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Figure, Ground, and Gender
in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: A Romance

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Honors Senior Project
Dr. Richard Moore
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ABSTRACT

In art the terms "figure" and "ground" refer to the nominal subject of a work and its background, respectively. According to Douglas Hofstadter in his book, *Godel, Escher, Bach*, the relationship between figure and ground may be a simple one of cursiveness, the figure that has been inscribed creating a ground which "'is merely an accidental by-product of the drawing act,'" (Johnson 256). On the other hand, a clear distinction between figure and ground may be less discernible, showing recursiveness, a situation in which the ground behind the figure "'can be seen as a figure in its own right'" (256). Closely related to art, by analogy, in written language scripted letters and words may be figures and the surfaces on which they are inscribed grounds.

Utilizing the theories of these critics in my own discussion of the scarlet "A," I will explore the figure-ground relationship between the letter and its bearers, Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Pearl. The discourse in *The Scarlet Letter*, with the exception of the "Conclusion" chapter in the text, shows Hester to be both the ground upon which the letter is inscribed and a figure in her own right. Hester's own nature shapes her fate as much as the letter, in many ways. Thus, the letter that marks her body, the letter of the law, may be understood to be a recursive figure.

The "A" relates to Arthur much as it does Hester. He inflicts the law upon himself by creating his own scarlet letter. However, the figure-ground relationship between Arthur and the "A" is far less recursive than that of Hester and her letter. Pearl, the child resulting from the adulterous act, proves to be the physical embodiment of the letter, creating a relationship between figure and ground that is almost purely cursive. Consequently, *The Scarlet Letter* cannot be regarded as a true affirmation of patriarchy on the basis of these figure-ground distinctions.

**Figure, Ground, and Gender
in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance***

In art the terms "figure" and "ground" refer to the nominal subject of a work and its background, respectively. According to Douglas Hofstadter in his book, *Godel, Escher, Bach*, the relationship between figure and ground may be a simple one of cursiveness, the figure that has been inscribed creating a ground which "'is merely an accidental by-product of the drawing act,'" (Johnson 256). On the other hand, a clear distinction between figure and ground may be less discernible, showing recursiveness, a situation in which the ground behind the figure "'can be seen as a figure in its own right'" (256). Closely related to art, by analogy, in written language scripted letters and words may be figures and the surfaces on which they are inscribed grounds.

Several critics have used the figure-ground relationship to discuss the subject of gender in literature. Barbara Johnson's "Is Female to Male as Ground Is to Figure?" shows one such approach to the analysis of patriarchal texts. Her contrast of the interests of feminism and psychoanalysis as it relates to the figure-ground distinction illuminates the conflict of the two theories as regards the treatment of women, both in literature and in everyday life. Johnson's article looks at cursiveness and recursiveness, critiquing Freud's theories regarding sexual development and exposing man's desire to silence woman.

Johnson discusses male and female roles in her article. Using "terms...drawn from the liberal arts" (256), Johnson explains that female characters are often forced to serve as background as a result of the male-dominated framework within which they are defined; thus, the men can be seen as the figures in these situations. Johnson explores this figure-ground relationship further, asking whether "the figure of sexual difference in psychoanalytic theory [is] cursive or recursive" (257); to answer this question she examines "the conjunction between the aesthetics of the figure-ground relationship and the therapeutics of the male-female relationship" (258). By studying these relationships, Johnson examines the "relations between feminism and psychoanalysis" (255) using the following texts: Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Hawthorne's "Birthmark," and Freud's "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria."

Johnson's article describes man's attempt to silence woman. Woman's self-expression is described as the desire to write, to express inner feelings. As Johnson notes, however, males wish to leave females in a subordinate status, disallowing these women to show their true feelings. Women are often portrayed as "mute, passive, or inert" in texts that reflect this masculine view because women are often thought of as "objects" in patriarchal society (258). When women do dare to express themselves, they are often treated like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," who is told by her husband not to write in her diary or to think too hard about anything; in fact the narrator's husband John will not allow his wife to express her

dislike of the wallpaper that torments her. Thus, women are forced by men to repress their innermost thoughts.

