled with renewal of energy that enables him to write, in a burst of inspiration, an Election Day sermon that turns out, ironically, to have as its subject "the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind" (p. 249). Unlike Chillingworth, however, Dimmesdale is not condemned by the narrator; if anything, the narrator excuses his "Remorse" and "Cowardice" (p. 148) because they are human failings. Chillingworth's morbid curiosity alone ranks with the devil.

The objective evidence for excusing Dimmesdale and condemning Chillingworth is not conclusive. This confuses the reader. In addition to the blood thirst that both share, the narrator indicates that, during one interview at least, Chillingworth specifically offers Dimmesdale a cure for his spiritual illness that is not a leech cure—the public confession. "With somewhat more emphasis than usual," suggesting that for once, at least, Chillingworth speaks earnestly and truthfully, he tells the minister that men who hide their guilt "fear to take up the shame that rightfully belongs to them. . . . Trust me, such men deceive themselves!" (p. 133). He points out that Hester's public acceptance of her shame has made her sufferings less intense than Dimmesdale's burden of the "mystery of hidden sinfulness" (p. 135). Dimmesdale refuses to continue this discussion with the physician and leaves the room "with a frantic gesture" (p. 137).

With all of the objective indications, then, that Chillingworth is not, at least at the inception of his crime, himself the pure embodiment of evil; and with the equally objective evidence that Dimmesdale shares the burden of guilt in his own deterioration, the question thus becomes more insistent—how does Chillingworth become transformed into the devil the narrator states he is (p. 170), and why, since the evidence for this remains inconclusive?

The technical answer to the first part of the question, How, is relatively straightforward. The narrator describes Chillingworth,
from his first appearance in the novel, as a deformed individual, physically marked, just as Hester Prynne is marked, to immediate visual perception. Chillingworth’s features are those “of a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens.” He also has a deformed back (p. 59). In addition, he is a man of mystery, and his “darkness,” physically as well as biographically, becomes Hawthorne’s tool. When it becomes clear that a man has not been sent by God, the Puritan instinctively concludes his link with Satan. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the complexities of Chillingworth’s relationship with Dimmesdale do not become part of the public domain; only the narrator explores them. Thus, the Puritanic progression of the final judgment of Chillingworth suggests the narrator’s intervention, the narrator’s own shifting of sympathies.

Why these sympathies shift is apparent, I think, in the scene in which Chillingworth reveals his own demonism. There are two significant evasions of revelation in the novel. The first, withholding Dimmesdale’s association with Hester, as I have discussed, provides the scaffolding on which the narrator builds his symmetric study of marked and unmarked individuals. The second evasion, withholding knowledge of what Chillingworth finds on Dimmesdale’s breast, is more difficult to justify.

The narrator prepares the scene for revelation by permitting the reader a privileged view of Chillingworth. He describes the physician’s manner, in which he hypocritically hides his “mysterious and puzzled smile” from the minister:

This expression was invisible in Mr. Dimmesdale’s presence, but grew strongly evident as the physician crossed the threshold.

"A rare case!" he muttered. "I must needs look deeper into it. A strange sympathy betwixt soul and body! Were it only for the art’s sake, I must search this matter to the bottom!" (pp. 137–38)

The passage suggests that the narrator, as well, is about to manifest something to the reader, “were it only for the art’s sake.” As Chillingworth approaches Dimmesdale, however, the reader’s view is forced back. We continue to see Chillingworth, but not what Chillingworth himself sees. Chillingworth at this moment becomes the only intimate witness to the ghastly elements in Dimmesdale’s soul.

It is certainly true that the narrator eventually gives the reader a good indication, although he does not ultimately commit himself, that what Chillingworth finds is a letter “A” etched on Dimmesdale’s breast. By that time, however, Dimmesdale has pointed to Chillingworth as the emblem of evil, and the narrative power of this moment of Chillingworth’s revelation has been superseded by the
third scaffold scene. Clearly, then, Hawthorne's narrator is not, in the private moment with Chillingworth, interested in Dimmesdale. He has allowed the physician to approach the minister out of his initial artistic curiosity, but at the moment of revelation, withdraws. Instead he focuses on Chillingworth's expression—and on the artist's narrow escape. The narrator writes,

After a brief pause, the physician turned away.
But with what a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror! With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by the eye and features, and therefore bursting forth through the whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms towards the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor! Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom.
But what distinguished the physician's ecstasy from Satan's was the trait of wonder in it! (p. 138)

