

SENTIMENTALIZING HAWTHORNE:
THE SEDUCTION NOVEL IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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Sex sells. But despite the simple advertising wisdom this truism gives, American authors all but stopped seducing their readers with tales of scandal by the nineteenth century. The seduction novel, a genre revisited tirelessly in the eighteenth century, had seemingly fallen out of favor with American novelists as Erika Kreger notes: “the seduction plot virtually disappears” during the early nineteenth century (Kreger 311). Though the overused cautionary tale fatigued writers at this time, readers had yet to get their fill. Readers made Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*, a quintessential seduction novel, “the first American bestseller” and the novel remained the most popular bestseller from its states’ side release in 1794 until the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the 1850s (Pelmas). Indeed, for almost sixty years, nothing entertained the American reading public more than the seduction plot from which authors had all but divorced themselves. Least likely to embrace the tradition, Nathaniel Hawthorne nonetheless recognized the popularity of seduction novels and channeled the genre’s stereotypes in *The Scarlet Letter*. Attempting to mature the adolescent voice of American literature, Hawthorne subverted the seduction novel through his allusions to both popular sentimental novels and the Christian gospels. This paper will examine Hawthorne’s imitation and subversion of the seduction novel through Hester and Dimmesdale and Dimmesdale’s sacrificial death in Hester’s place. But first, we must examine the critical consensus of Hawthorne’s usage, or lack of usage, of the seduction novel.

Most literary critics refuse to acknowledge Hawthorne’s employment of sentimental fiction because of his infamous disparagement of the genre. Indeed, Nina Baym argues that critics like F. O. Matthiessen and Fred Lewis Pattee, in order to divorce Hawthorne from the sentimentalists, exaggerated the author’s

disdain of the genre, and of women writers in general. These critics canonized writers like Hawthorne and Melville by barring others, namely women writers of sentimental fiction, in what Baym labels a “cheap trick” (*Again and Again* 20). In response to this tradition of separating Hawthorne from sentimental writers, critics like Erika Kreger and Cathy N. Davidson have recently drawn attention to his debt to the seduction novel. Cathy N. Davidson connects Hester to a specific seduced heroine named Caroline Courtney, the protagonist of the 1797 novel *Infidelity, or the Victims of Sentiment*, calling her “an obvious ancestress of Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne” (*Flirting* 20). Davidson’s use of the word “ancestress” shows that she believes these connections are more than simple allusion or coincidence and that Hester’s character is actually, in part, derived from a seduction novel heroine. This inspiration for Hester seems convincing as Caroline Courtney suffers neglect from “her cruel husband” and later “finds solace in... a younger, more sympathetic man” (*Flirting* 20). This neatly matches Hester’s own story as she suffers a marriage to the much older Roger Chillingworth for whom she “felt no love” and then later finds comfort in her younger partner, Dimmesdale (Hawthorne 50).

Before further examining the instances of Hawthorne’s adoption of the seduction novel, an explanation of the genre is necessary. The American seduction tradition differs slightly in focus from the earlier British seduction novels of the eighteenth century. The British novels tend to build up to the seduction, belaboring it to a major plot point. A classic example of this is Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, a massive novel in which the drama that fuels the plot is whether or not the heroine will succumb to her potential seducer’s seemingly endless advances. However, the American variations of the seduction novel place “the seduction early in the tale and then [explore] its consequences” (Kreger 310). Kreger rightly notes that many popular American seduction novels, including *Charlotte Temple*, “chart the results, rather than the causes, of the heroine’s fall” (310). *The Scarlet Letter* cleanly fits into the Americanized seduction genre since the novel begins long after the seduction with Hester holding her newborn child, facing her sentence of public humiliation as she walks to the scaffold. From the beginning, this text concerns itself not with the actions that lead Hester and Dimmesdale to their affair but with their suffering due to its aftermath.