Johnson shows the sexist tendency present in psychoanalytic theory as prescribed by Freud. Freud initially shows a desire "to represent sexual difference as a recursive figure...in which both figure and ground, male and female are recognizable, complementary forms" (257). Freud's "geometry of castration" exemplifies this recursiveness; "the penis is the figure, or positive space, and the vagina the ground, or negative space" (257). However, Freud's castration theory conflicts with its practical physical ramifications. Freud portrays the figure (male) and ground (female) of sexual difference physically in such a way that implies one sex's body complements the other's, that one body ends where the other begins. Johnson notices, however, that Freud feels frustrated with this illustration of human sexuality because it does not seem to imply any need for a sense of lack in woman, which Freud feels is a necessary trait for females to develop properly. Freud's sense of frustration toward true recursiveness is checked by his decision "to dismiss the undecidability" of sexual difference via his introduction of his theory of woman's "castration" complex (257). This would make man superior to woman simply because of his having sexual organs that woman does not. Freud holds the theoretical castration complex as more important than the physical realities of his description. Freud's theories are self-contradictory because he implies both that women and men are, to some extent, and are not, to a greater extent, recursive figures. Johnson

notes these inconsistencies, showing that the patriarchal tendency toward making women ground, or defined by male's superiority, is present in psychoanalytic theory.

In literature, as well as in psychoanalysis, notes Johnson, the dominant presences in the texts (whether it be Freud as author of his case study or Aylmer or John as husbands in "Birthmark" and "The Yellow Wallpaper," respectively) desire to relegate woman "to ground" in order "to erase sexual difference" in females (259). Johnson theorizes that men cannot conceive of women as beings of "ambivalence"; the men must cure the women of their "mixed feelings" (263). According to Freud, states Johnson, women have both masculine and feminine characteristics, and perhaps the aforementioned "mixed feelings" have two sexual organs, i.e., "the vagina, the true female organ, and the clitoris, which is analogous to the male organ" (263). Freud also states that women must "renounce" this "male" organ and, instead, concentrate on their femininity in order to achieve full "sexual development" (265). Johnson finds the mark on Georgiana's face in "Birthmark" to be "the displacement upward precisely of that troublingly excessive female organ" (264). Thus, Johnson reads Aylmer's removal of this mark as a "fatal clitoridectomy" (264). In removing the birthmark, then, Aylmer has rid Georgiana of her "ambivalence," making her cured of her "mixed feelings." Conversely, in order for woman to keep her identity as a person of diverse emotions, she must not "renounce" her sexual organs. Psychoanalysis calls for women to renounce their "excessive" organs in order to fit into a

"normal" category of sexual development, that of males; feminism wants women to keep their uniqueness. Thus, "the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism can indeed be summed up in this relationship between renunciation *for* symmetry [of sexual development] and renunciation *of* symmetry" according to Johnson (265).

Johnson illuminates the trend in which men wish to silence women. The three texts that Johnson has chosen show the unusual perspective she brings out, that man often serves as figure, while woman represents background, that male and female are not always recursive figures as a result of patriarchy. Man's desire to silence woman can force woman to lose her identity, thus, relegating her to live a meaningless life as an object governed by patriarchy. Hence, in such a case, woman does become the ground upon which male ideas are inscribed. Johnson's argument, then, applies to a great number of texts that reflect these patriarchal tendencies.

Another article that agrees with Johnson's propositions is Susan Gubar's "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity." Gubar has found that woman is often portrayed as a "blank page, the raw material on which the pen-penis of male creativity inscribes its figures" (Johnson 257-258). In both Gubar and Johnson's articles, the critics find the line dividing the genders in literature to be, on the whole, cursive, relegating woman to a singular, noncomplex state, an "object of male desire" (258).

In "Hawthorne's Genres: The Letter of the Law *Appliquée*," Peggy Kamuf links this gender theory to sign theory, explaining that femininity is not always an easily characterizable trait. Readers often try to determine the gender of certain symbols. Kamuf notes that in a "non-gender-inflected language" (71) such as English, the explicit gender of objects is more important and more difficultly discovered. She applies this theory to the law affecting the letter "A" worn by Hester Prynne as punishment for adultery in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Utilizing the theories of these critics in my own discussion of the scarlet "A," I will explore the figure-ground relationship between the letter and its bearers, Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Pearl. The discourse in *The Scarlet Letter*, with the exception of the "Conclusion" chapter in the text, shows Hester to be both the ground upon which the letter is inscribed and a figure in her own right. Hester's own nature shapes her fate as much as the letter, in many ways. Thus, the letter that marks her body, the letter of the law, may be understood to be a recursive figure.