The scene suggests an explanation for Hawthorne's choice of his own mode and genre—allegory and romance. In "The Custom-House," his narrator had written, "A better book than I shall ever write was there; leaf after leaf presenting itself to me, just as it was written out by the reality of the flitting hour, and vanishing as fast as written, only because my brain wanted the insight and my hand the cunning to transcribe it" (p. 37). But "these perceptions have come too late," and the transcription of "the reality of the flitting hour" is not the narrator's métier. Instead, he withdraws from the materiality and sensuality of life at the Custom House, and is timely ejected—not into a more realistic world, but into a world of romance (just as the reader is abruptly "ejected" into the tale that follows). And in The Scarlet Letter, the narrator's narrow escape asserts the ascendancy of romance over materialism. In this moment he refuses, avoiding the unpardonable sin of the tales, to explore Dimmesdale's most intimate secrets, focusing instead on the dangers of the chasm, which may lead the unsuspecting artist into the devil's kingdom.

In the short sketch "Monsieur du Miroir," Hawthorne considers this chasm as the "impenetrable mystery" that separates the narrator from his own reflection. He writes of the man in the mirror, "the chief that I complain of is his impenetrable mystery, which is no better than nonsense if it conceal anything good, and much worse in the contrary case." F. O. Matthiessen reflects, "What moved him in 'Monsieur du Miroir' was the related contrast between superficial appearance and hidden truth, between the pale features of the man reflected in the mirror and the tormented life that was locked
up in his heart." The narrator refutes the efficacy of exploring the reflection, of probing behind what he calls the man's "delusive garment of visibility." Yet he does explore it, for the space of the sketch, and the fictional situation depicts a moment of potential self-exploration and self-revelation. "Monsieur du Miroir" suggests that a similar self-exploration process takes place in The Scarlet Letter, that like the man in the mirror, Chillingworth also becomes the narrator's reflection, and when the revelation becomes too painfully intimate, he withdraws his sympathies from Chillingworth, who becomes the figure the casual reader remembers—the man who cries, at Dimmesdale's death, "'Thou has escaped me!'"

Thus, "incited . . . by the propensities of a student of human nature" to explore the hidden meanings behind the scarlet letter, the narrator of Hawthorne's romance ends also by looking in a mirror. He stated in the sketch, "So inimitably does he counterfeit that I could almost doubt which of us is the visionary form, or whether each be not the other's mystery, and both twin brethren of one fate in mutually reflected spheres." The mirror analogue appropriately describes, not the relationship between the rag of scarlet cloth accompanied by the sheets of foolscap the narrator finds and the tale he then proceeds to construct, but rather a relationship between the narrator of "The Custom-House" and the narrator of The Scarlet Letter. If Chillingworth is a type of the artist, the artist certainly resembles Chillingworth as well. As "The Custom-House" shows, both are motivated by blood thirst, although Hawthorne's reflection on this, in the romance, leads him to withdraw his narrative curiosity just on the verge of material revelation. In The Scarlet Letter, the narrator chooses allegory, unlike his demonic counterpart within the narrative, who would lay bare Dimmesdale's soul if he could. In support of his own withdrawal, he states: "'There can be, if I forebode aright, no power, short of the Divine mercy, to disclose, whether by uttered words, or by type or emblem, the secrets that may be buried with a human heart. The heart, making itself guilty of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed'" (p. 131). In spite of his concern for social roles in the novel, he is not interested in disclosing the secrets in Dimmesdale's heart—or his own. He does not have that much "blood thirst." Hawthorne's very choice of allegory characterizes his subject as ultimately introspective—directed toward protecting the individual from the community.