Seduction novels, despite their inherently scandalous nature, provided readers with a moral lesson. Authors felt compelled to articulate a moral in their fiction because religious elites in the eighteenth century “regarded novels as being at worst seductive lies and at best unedifying entertainment,” so writers sensed that these unfair judgement of their medium “could be circumvented only by heavily moralized fictions” (Abel 270). The foremost moral presented in these novels is “that female virginity had to be preserved... and that its loss must necessarily lead to degradation and even death” (*Flirting* 18). The majority of fiction

readers at this time were women, so political and religious leaders used this opportunity to pressure authors into teaching their audience how to conduct themselves within a social structure that depended on controlling the sexuality of women. So these novels, attempting to thrill readers with sexual misconduct while still teaching them Christian sexual ethics, typically had a couple commit a tryst leading to a life of suffering and repentance for the woman who usually dies near the novel's conclusion.

And insofar as an affair serves as the narrative catalyst for *The Scarlet Letter*, the romance derives its "plot from American adaptations of the novel of seduction" (Kreger 310). The narrator even seems to reference a popular sentimental novel in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* and succumbs, if begrudgingly, to a convention of sentimental fiction. Critic Kavita Ramdya notices the reference to *The Wide, Wide World*, a sentimental novel released the same year as *The Scarlet Letter*, when the narrator complains of sentimental writers' habit of releasing "confidential depths of revelation... on the wide world" (Ramdya 45, Hawthorne 7). Despite his critique of the sentimental convention of autobiographical writing, the narrator still focuses on his personal life for the duration of the pseudo-autobiographical introduction.

Hawthorne also seemingly appropriated the seduction novel's tendency to claim authenticity. Three of the earliest and most popular seduction novels- *The Power of Sympathy*, *Charlotte Temple*, and *The Coquette*- "were or claimed to be, based upon the deaths of real women" (Henderson 489). Authors based, or claimed to base, their stories on real events to combat the grievance that novelists only wrote useless lies. This claim of truth also heightened the novel's sense of scandal, ensuring better book sales. For instance, Davidson notes that in 1788 a young woman died after giving birth to a still-born child and the mystery surrounding her life and death captivated New England (*Revolution* 221). Davidson goes on to point out that this tragedy must have inspired novelist Hannah Webster Foster to write her novel *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton*, as the protagonist is obviously named after the mysterious young woman—Elizabeth Whitman (*Revolution* 223).

Likewise, Hawthorne claims the events of his novel actually occurred in history through the Custom House introduction where the surveyor character discovers the manuscripts and Hester's embroidered letter. Like the sentimental authors before him, Hawthorne found inspiration in historical events for his novel. Before writing his introspective romance, Hawthorne pored over historical texts, as shown by the fact that almost every minor character in the novel's periphery is based on a historical figure. The only characters who do not seem to have a direct historical counterpart are the four leads: Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl. Hawthorne also appears to have lifted the basic plot of his Romance from history. Many have pointed to the record of Salem law, a record in Hawthorne's library, requiring a woman convicted of adultery in the

late seventeenth century to wear a capital *A* on her clothing (Newberry 291). The techniques of sentimental writers clearly worked both to tell a story and to sell a book, and Hawthorne seems to have used these tactics in practice even as he mocked them in public.

Through the characters of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne, Hawthorne subverts the seduction genre as they seem to fit the stereotypes of seducer and seduced heroine respectively, but also possess traits that distance them from these familiar characters. For instance, Dimmesdale enjoys immense respect from his community which protects him from the scrutiny his lover endures, a privilege he shares with the seduction novel's seducer. Yet, as Kreger demonstrates, Dimmesdale's physical descriptions resemble those of seduced heroines, thereby subverting the seducer stereotype. Hester, the mother of an illegitimate child, faces the universal shame and ostracization that plagues the seduced heroine. Yet Hester, in place of the sensitivity and dependency of many seduced heroines, shows such inner strength and independence that feminist critic Nina Baym labels her "the first true heroine of American fiction" (*A Reading* 62). The novel also questions the assumption that the affair is morally wrong through the intimacy Hester shares with Dimmesdale that she never experienced with her actual husband: Roger Chillingworth. The subversion comes to a head though when Dimmesdale dies in the place of Hester, shown through the many allusions to the Christian gospels. The two main characters of *The Scarlet Letter* look like familiar characters from a bygone genre, but these subversive character and plot elements distance Dimmesdale and Hester from their eighteenth-century counterparts.