The "A" relates to Arthur much as it does Hester. He inflicts the law upon himself by creating his own scarlet letter. However, the figure-ground relationship between Arthur and the "A" is far less recursive than that of Hester and her letter. Pearl, the child resulting from the adulterous act, proves to be the physical embodiment of the letter, creating a relationship between figure and ground that is almost purely cursive. Consequently, *The Scarlet Letter* cannot be regarded as

a true affirmation of patriarchy on the basis of these figure-ground distinctions.

This rag of scarlet cloth,--for time, and wear, and a sacrilegious moth, had reduced it to little other than a rag,--on careful examination, assumed the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A...Certainly, there was some 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.

(*The Scarlet Letter* 42-43)

**Hester's Office,
or The Letter of the Law**

In *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne must wear a cloth "A" on her chest as punishment for adultery. The office of this letter is the punishment itself. The letter is, then, a symbol of legality, the letter of the law. A major problem in interpreting the office of the letter is its symbolic nature. The letter itself remains an embroidered piece of red cloth, "rigid, inanimate," although it "is able to mime 'life'" (Flores 314). Allan Lloyd Smith explains that the letter has two roles from the beginning of the text: it is an "alphabetic sign" and a "historically determined signifier" of the law that implies "adulteress" (69). The role of the "alphabetic sign" is merely to represent a sound; the letter "A" contains no intrinsic meaning and, therefore, may signify anything, thus leading to some ambiguity about the actual meaning of the letter in the text. The meaning of the "A" "turns in a mirror of interpretation, its image infinitely reversible without a change in its appearance" (Kamuf 79). The letter may mean Able,

Adulteress, or even Arthur (Kamuf 77). Hence, the interpretation of the sign must be dependent on uncontrollable outside factors.

The "A" changes entirely in its meaning depending on its beholder. The cloth "A," originally intended to mean Adulteress, receives several interpretations. As time passes in the text, "many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne" (131), thus making a conscious effort to change the signification of the sign. Native Americans who are not familiar with the colony's laws look at "Hester's bosom; conceiving, perhaps, that the wearer of this brilliantly embroidered badge must needs be a personage of high dignity among her people" (189-190), not one punished for a crime. Perspective modifies the meaning of the cloth "A" entirely.

Interpretation remains an important issue as other letter "A"s are beheld by townspeople. During the second scaffold scene in the text, a meteor appears in the sky looking much like a letter "A." Determining the significance of such a symbol is quite common in the Massachusetts colony. The townspeople believe "that the destiny of nations be revealed, in these awful hieroglyphics" (127). Thus, the interpretation of such a sign as the meteor must have cultural significance for the townspeople. The magistrates perceive the meteor to stand for "Angel" in remembrance of a governor who dies during the same night, while Dimmesdale believes that the "A" is an affirmation of his guilt. However, the "A" in the sky does not represent

anything, but rather, is a natural occurrence without symbolic meaning. There is no factual basis upon which to base such a determination of the "A's" significance, again problematizing any single meaning for the symbol.

There is only one purpose intended for the "A" when it is first utilized: punishment for adultery. This punishment, the office of the letter, is problematic from the onset, however. As the townspeople punish Hester, there is already a discrepancy between the law itself regarding adultery and the punishment it inflicts. While the townspeople gather in the market-place before Hester has displayed publicly her "A" the first time, already the women of the town call for stronger punishment than merely wearing a piece of cloth. According to one woman, Hester "has brought shame [to the town of Boston]...and ought to die" (56). Thus, the reason to punish Hester is not only because of the act of adultery in and of itself, but also the negative reputation or appearance that the townspeople feel will follow Hester's act of adultery. The same woman then says, "Is there not a law for it [adultery]? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book" (56). Thus, at least in the perspective of this one woman, the magistrates are not adhering to the written laws with which they are supposed to govern the Boston settlement in their punishment of Hester. The original law is itself unclear in the book, as is the reasoning for Hester's punishment.