In his choice of mode, however, he reveals a great deal about himself. As Baskett has suggested, from the moment when Hawthorne places the scarlet letter on his breast he becomes "the figure
of the Alienated Artist." However, although it is true that many of Hawthorne's artists, not simply the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*, are isolated from society, and although A. N. Kaul is probably correct when he writes that Hawthorne "saw in art itself the true answer to this dilemma" because "art could be a form of communion without conformity," what *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates is that Hawthorne is more interested in isolation than in communion, if by communion Kaul means mutual revelation and confession among the members of a community. Hawthorne focuses on the letter as a means of attaining self-knowledge; he chooses allegory rather than the "flesh and blood of action." As Fogle writes, "Allegory gives point and reference and therefore is in itself a guarantee of purpose; it affords a principle to which the action of narrative may be referred and around which the action may be organized." In these terms, Hawthorne's own use of allegory becomes analogous to the Puritan practice of meditation and the physics of social exclusion. All three require recurrent focus on the mark in order to achieve transcendent knowledge. Yet allegory allows Hawthorne to achieve an artistic resolution of social and metaphysical problems and still keep his distance from the material world.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, then, Hawthorne integrates the use of marking as social, artistic, and metaphysical method for both the artist/outcast and his excluding community. The difference between viewing the novel as a study of marking and viewing it more traditionally as a study of isolation from society is to see Hawthorne's art not simply as historical romance and certainly not as naturalistic reflection of the world (that would require "flesh and blood") but rather as an epistemological process in and of itself. It is also to seize upon this epistemology as one component of "American" literature. Hawthorne links but does not equate his search for the significance in a symbol with the Puritan quest for revelation of guilt and exclusion of the stigmatized offender. In so doing, he uncovers the close relationship between social stigma and art for the Puritan community. Harry Henderson alludes to this process in *Versions of the Past*: "What is at first taken by the community as a sort of algebraic sign for a quality of the personality . . . is transformed almost immediately by the author from the allegorical to the symbolic level. To an imagination dominated by literal readings of natural and social phenomena, nothing could be more subversive than symbolism." If Hester manages her own version of American revolution while living within the confines of her stigma, Hawthorne establishes a working definition of American identity while withdrawing behind the protective walls of his allegory. It is part of the
American temper, he seems to be saying, to learn about the world by marking it, then establishing it as American by excluding what is marked.

The difference between the community's use of stigma to strengthen its social identity and the artist's use of the mark as a focus for symbolistic inquiry is clear: the Salem witch trials, the lynching of Negroes in the South, and the struggle of minorities of all kinds for two centuries are emblematic of the deep metaphysical insecurity we have inherited from the Puritans. In the struggle for identity, both in the sense of who we are and how much we are alike, American communities have not tolerated deviance. What is destructive to our country, however, has created viable ground in which our literature has flourished. By the same method, the American fiction writer has focused often on stigma, as if this were the aberrant and abortive result of American attempt at community.

As Hawthorne indicates, markedness is an indicator of an individual's visibility and thus his potential isolation from community; it is also, as I will show in subsequent chapters, one technique American writers following Hawthorne continue to use in their progressively complex studies of the changing American identity. Hawthorne's concern with social stigma explores the Puritan's attempt to make the nonmanifest manifest. Following Hawthorne, Melville examines the correspondence between the physical world and the metaphysical one. Faulkner's analogous concern returns to the social realm of public and private experience and in Ellison, the parameters of correspondence are social visibility and invisibility. For each of these writers, however, what is at stake is what it means to be American. As Charles Feidelson writes, "The symbolistic outlook involves much more than the stylistic device which is ordinarily called 'symbolism'; the physics of symbolistic literature depends on its metaphysics . . . the theory of symbolism is really a theory of knowledge." I would only add to this, following my study of The Scarlet Letter, that a study of American symbolistic literature involves a study of stigma. As I will attempt to show in my analysis of Moby-Dick, Melville, though he is not explicitly concerned with American sociology, has seized upon marking as the epistemology particularly suited to Ishmael, the American orphan, in his search for who he is.

Notes

1. Austin Warren, in his introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Representative Selections (New York: American Book Co., 1934), stated that "The Custom-House" is

Charles Feidelson, in Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), states that "every character, in effect, reenacts the 'Custom House' scene in which Hawthorne himself contemplated the letter, so that the entire 'romance' becomes a kind of exposition of the nature of symbolic perception" (p. 10).

Copyright 1953 by the University of Chicago. All rights reserved. All excerpts from this work are reprinted by permission. And Sam Baskett, in "The (Complete) Scarlet Letter," College English, 3 (February 1961), writes: "For Hawthorne himself in a sense is the major character in the romance as well as in the sketch; and in both parts of the book the theme is the same: the relation of the individual to whatever the society, irrespective of its nature, in which he finds himself" (p. 325).


3. In noting that Hawthorne "in point of fact came upon his subject quite otherwise," Charles Feidelson does not distinguish between the author of the essay and its narrator (Symbolism and American Literature, p. 9).