Adhering to the status of the seducer stereotype of eighteenth-century seduction novels, Dimmesdale enjoys a higher social sphere than his lover. The narrator introduces Dimmesdale as an alumnus of "one of the great English universities," meaning he possesses an elite education (Hawthorne 46). His reputation reaches beyond the ivory tower to the local church as the narrator records he "achieved a brilliant popularity in his sacred office" as a pastor (Hawthorne 88). Dimmesdale not only attracts the governor's company, he actually enjoys universal approval from political elites to his more humble congregants who "deemed the young clergy-man a miracle of holiness" (Hawthorne 89). As his guilt erodes his pride and mental state over the seven years of the narrative, his reputation not only stays intact but grows in reach. Interestingly, Dimmesdale does little to better his reputation and actually sabotages it without facing any consequences. For instance, the morning after the minister subjects himself to a night upon the scaffold, a sexton returns one of Dimmesdale's gloves which he found, condemningly, on the wooden structure. Yet, since this apparatus is where "evil-doers are set up to public shame," the sexton deduces that the devil must have placed the glove there as an attack against his godly minister (Hawthorne 97). Dimmesdale's position affords him such privilege that even as

he sabotages his career and public-image, his congregation views all his actions in the best possible light and praises him for his shortcomings. Aware of his beloved status, Dimmesdale, on “more than a hundred” occasions, uses his pulpit to clear his conscience by speaking “self-condemning words” and labeling himself “the worst of sinners” (Hawthorne 90). Yet, he confesses his sin “in a symbolic language that he knows will be misunderstood” (Baym 69). Dimmesdale manipulates his congregants’ high opinion of him in a vain attempt to assuage his own sense of guilt.

This distinctly male privilege stands as a hallmark of the seducer in seduction novels. These novels often critique the double standard of extramarital sex in which a man in power may engage in it with little or no consequences, while a woman who engages in the same activity faces unbearable stigma. The novel *Charlotte Temple* displays such disparity between its seduced and seducer characters, Charlotte and Montraville. Davidson notes that Montraville delays marrying Charlotte in part because she “is no heiress” and “marrying her would preclude the affluent life to which Montraville aspires” (*Revolution* 22). As in *The Scarlet Letter*, the male character lives in a more elevated sphere than his lover, which he protects to her detriment and demise.

Though Dimmesdale does have the privilege expected from the seducer in seduction novels, the actual descriptions attributed to him resemble another character from the seduction tradition. Kreger notices that “from the moment he is introduced, Dimmesdale is depicted in feminine terms” (318). More specifically, “his pale cheeks, drooping form, bleary eyes, and melancholy aspect” actually resemble “the specific physical markings of the seduced heroine” (Kreger 321). The minister’s hypersensitivity and physical descriptions connect him to the protagonists of the previous century’s most popular genre. These heroines suffered physical weakness as a biological manifestation of the guilt they felt over the affair. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale, not Hester, suffers from this physical weakness because of his guilt. This guilt causes him to eat and sleep less and, most destructively, inflict self-harm. This guilt blatantly subverts the expectations associated with the seducer stereotype, who always feels remorseless over his actions. If Dimmesdale were a mere imitation of the seducer, he would be unfeeling and cruel; instead, he emotes constantly and grows in sympathy toward others because of his brokenness over his hypocrisy.