Since the law itself is in question, the "A" cannot be relied upon to serve as clear, understandable punishment for

Hester's crime. "There is, in other words, no guarantee of the letter's meaning as an instance of the law" (Kamuf 83).

Interestingly, the letter is a symbolic punishment rather than physical punishment such as death. Kamuf describes the "judgment on Hester" in which she is forced to wear the "A" as "simply that of display" (80). It does not have any physical ramifications other than that of appearance, hence, making its punitive quality dependent on meaning that townspeople give to it.

The lawmakers, who must rely on the meaning that the townspeople give to the "A" in order to punish Hester, lose control of the "A" due to its symbolic nature. Hester understands that the "A" takes a meaning and a strength all its own separate from that given it by the magistrates. Lawmakers implore Hester to tell them who Pearl's father is, which might cause them to remove her punishment, allowing her to remove the letter. She responds that she will never remove the "A", for "[i]t is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off" (68). Later in the text, the town council discusses allowing Hester to take off her letter after she has worn it for several years. Hester, however, remarks that "[i]t lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge" (136). The "A" instead "would fall away of its own nature" if it were to deem Hester "worthy" to remove it (136). These statements remove all control of the "A" out of the hands of anything other than the "A" itself. The "A" seems to have developed a life of its own,

leaving the magistrates powerless to control it, although they prescribed its use in the first place.

The law represented by the "A" is again ambivalent because Hester embroiders it herself. Although Hester is punished with the letter as a result of a patriarchal law, she decorates the "A" using a "feminine art" (Kamuf 75), illuminating another conflict in the law itself. In addition, the letter is made of "fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread" (57). Hawthorne describes the "A" as

so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a lost and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony
(57).

Thus, Hester's embroidery "designates the law with its own infraction" (Kamuf 82), adding to the problematic nature of the law governing her.

Hester's embroidery is a sign of her strong personal nature. Rather than allow the lawmakers to control completely the letter that marks Hester an adulteress, Hester takes "possession of the symbol of her disgrace (and of the disgrace itself),...[and] at once realizes and transforms it" (Carton 100). By making the "A" an elaborately embroidered decoration, she has made the letter an extension of herself and her art, "a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill" (76). The

embroidery that designates Hester as an adultress is also utilized by other townspeople in ceremonial situations. Hester's "handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion" in Boston (77). Special events (aside from weddings) allow Hester's embroidery to spread throughout Boston. Although the elaborate embroidery first goes against the laws in Boston, the townspeople develop a tolerance and even a respect for Hester's art. Because of this, Hester's influence on others gains strength, while the punishment inflicted by the "A" weakens. Hester's embroidery, first limited to the letter and later expanded to provide special clothing for townspeople, allows her to take some control of the law itself.

Although the letter's symbolic nature appears to weaken its effectiveness, the letter serves its punitive purpose by forcing Hester into the margin of society, keeping the element of sin [adultery] out of the central view of the townspeople. After being physically imprisoned and, hence, marginalized during her pregnancy, she subsequently lives on the edge of town, operating in her own way outside of the view of many townspeople. The "A" has "the effect of a spell [for Hester], taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (57). When in public, "[a]s was usually the case wherever Hester stood, a small, vacant area--a sort of magic circle...formed itself about her, into which...none ventured, or felt disposed to intrude. It was the forcible type of the moral solitude in which the scarlet letter enveloped its fated wearer" (181). The letter has forced Hester to live in a circumscribed

space within the community (although she is, of course, free to leave the colony if she wishes). To this extent, the letter succeeds in limiting Hester's actions.

Hester's "A" causes her emotional pain as well. A townswoman observes that the letter has hurt Hester greatly; "Not a stitch in that...letter, but she has felt it in her heart" (58). Hester's pain due to the "A", a symbol of "her sin, her ignominy," is described as nothing less than "grief," "misery" (74-75). Perhaps the most obvious example of the pain caused to Hester by the letter is revealed when Hester removes it from her dress in the forest. Upon removing the letter, "[t]he stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom" (159). The symbol of Hester's punishment is a powerful and constant reminder of her adultery as long as she wears it.

The "A" sometimes overshadows Hester herself, becoming the only thing that gives her identity. Hester imagines that the letter will cause her to

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. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast...as the figure, the body, the reality of sin"

(75).