5. Works, 1:53.

6. Ibid., p. 69.

7. Harry Henderson, in an excellent chapter on Hawthorne in Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), writes of "The Minister's Black Veil" that it is "at least in part a commentary on the final cul-de-sac of Puritan introspection and exclusiveness" (p. 101). Among the many commentators on Hawthorne, I find Henderson one of the most useful. As my own discussion of Hester and Dimmesdale that follows later in this essay will suggest, Hawthorne perceived the relationship between theological cast of mind and social behavior that characterized the Puritan community. Henderson seems to be implying here that the black veil, like the scarlet letter, is a literal manifestation of the spiritual stigmata the Puritan searched for during introspective meditation. My own discussion of The Scarlet Letter develops this idea more fully.

8. More is at stake in the romance and its accompanying essay than either a discussion of solitude and society or the relationship between fiction and history, themes that Hawthorne develops again in The House of the Seven Gables. And in spite of the Brook Farm model for The Blithedale Romance and the discussions early in that novel of the transcendentalism that guides Zenobia in forming the colony, this third of what Henry James termed Hawthorne's "American novels" deals with the failure of an idea, not the creation of a symbol. In Seven Gables, the artist figures, Clifford and the daguerreotypist Holgrave, bear little relationship to the narrator; the subject is art, not the process of creating it, except as daguerreotype becomes a symbol of aesthetic process. And in Blithedale, although Miles Coverdale certainly suffers the burden of isolation imposed on him by Zenobia, Priscilla, and Hollingsworth, he ends by blaming his preoccupation with the romance on his "love" for Priscilla rather than viewing it as a comment on the isolation of the artist.

9. F. O. Matthiessen comments on "the continual correspondences that [Hawthorne's] theme allowed him to make between external events and inner significances." The "external events" I am most concerned with in this study involve the social behavior of the Puritan community. In an interesting choice of phrase, Matthiessen calls these "continual correspondences" Hawthorne's "transcendental habit" (American Renaissance [London: Oxford University Press, 1941], p. 275).

10. That indolence is also a form of historical ignorance is Henderson's theme in Versions of the Past: "The man and the nation lacking a meaningful understanding of
their past are like the old Inspector . . ., who recalled only certain gourmandizing exploits 'while all the subsequent experience of our race, and all the events that brightened or darkened his individual career, had gone over him with as little per­
manent effect as the passing breeze'" (p. 95).


12. Charles Feidelson describes what he calls "the central theme of the sketch . . . the theme implicit in the vignette of Hawthorne poring over the scarlet letter . . . That self-portrait . . . amounts to a dramatic definition of the following 'romance' and of the author's relation to it. The author's donnée, as James would call it, is neither Imagination nor Actuality per se but a symbol whose inherent meaning is The Scarlet Letter" (p. 9).


15. See Kaul for a general discussion of the complexities of Hawthorne's historical view.


17. John E. Becker comments on the novel's first chapter, prefacing the scene in which Hester appears before the crowd, in a way that is relevant to my argument in this study: "The first chapter acts as the prelude to a meditation, it is a 'composition of place.' It is vividly pictorial and yet completely static. It does not start the action; it starts a process of reflection and prepares us for many moments ahead when we will be forced to suspend our interest in the story, focus our attention on a symbol or symbolic tableau, and meditate" (Hawthorne's Historical Allegory: An Examination of the American Conscience [Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971], p. 90). What I have described as Hawthorne's aesthetic distance does remove the reader from direct unmediated perception of the novel's drama. The "process of reflection" that Becker describes accurately depicts the way in which the mark provides the reader with a focus for "meditation." We may view each separate interpretation or perspective on the letter as yet another opportunity for the reader to "focus our attention . . . and meditate" on the letter's meaning.