I must return now to Hester because, as one critic states, “the problem of *The Scarlet Letter* is really the problem of how to interpret Hester” (Erlich 164). Here I must articulate where I disagree with Kreger, even though I have relied on much of her criticism up to this point. Kreger asserts that while Dimmesdale resembles an eighteenth-century heroine in his characterization, Hester resembles a nineteenth-century heroine. However, this interpretation stems from Kreger’s failure to note the obvious similarities between Hester’s circumstances and the circumstances of heroines from the previous century. Kreger rightly

notices Hawthorne's adoption of the seduction novel when she writes on the plot and Dimmesdale's character, yet she turns a blind eye to the obvious eighteenth-century allusions that Hester evokes so she may set up a dichotomy between eighteenth and nineteenth-century literary genres. Kreger seems to believe that Hester's strength and independence gives warrant to ignore the parts of Hester that evoke the seduced heroine stereotype. I assert that the facets of Hester's character that seem incongruous with the seduced heroine character are Hawthorne's subversions of the seduced heroine stereotype rather than allusions to nineteenth-century heroines. This interpretation is only valid, though, once one recognizes that Hester resembles the seduced heroine from seduction novels of the eighteenth century since she is a single mother living under the stigma of her affair; a hallmark of eighteenth, not nineteenth-century, sentimental heroines.

Sentimental heroines like Charlotte Temple live through suffering and abandonment, all the while experiencing endless remorse for their actions. Hester faces such abandonment not only from Dimmesdale, who will not join her on the scaffold during the novel's opening sequence, but also from the entire Puritan community. Soon after the scaffold scene, the recently-branded adulteress moves into a cabin just outside of town and the narrator notes that she lives "without a friend on earth" since no people wish to affiliate themselves with the shame placed upon her (Hawthorne 54). Hester uses this seclusion to practice her repentance in accordance with her eighteenth-century predecessors. By remaining in New England, Hester hopes to use "the torture of her daily shame" to "purge her soul" of its guilt, revealing that she feels the shame from the affair and subjects herself to the stigma found in the Puritan town as a form of penance (Hawthorne 54).

At this point, any eighteenth-century author would leave Hester in her self-inflicted misery as the seduction novel "portrays women as vulnerable and in need of male protection," meaning that those familiar with the seduction novel would have expected Hester to suffer for the rest of the story, languishing without a husband to provide for her (Kreger 316). Hester, however, overturns this expectation through her independence. Without help from a man, or anyone for that matter, she provides for Pearl by making herself an asset to the community through her sewing. The narrator records that Hester "filled a gap" in the market of the Puritan town with her expertise, so that laypeople and even the governor himself wear her threads (Hawthorne 55). Hester's determination and confidence reverses the weak and docile attributes of the eighteenth-century heroine which other facets of her character conjure. Because she lacks the physical weaknesses and emotional dependency that seduced heroines often exhibit, Hester refuses to be sentimentalized and instead asserts her independence and strength through small rebellions. Hester also does what none of the heroines of seduction novels could: she reverses some of the shame of her

adultery through her diligence and compassion. She overcomes the stigma to such a degree that some “refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification” of ‘adulterer,’ but instead “said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (Hawthorne 99). Hester does not completely rid her crimson emblem of its shame, yet through her perseverance and humble strength she redefines herself as so much more than a woman caught in adultery, which heroines of the previous century failed to do.

The novel also subtly questions the severity of its couple’s affair through the exchanges that Hester has with her husband, Chillingworth. In these interactions, both Hester and her cuckolded husband express more regret over their marriage than Hester and Dimmesdale do over their affair. As Hester articulates during the forest scene with her lover, what they “did had a consecration of its own” (Hawthorne 118). This statement reveals that Hester no longer feels guilt over the affair, and actually believes that it has bettered her and Dimmesdale. Yet Hester does not afford Chillingworth the same absolution and resents him for the novel’s entirety. Though Chillingworth’s backstory is sparsely covered, he seems to have all but forced Hester to marry him even while both of them recognized the folly of their union. Hester even says that marrying Chillingworth and staying with him is “her crime most to be repented of;” notably “this crime” is not her affair, but her unwise marriage (Hawthorne 107). She goes on to say that Chillingworth’s sin against her in the unhappy marriage “seemed a fouler offence... than any which had since been done him” (Hawthorne 107). Even Chillingworth acknowledges his sin by admitting the marriage “was [his] folly” and then persuades Hester to conceal his identity by saying that “the scale hangs fairly balanced” between them (Hawthorne 51). Here, Chillingworth equates his sin of an unwise marriage with Hester’s affair against him. This subverts the seduction novel tradition which assumed marriages to be sacred and affairs to be irredeemably sinful in every instance. However, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester’s marriage is lamented more than her affair. Even though a seduction novel’s heroine typically falls for her seducer’s advances because of her naivete, Hester’s youthful naivete led her first, not to adultery, but to an unhappy marriage. This shows that, for *The Scarlet Letter*, a foolish marriage is a greater sin than an affair, which inverts the logic of seduction novels.