It seems that Hester anticipates that she will become the physical manifestation of the letter. Another way in which the "A" looms above Hester herself occurs when Pearl identifies her mother by means of the "A," showing that Hester has become the letter to some extent, or rather, the superimposed "A" has given her a new identity. "'Mother,' cried she [Pearl], 'I see you here'" (93). The "you" that Pearl sees is a distorted image of the "A" in a coat of armor, not Hester herself (for example, her facial features or any other outward aspect of her physical appearance aside from the letter). "Owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated proportions, so as to be the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden by it" (93). Later in the text, Pearl refuses to recognize her mother without the letter on her chest. Hester replaces the "A," at which time Pearl replies, "now thou art my mother indeed" (166). Again Hester is identified by means of the "A" alone. The letter has overtaken Hester's physical identity, if not her entire self in these instances.

The preceding examples of the letter as cursive figure are countered as Hester is shown to be a strong figure herself. The letter allows Hester certain freedoms that other people, especially women, cannot have in the strict Puritan society in the text. One way in which Hester gains freedom from the letter is a result of the marginalization that, in turn, is a result of the punishment of wearing the "A". Because when she stands in public a "magic circle" forms around her, she may reap the

benefit of privacy that results. When Hester intends to board a sailing ship and return to Europe with Pearl and Dimmesdale, she needs to speak with an officer on the ship. The isolation of Hester from the other townspeople "answered a good purpose, by enabling Hester and the seaman to speak together without being overheard" (181). She makes these secret plans to escape from Boston because she knows how freely she may travel, how easily she may converse with those with whom other members of society may not associate. Additionally, "[t]he scarlet letter was her [Hester's] passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (157). For example, Hester may walk alone through the forest, something other women are disallowed. The letter also protects Hester from negative elements because "the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom. It imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness, which enabled her to walk securely amid all peril" (132). Thus, the scarlet letter has benefited Hester by allowing her certain freedoms and protections. Indeed, these freedoms might not be enjoyed were Hester not a strong-natured person.

Enduring the treatment that the letter brings to Hester empowers her mentally. Hester shows resilience under the pressure that the townspeople of Boston have placed upon her by forcing her to wear the "A". In fact, Roger Chillingworth notes that Hester's "spirit" has "borne up...beneath a burden like thy scarlet letter" (139). The "Shame, Despair, [and] Solitude" that Hester has to face as a result of the "A" and the law it represents have "been her teachers...and they had made her

strong" (157). In these instances the "A" is an agent that enables Hester to grow emotionally and mentally. Hester, thus, makes the most of her punishment, taking charge of what the "A" affords her when possible.

The scarlet letter and Hester are recursive figures. At times the "A" overshadows Hester, sending her to the margin of society, causing her mental anguish, taking control of Hester's identity. In these instances, the letter is a cursive figure inscribed upon a meaningless ground (Hester). On other occasions Hester uses the letter to gain strength and freedom, making her as much of a figure as the "A". The letter's office is not fulfilled fully for this reason. The law itself is somewhat tenuous, again weakening any complete dominance that the "A" might otherwise have had over Hester. Thus, there is no single constant figure in this relationship between Hester and her "A". Instead, she and the letter alternate roles in the text, implying a recursive relationship.

Pearl and the Letter

Although the cloth "A" is the actual punishment that Hester is given by law, Hester's daughter Pearl grows up as the consequence and the embodiment of the scarlet letter. Just as the letter is a constant reminder of Hester's affair with Dimmesdale, Pearl is "the living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret they [Hester and Dimmesdale] so darkly sought to hide,--all written in this symbol [Pearl]" (162). In

addition, Pearl "inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom...It as the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life" (90).

Pearl represents the act of adultery committed by Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale. She "is an emblem of passion which partook of that same heathen, natural wildness" for which Hester is punished (Hoffman 345). Hester and Arthur cannot control their emotions and physical attraction, instead giving in to their natural impulses, culminating in the sexual act. Much like the lack of restraint on the part of Arthur and Hester, Pearl cannot be restrained from doing as she pleases. Conversely, she acts out on any emotion that she feels at a particular moment, often "swayed by her own impulses," and is not "amenable to rules" (82-83). Pearl's aversion to rules resonates with Hester and Arthur's momentary abandonment of the laws of their colony. Pearl's personality directly reflects the adulterous act that conceived her and, in doing so, shows her close relationship to the scarlet "A."