18. The tendency of critics in the past has been to interpret a single stance as Hawthorne's own; and thus, interpretations of the novel are various and widely divergent. The spirit of mystery that intrigues Hawthorne in "The Custom-House," and the range of perspectives his narrator provides the reader in the opening two chapters, indicate a deliberate inconsistency. See Charles Child Walcott, "The Scarlet Letter and Its Modern Critics," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Scarlet Letter, ed. John C. Gerber (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968) for a survey of critical positions on the novel. Hyatt H. Waggoner, in Hawthorne: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), states further, "What seems to me to need doing at this point in the development of Hawthorne criticism is to show why the work is more enigmatic than Hawthorne's other finished romances, even though there is a sense in which one would think it ought to be clearer. It ought to be clearer because it has less action and more exposition devoted to analysis of meaning. Ex­
pository writing is a way of 'telling,' narration a way of 'showing.' If symbolism is always more ambiguous than allegory and art contains a functional ambiguity that would be a defect in logical statement, why is this novel, which leans so heavily on statement, so ambiguous?" (pp. 126-27). Waggoner tries to answer his own question by showing that "Hawthorne . . . is letting his images do most of the work for him" (p. 127), but it seems to me that Waggoner's question is more interesting than his attempt to answer it. The novel is ambiguous, and ambiguity is part of Hawthorne's subject. As Feidelson writes, "Hawthorne's subject is not only the meaning of adul­
tery but also meaning in general; not only what the focal symbol means but also how it gains significance" (p. 10). And in the opening scene, the letter gains significance as an object that requires interpretation.

The Scarlet Letter

20. Ibid., p. 50.
21. Ibid., p. 69.
22. Ibid., p. 61.

23. Harry Henderson views Hawthorne as a “holist” within his own understanding of what that word means. A holistic view of culture, as Henderson defines it, creates “an illusion of a whole civilization or culture, in which each institution or characteristic of society might be seen as integral to the total culture” (p. 18). Furthermore, “For the holist, it is manners and mores which are significant. . . . The holist sees society as a seamless web of relationships” (p. 36). Therefore Hester’s stigma is integral to the Boston community, “in which all surface manifestations of behavior carry social significance” (p. 115). For the townspeople, Hester is not a symbol; she is rather the embodiment of their own sin. The effect of their perspective forces the interconnection between private and public worlds. Henderson states later, “The distinction between the inner and outer spheres of human existence is such a pivotal intuition of Hawthorne’s writing that it is difficult to overestimate its impact on the holist frame, in which the interlocking surfaces are ‘society.’ A character’s position within or outside this matrix dictates the content and pattern of his thought” (p. 116). By assigning Hester her particular stigma, the magistrates are attempting to establish not only Hester’s position within the community but also the “content or pattern” of her thought. By interpreting her stigma, the townspeople are trying to understand their own position as well. They are part of the same “matrix.” Thus Henderson views the opening scene as “as dramatic a ‘private’ and ‘public’ concern as one can imagine” (p. 115).

Two additional comments from other critics shed light on this point. Baskett writes, “The scarlet letter itself is a vivid emblem of the Puritan belief that no individual action occurs outside the purview of the theocratic society” (p. 323). To say this is to concur implicitly with Henderson, because the townspeople’s attempts at interpretation establish their ‘purview’ of Hester’s action. Becker, in Hawthorne’s Historical Allegory, goes so far as to describe Hester’s punishment as “an allegorical celebration of the Puritan way of life. In public punishment, the culprit is the representative of forces which are undermining society. The people assemble into a hierarchically structured group in order to accomplish a ritual destruction of the criminal force. This may be done by the destruction of the criminal or, less radically, by so torturing the criminal that, symbolically at least, the crime is considered removed both from his heart and the hearts of the gathered assembly” (p. 95). Becker is commenting on the scapegoat ritual here. For the Puritans, however, at least for the townspeople in the opening scene, Hester’s stigma is not a symbolic punishment. The Puritans are not ritualistically self-conscious, as Becker implies. Hester’s crime, her punishment, and the resulting expulsion of evil from their midst are all real.

24. Many critics have discussed the significance of this quotation. Among them Becker states, “In contrast to society in any other place or at any other time, Puritan society cannot distinguish between offenses against society and offenses against God. Within such a world, the individual conscience, the ‘heart,’ has no distinct place” (p. 91). Henderson writes, “One of Hawthorne’s most telling criticisms of New England Puritanism is conveyed by his portrayal of it as a civilization which believed that its obsession with forms and appearances brought it closer to ‘pure’ religion” (p. 115). Joseph Schwartz, in “Three Aspects of Hawthorne’s Puritanism,” New England Quarterly, 36 (June 1963), comments, “From Hawthorne’s point of view the Puritan way of life, their denial of civil liberty for others, and their theology combined to give an unfavorable aspect to the national character. It created a social system, based upon an identification of law and religion, that trammeled itself as it did the people who lived under it” (p. 207). When the religious practice of such a community involves searching for stigmata as part of meditation, it is not surprising that Hester’s legal punishment should resemble a social religion. However, as Henderson writes, “To the nineteenth- or twentieth-century mind the concept of a civilization attempting to realize transcendental ideals by reinforcing the formal matrix of society is highly ironical” (pp. 115–16).