Yet the most subversive element of *The Scarlet Letter* is the fact that Hester, the mother of an illegitimate child, does not die at the novel’s conclusion. In fact, the heroine in *The Scarlet Letter* actually encourages Dimmesdale to “do anything save to lie down and die” (Hawthorne 120). Yet despite this advice from Hester, Dimmesdale does indeed lie down and die in the most acute subversion of the seduction novel. Dimmesdale’s death is such a subversive plot point because he, as a publicly beloved man of a higher caste than his lover, is expected to live comfortably for the rest of his days despite having committed

the same sin as Hester. More than this, Hester should die a premature death in keeping with the tradition of the seduction novel. Davidson actually recognizes that the sexual act for women in a seduction novel is “a decline into a figurative death... that will soon slide into the real thing” showing that, from the moment a woman has extramarital sex in these stories, readers could safely expect her to die painfully and shamefully (*Revolution* 229). *The Scarlet Letter* reverses this expectation, however, as Dimmesdale dies in the place of Hester. Hawthorne shows that Dimmesdale dies in the place of Hester through many allusions to the Christian gospels.

Readers would have immediately seen Dimmesdale as a figure of Jesus since at this time “the Bible was still the book of books,” meaning that Hawthorne’s audience knew the Christian scriptures well (Gartner 131). Matthew Gartner acknowledges a Christological reading of Dimmesdale when he writes that “in the final scaffold scene” the minister “becomes a Christ figure” (131). These allusions show that, as Jesus died in the place of others, so Dimmesdale dies in the place of Hester and Pearl. The first connection between Hawthorne’s novel and the Christian gospels is the fact that both of the protagonists die during an important communal holiday. Christ died during the Passover festival, the most important of the Jewish festivals, while Dimmesdale dies the day of the Election Sermon, an annual celebration in which the newly elected New England governor would begin his term. This political holiday causes a large group of people to congregate in a central location, similar to the Passover for which Jews from surrounding regions would make a pilgrimage to the temple in Judah. Large crowds attend the election sermon celebration, as shown when Hester and Pearl enter the market-place and find it already filled “with the craftsmen and other plebeian inhabitants of the town, in considerable numbers,” and even people from outside the colony attend this ceremony as there “were many rough figures whose attire... marked them as belonging to some of the forest settlements” (Hawthorne 134). These people do not even live within the Puritan settlement but travel to join the festivities not unlike the Jews making a pilgrimage to the temple in Judah for Passover. Both Christ and Dimmesdale, then, have large audiences for their deaths on account of these widely celebrated holidays.

The iconography of Dimmesdale’s death also alludes to the gospels. The narrator draws attention to the fact that Dimmesdale has Hester on one side of him and Pearl on the other by mentioning it on two separate occasions. The first instance occurs as the three ascend the scaffold, and the next, a few moments later when the unfortunate family actually stands upon the structure. While on the scaffold, a wooden apparatus of public shaming already reminiscent of the cross, the minister is “supported by Hester” as he leans on her weakly, “and hold[s] one hand of little Pearl’s” (Hawthorne 150). Dimmesdale’s lover and child seem to stand on either side of him just as Jesus suffers his crucifixion

with a perpetrator on either side of him. As Dimmesdale collapses, moments from his death, the narrator carefully notes that “Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom” (Hawthorne 151). This moment with Dimmesdale’s head upon Hester’s chest resembles classical paintings in which Mary cradles a deceased Jesus, a connection made all the more strong since the narrator compares Hester to the Madonna in her first appearance on the scaffold (Hawthorne 40). Though Hester rid the scarlet letter of most of its shameful meaning, some stigma still surrounds her wherever she goes. As she joins the crowd for the Election Sermon “a small vacant area- a sort of magic circle- had formed itself about her” as people instinctively draw back from her to distance themselves from the shame that still accompanies her person (Hawthorne 139). Then, after Dimmesdale’s death, Hester’s “scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn” (Hawthorne 154). Something changed after and because of Dimmesdale’s death; the token of Hester’s shame has been cleansed of its ignominy.