Hawthorne presents Pearl as an element of nature in the language he uses to describe her. This natural tendency in Pearl connects her to the letter. Pearl's moods often show "some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency...They were now illuminated by the morning radiance of a young child's disposition, but, later in the day of earthly existence, might be prolific of the storm and whirlwind" (83). Additionally,

Hawthorne describes her actions much like those of an animal; for example, she hovers, flies, and flits around (83). Pearl *is* nature and natural impulse, much as the letter reflects the natural impulses of Hester and Dimmesdale.

Hester's letter limits Pearl, forcing her to live in the margin, much as Hester is limited to some extent by the "A". Although Pearl does not wear the "A" herself, her role in Boston society is that of an outsider. Both "[m]other and daughter [Hester and Pearl] stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society" (85). Pearl is, in fact, "a born outcast...[an] emblem and product of sin...[D]estiny...had drawn an inviolable circle round about her" (84). Pearl cannot escape this limitation given her as a result of the letter.

Unlike the cloth "A" that threatens at times to overshadow its bearer, Pearl and the letter (and what it represents) are united, one and the same. Instead of a relationship of recursiveness, Pearl and the "A" have no figure-ground distinction whatsoever. If Pearl's own nature were reflected at times in spite of the stigma of the letter, this might be called recursiveness. However, this is not the case. Pearl is instead a physical extension of the letter, reflecting exactly the ambivalence of the letter itself and no more. If any figure-ground distinction can be made from such a relationship, it is more cursive than recursive. Thus, Pearl has no self without the letter.

Gender and the Law

In analyzing the figure-ground relationship between the scarlet letter and its bearers, issues of gender emerge. The main question that arises is: should *The Scarlet Letter* be regarded as a truly patriarchal text that seeks to undermine woman's role in society? There appears to be no arguable evidence in the text to support this view. Instead, Hawthorne's portrayal of Hester and other members of Boston society supports a more sensitive view. The roles of the main male and female characters in the society of the text, namely Hester and Arthur, are complex and difficult categorized into gender-specific roles, showing a lack of male dominance.

Barbara Johnson notes a tendency in patriarchal texts to relegate women to the position of ground in relations to men. However, *The Scarlet Letter* tends to favor the character Hester in her relationship with the letter of (what may be deemed) patriarchal law over that of Arthur or Pearl (who, for these purposes, is labelled a child without gender distinction). Hester and the cloth "A" are connected recursively. Pearl, on the other hand, shares a cursive relationship to the "A". In fact, the letter dominates her very existence. Arthur has a cursive relationship with his letter of shame as well. Unlike Hester, whose scarlet letter is an easily removable piece of cloth, Arthur has an "A" inscribed upon the skin of his chest that cannot simply be unpinned at will. Whereas Hester's "A" gives her strength, Arthur grows endlessly weaker because of his

letter (and the broken morality that he associates with it), eventually dying as a result of his feebleness which has been caused by the "A". Although this text may cause less significant female characters to serve as a background to the men in the society, the main female character in the text rises above the stigma placed on her by society, namely men, and forges a new way of life that enables her to be strong. However, the main male character physically diminishes in strength due to his sense of guilt over his own scarlet letter. This reversal of gender relations illuminates Hawthorne's tendency not to stereotype women as passive background.

Another quality of patriarchal texts noted by Johnson is a desire to silence women. In *The Scarlet Letter*, however, Hester is not quieted by the magistrates, but asked to reveal who the father of her illegitimate child is. The traditional patriarchy wants Hester to express herself unlike Johnson's paradigm. Instead it is the characters in the text who are living a lie for purposes of society, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingsworth, who ask Hester not to speak. In this text, the voice of subversion tries to silence Hester, not the voice of tradition. In response to the lawmakers' request of speech, rather than submit to the magistrates, Hester chooses not to answer willfully, showing her self-assertion. Hester's strength in this situation contrasts with Arthur's inability to admit to his crime of adultery until his dying moment which illuminates his lack of emotional strength. Another point showing Hester's self-expression is her staying in the colony instead of

departing, which she could have done legally if she chose. It is again her own free will that keeps her in Boston. Thus, Hester's voice is not silenced in this non-patriarchal text.