25. As Marius Bewley writes, “In the last analysis, Hawthorne is not interested in Hester’s private drama. She exists magnificently in the art as the focus of tangled moral forces, but she is herself as much of a symbol as the scarlet letter which she wears on her breast” (“Psychology and the Moral Imagination,” in Gerber, p. 39). And as Becker comments on the additional burden Hawthorne gives Hester: “We see both the allegorical Hester created by the Puritans and Hawthorne’s Hester, more real,
more mimetic, yet still a character in an allegory. . . . But her very resistance to the
Puritan allegory will make her an allegorical figure within Hawthorne's allegory.
The scar of the Puritan punishment marks Hester for life; her resistance twists her
into a figure of resistance" (p. 98).

26. "The story, indeed, is in a secondary degree that of Hester Prynne; she be­
comes, really, after the first scene, an accessory figure; it is not upon her the denou­
ement depends. . . . The story goes on, for the most part, between the lover and the


28. Ibid., p. 4.

29. As Quentin Anderson expresses it, "Hester's punishment is to Dimmesdale's
suffering as public infancy is to private shame" (The Imperial Self: An Essay in

30. Goffman, p. 5.


32. As Anderson expresses it, "Hester herself is made to perceive a sense of guilty
participation in the faces of some of those she encounters, as if she were the embodi­
ment of acts and impulses they do not confess" (p. 69).

33. For another discussion of Dimmesdale's need for confession, see George E.
Woodberry, "The Dark Side of the Truth," in Gross, where he states: "Absolution, so
far as it is hinted at, lies in the direction of public confession, the efficacy of which is
directly stated, but lamely nevertheless; it restores truth, but it does not heal the
past" (pp. 16-17).

34. As Anderson comments, "the response of Dimmesdale to his sense of trans­
gression is to attack his own body; the response of the townspeople is to attack
the separated member, the bearer of the stigma, the extruded evil" (p. 69). Anderson
implies here that Dimmesdale's self-flagellation is analogous to the Puritan stig­
mazation. In effect, Hawthorne is demonstrating in Dimmesdale the pervasiveness
of Puritan theology within the individual conscience. Just as the Boston community's
attempt to exclude marked individuals is analogous to the Puritan mediation, con­
versely Dimmesdale himself may be viewed as the single embodiment of Puritan
community. He is, to anticipate Melville, "the world in a man-of-war."

35. Hawthorne's portrait of the Puritan inability to tolerate mystery that has not
been made manifest suggests a cultural cast of mind. In a related observation con­
cerning Bellingham and Wilson in the novel, Henderson writes: "Though they are
history-makers and role-enforcers, they have no insight into the inner life. For
Hawthorne, the separation of 'heart and head' was not the chief fault of the history-
makers of New England; it was, rather, their inability to imagine a human reality
behind the masks of society, an imaginative, not an emotional, failure" (p. 118).

36. Becker sees Hester's action as an individual one: "Hester stands forth in de­
fiance of that society. She has taken the symbol which was to make her another
allegorical figure in the Puritan allegorical world and, by force of an almost violent
art, has turned it into an expression of her own defiant individuality" (p. 94). My own
interpretation of Hester's management of her stigma is more akin to what Henderson
terms the holistic view of Puritan society.

37. See Marius Bewley, The Eccentric Design: Form in the Classic American Novel
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 161-74, for an excellent discussion
of the midnight scaffold scene and Dimmesdale's public expiation.

38. In an interesting discussion of allegory in The Scarlet Letter, Becker com­
ments: "A society whose public ritual is made to extend in this way beyond the ritual
arena and the ritual moment into daily life, is a society so committed to allegory that
it has become not a mode of expression but a mode of life. The correspondence be­
tween concrete events and eternal truths becomes a presupposition of life itself" (p.
96). It is this very presupposition that allows the Puritans their "control" and empha­
sizes their intolerance for mystery or ambiguity or paradox.