The death positively affects Pearl’s life too. The narrator notes that, as Pearl kisses her dying father, “a spell was broken” and experiencing this tragedy “developed all her sympathies” (Hawthorne 151). She previously lacked these “sympathies,” which kept her from behaving normally. But because of her father’s death she “shed[s] her devilish ways and join[s] society,” something the wild, almost inhuman Pearl up to this point could never have done (Ramdya 53). Some may critique this Christological reading of Dimmesdale by noting that it diminishes Hester’s heroism and independence and further argue that she requires a man to save her from her shame. However, unlike the gospels, *The Scarlet Letter* does not give us a sinless savior. Dimmesdale let his partner suffer under stigma and raise a child alone for seven years when he helped create both, hypocritically pastoring a local church all the while. If Hawthorne had wanted to make this minister a hero, he would have made him act heroically, instead, Dimmesdale pays for his own sins on the scaffold as much as he atones for Hester’s.

Hawthorne appropriates and rewrites the seduction novel through the characterization of Hester and Dimmesdale, which makes the two both types and antitypes of eighteenth-century seduction novel characters; the moral inversion of adultery and marriage; and Dimmesdale’s unexpected death in the place of the adulteress woman and the bastard child. However, the question still remains: why would Hawthorne even touch a genre so maligned by the social elites of his time? One reason may be the fact that financial factors pressured Hawthorne to adopt the tradition so popular with the public and so hated by the critics.

Hawthorne knew that most of his audience would be women and therefore may have felt the need to cater to the demographic with *The Scarlet Letter* to ensure a profit, as he famously lost his job mere months before starting the novel. Though Hawthorne wanted to publish high art along with his contemporaries,

writing for him unexpectedly shifted from a hobby to a career, meaning he would have felt the need to make his novel accessible to the common reader and, therefore, more reminiscent of genres that the common American reader clearly loved, like the seduction novel. Hawthorne showed this economic impulse early in his career with the release of *Twice-told Tales*, with which he “clearly tried to anticipate the tastes of the reading public” as this collection contains pleasant stories rather than the dark, introspective material more indicative of his style (Mellow 77).

But Hawthorne also adopted the stereotypes of the seduction novel for reasons more complex than economic gain. Hawthorne seems to have acknowledged what few critics acknowledge today: that seduction novels as “the first novels of the new republic” are “the real roots of American fiction” (*Flirting* 34). Hawthorne’s subversion of the seduction novel’s stereotypes are his own additions to the adolescent voice of American literature. Through his complication of the seduction novel’s simple story, he matures the literary voice of his nation.

With a sense of shame, Hawthorne not only accepted the wildly popular and artistically simple seduction novel, but also the occupation of the author itself while his male friends made careers in business, law, and politics. Yet, not unlike Hester, he accepts his tokens of shame on his own conditions. He threads his story with subtle nuances, thereby transforming the stigmatized profession and the maligned genre into something eye-catching. Strikingly similar to his heroine, with her titular letter which would have labeled her as an adulterer for the rest of her life if not for her embroidery, if not for her *art*. Importantly, Hester embellishes her token of infamy through embroidery, an activity reserved for women at the time of the novel’s setting and the time of its writing. Hawthorne also rebrands his tokens of shame through an activity almost exclusively performed by women at the time: writing fiction, specifically sentimental fiction. Like Hester, Hawthorne does not rebel by overtly refusing the badge of shame handed to him but rebels by embellishing his ignominy with golden threads of subversion.

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