The one issue in which Hawthorne shows the scarlet letter to be truly patriarchal is the "A's" ability to reduce Hester's ambivalence and expressiveness to a non-complex state. When Hester wears the letter she appears matronly, beautiful, but somewhat lacking in emotional warmth. Upon removal of the "A", however, she begins to show signs of

a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back

(160).

The "A" has caused Hester to lose her happiness and her sexuality, reducing her to the state of mere "mother," in which her only role is nurturer of her child and any sexual energy is stifled. When replacing the letter on her chest, Hester feels a "sense of inevitable doom" (165). Putting on the "A", "her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, departed, like fading sunshine; and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her" (166). In fact, it is "as if there were a withering spell in the sad letter" (166). In this instance, the power of the letter is easily seen in its ability to reduce woman to simplicity. Thus, the letter and the text may be reflections of patriarchy as a result.

Conflict in "Conclusion"

Although the text to this point has fallen somewhat short in any attempt at precise illumination of patriarchy or a lack thereof, the "Conclusion" chapter leaves no doubt in its assertion of traditional patriarchal values. This chapter does not seem to flow with the logic of the rest of the text. Instead, it appears that Hawthorne needs a way to end his romance conclusively even if the conclusion drawn is a non sequitur.

Hester's inner strength is reduced in this chapter. While Hester asserts herself in "Conclusion", leaving Boston for many years, she eventually returns to the colony and resumes her wearing of the "A," even though "not the sternest magistrate" would force her to do so (200). This is a sign of her weakness in relation to the "A," i.e., her identity in Boston depends on the "A". A question then arises: why would she return by choice to a place only to lose her true self knowingly? Earlier in the text Hester appears glad to remove the "A" and escape the pain that it causes her. In addition, by embroidering the letter exquisitely, she has taken some sort of possession of the letter, (although she has to wear it by law) but this sense of self-assertion under duress does not comfortably mesh with her purposely wearing the "A" in the "Conclusion." Thus, Hester loses her sense of self-assertion in this chapter.

The "Conclusion" seems to contradict the notion displayed prior in the text that a woman can survive in society (albeit somewhat unhappily) without being required to live a life of domesticity. In this final chapter, the character Pearl, once a figure of ambivalence and perhaps hidden, but powerful potential sexuality, has become a wife and mother, a representative of a traditional female role. In addition, Hester apparently settles comfortably into her role as grandmother, "embroidering a baby garment" (201). When Hawthorne relegates Hester and Pearl to these traditional roles, he undermines the strength of their characters, ultimately proving these women to be weak. The women must rejoin the patriarchal order to be happy.

The logic of the "Conclusion" forces feminine strength to diminish. Rather than show Hester and Pearl to be consciously assertive of their own desires in spite of the scarlet letter, this chapter shows that Hester is almost a slave to her letter. Instead of Pearl's using her status as an outsider to act non-traditionally when she reaches adulthood, she simply resorts to the way of life into which most other women in a male-dominated society fall. This chapter causes women to be relegated to ground upon which male ideas are inscribed. There is no female self-assertion as evidenced in this chapter. The actions in this chapter prove not to follow the paradigm set up in the preceding ones. The "Conclusion" cannot cause the reader to confirm or reject the lack of true patriarchal tendencies earlier in the text because the chapter merely superimposes the

traditional ideas in a handful of pages on nearly two hundred pages that tell otherwise.

Because we do not have any way of pinpointing the particular gender of the letter, there is no way to state with certainty that it is completely patriarchal. Thus, any judgment on the letter as to its weakening of female strength cannot be made precisely. Outside of the "Conclusion" chapter, finding this text to be wholly representative patriarchal tendencies overlooks the strength of the woman who bears the cloth "A". While other characters in the text lose themselves to the strength of the letter, Hester finds a way of life that suits her and that satisfies the societal claims which limit her lifestyle somewhat. There is no indication that Hester loses her sense of self. If the letter of the law is intended to force her to do this, then the "scarlet letter...[did not do] its office" (134).

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