39. Baskett makes a point about 'The Custom-House' that suggests Hawthorne's
affinities with Hester. "Hawthorne's growing, if unwilling, understanding that, de­
spite his desire for withdrawal from an uncongenial system, he must somehow
establish a significant, self-nurturing relation with it, is intensely signified when he
places the scarlet letter on his breast" (p. 327). Hester must also establish such a
relation with a similarly "uncongenial" system.
41. Ibid., p. 319.
42. Kaul talks about several stories ("Wakefield," "The Man of Adamant," "Egotism") in which people alienate themselves from society: "These are thus the stories of a peculiar destiny: of an alienation which arises from cold selfishness, from deluded piety, and from egotistical individualism, and which leads in all cases to a corruption of the human personality and the break-down of normal social relations within the community. They are the parables of a culture in which the Puritan absorption with the self has shifted off into the democratic ideal of the individual's self-sufficiency" (p. 158).
43. Joel Porte, in The Romance in America: Studies in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and James (Middletown, Conn.; Wesleyan University Press, 1969), comments on Hawthorne's experience: "All the major characters in The Scarlet Letter, including Hawthorne himself, aspire to the condition of the romancer—a position of spiritual depth and understanding earned through sympathy with or experience of pain. The price of attaining such a bad eminence is worldly danger: 'decapitation' for Hawthorne when he is removed as Surveyor of the Customs and thus permitted to return to writing, or pariahdom for Hester. . . . The Scarlet Letter, in short, can be read as an allegory of art" (pp. 98-99).
44. James, p. 101.
45. See Millicent Bell, for example, who points out that the "peculiar faculty of Chillingworth" is "peculiarly akin to the artist" (p. 74). Henderson calls Chillingworth "the searcher of the inner man just as Bellingham and Wilson are the censors of the outer" (p. 117). Henderson's comparative study of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth is also interesting here: "Dimmesdale's tragedy is that he cannot be secure in either his faith or his role. His faith is impotent before social imperatives. Chillingworth, like a charlatan, assumes new roles with ease. For him, man is made by art, not by faith. . . . In the social ascendency of Dimmesdale over Chillingworth Hawthorne epitomizes a New World which eschewed art to choose a faith it could not live with" (p. 121).
46. See 2 Samuel 12.
47. Matthiessen, p. 306.
49. Matthiessen, p. 258.
50. Works, 2:194.
51. In support of my idea that Hawthorne sees much of himself in Chillingworth, Kaul talks about the fact that the pursuit of art "could become an obsession, a means of isolation from the world rather than a mode of communication with it. When this happens, when art is unrelated to human sympathy, its 'diabolism' . . . becomes a fact in Hawthorne's moral vision" (p. 164). Chillingworth is thus an example of an artist whose 'art' becomes "unrelated to human sympathy."
52. Works, 2: p. 182.
53. Ibid., p. 195.
54. Baskett, p. 326.
55. Critics have made this point about the isolation of Hawthorne's artists. A. N. Kaul, for example, talks about the "spiritual death" that results from "conformity to certain kinds of society. . . . [Hawthorne's artists] live in a society which combines the Puritan mistrust of art with the emphasis on practicality and utility of both the early New England code and latter-day American life. It is a society in which the artist has no recognized place unless it be the one traditionally reserved for the Black Man" (p. 166). And R. K. Gupta, in "Hawthorne's Treatment of the Artist," New England Quarterly, 45 (March 1972), pp. 65-80, states: "In the case of the artists, loneliness is imposed by society. The artists do not themselves deliberately reject human brotherhood. . . . They are isolated because of society's failure to understand them and value their achievement."
58. This is one standard interpretation of the novel. Marius Bewley writes, for example, "The Scarlet Letter is a study of isolation on the spatial plane . . . the
conflict between Hester and the community is the most poised statement Hawthorne ever made of the tension between solitude and society" (p. 174). R. W. B. Lewis, in "The Controlled Division of Sympathies," in Gross, writes: "Hawthorne felt . . . that the stuff of narrative consisted in the imaginable brushes between the deracinated and solitary individual and the society or world awaiting him . . . . In The Scarlet Letter not only do the individual and the world, the conduct and the institutions, measure each other: the measurement and its consequences are precisely and centrally what the novel is about" (p. 26). And Quentin Anderson states: "Hawthorne saw human selves as fostered in a net of relations, finding their meaning and value only through those relations" (pp. 60–61).

60. Feidelson, pp. 49–50.