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“Depravity Dressed Up in a Fascinating Garb”: Sentimental Motifs and the Seduced Hero(ine) in *The Scarlet Letter*

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"The most moral book of the age," *Graham’s Magazine* dubbed *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in a September 1852 review of *The Blithedale Romance*. The reviewer went on to assert that the earlier novel was “especially valuable as demonstrating the superficiality of that code of ethics . . . which teaches obedience to individual instinct and impulse, regardless of all moral truths which contain the generalized experience of the race.”1 In *The Scarlet Letter* Nathaniel Hawthorne had given reviewers what they wanted: a book that encouraged self-restraint and adherence to conventional community values and yet did not directly address readers with intrusive, didactic remarks. His ambiguously narrated romance struck the difficult balance needed to please mid-nineteenth-century commentators who, though they judged a novel’s worth by its moral code, increasingly condemned authors who made that moral explicit.

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When we place *The Scarlet Letter* in the context of the literary debates of the 1840s and 1850s, it becomes apparent that Hawthorne’s novel inhabits a conventional moral position that affiliates it with, rather than distinguishes it from, the best-selling domestic novels of the era. Such a reading—although it clearly breaks with the long critical tradition of lauding the “radical” characterization of Hester Prynne and placing *The Scarlet Letter* on a canonical pedestal above other early-American works—builds upon recent critical discussions that have made a convincing case for the novel’s conservative relationship to nineteenth-century social politics, and have demonstrated the value of positioning Hawthorne’s work alongside “popular” antebellum writing.  

In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne carefully guides his audience to the “right” ethical conclusion through his depiction—both physical and emotional—of his central characters. All of these characterizations underscore the narrative’s conservative lesson about the need for self-denial and social responsibility; the portrayal of Reverend Dimmesdale, however, would have had particular force as a cautionary tale for Hawthorne’s contemporaries. When we consider *The Scarlet Letter* in relation to antebellum discussions of fiction that contrasted outdated seduction stories with worthy “new” novels, it becomes clear that

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Dimmesdale exemplifies the socially unacceptable qualities associated with the earlier narratives, while Hester embodies the cultural ideal developed in the later ones. The young minister’s passivity and hypocrisy link him to the weak heroines and deceptive villains of the eighteenth-century novels repeatedly condemned and ridiculed in pre-Civil War public commentary. Hawthorne’s “fallen woman,” however, possesses the strength, selflessness, and positive influence attributed to the heroines of domestic novels (as well as to the exemplary housekeepers of conduct books) in the nineteenth century. In this essay I hope to clarify the context in which this “sinful” pair was created and received, by first examining the antebellum discourse on morality and gender in fiction, then distinguishing between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel conventions, and finally positioning Hawthorne’s depiction of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne alongside similar characters from the “sentimental” genres of seduction narrative and domestic fiction.

In order to place The Scarlet Letter in its correct literary context, we should note that Hawthorne derived his plot from American adaptations of the novel of seduction. This genre originated with eighteenth-century British novels wherein the seduction either does not happen (as in Frances Burney’s Evelina [1778]) or is long delayed (as in Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa [1747–48]). American authors, however, shifted the narrative focus by placing the seduction early in the tale and then exploring its consequences. Numerous popular novels of the early national period, such as William Hill Brown’s The Power of Sympathy (1789), Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1794), and Hannah Foster’s The Coquette (1797), all chart the results, rather than the causes, of the heroine’s fall. As Mona Scheuermann suggests, Hawthorne has taken The Scarlet Letter’s “particular structure—illicit sex early in the novel followed by examination of the attendant psychological implications for the participants— . . . from his own American forbears” (pp. 106–7).

Yet Hawthorne is not simply taking part in a continuing American tradition; he is, rather, choosing to employ selected elements of plot and character from a form that had
fallen out of favor. Following Helen Waite Papashvily, Cathy N. Davidson points out that "after approximately 1818, the seduction plot virtually disappears" from novels written in the United States, "and, with the graphic exception of The Scarlet Letter, the 'fallen woman' does not figure prominently in the design of nineteenth-century American fiction." Readers, of course, remained familiar with eighteenth-century seduction tales; in the mid 1850s Charlotte Temple was "still a popular classic at the cheap book-stalls and with travelling chapmen." Yet nineteenth-century reviewers and novelists regularly expressed their disapproval of such melodramas, which portrayed women as gullible victims. Certain conventional images associated with eighteenth-century novels, therefore, would be likely to conjure up negative notions of selfishness and moral laxity in the minds of readers. Hawthorne's use in The Scarlet Letter of motifs from the novel of seduction, whether conscious or unconscious, encourages readers to condemn Dimmesdale's hypocrisy rather than sympathize with his sufferings, thereby reinforcing the novel's conservative moral. In both body and mind, Hawthorne's hapless minister fits the pattern of the physically drooping, ethically weak, seduced heroine whom mid-century discussions of fiction taught audiences to disparage.

When examining Hawthorne's use of iconography associated with the seduced heroine, however, we should beware of judging such a characterization as just another symptom of his antipathy for the "d——d mob of scribbling women" writers of his own era. Such a conclusion conflates the eighteenth-century novel of seduction and the nineteenth-century domestic novel, two distinct forms that modern critics often group to-

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gether in the single, ill-defined, yet much-maligned category of “sentimental” fiction. Twenty-first-century readers, taught to place Hawthorne’s work in opposition to the writing of his contemporaries, have not always observed that *The Scarlet Letter* shares a common moral framework and pattern of imagery with many works by antebellum female novelists. Like these women writers, Hawthorne uses his characters to emphasize the destructive consequences of allowing personal desire to overrule community law.

This ethical standpoint reflects the social values most often advocated in the antebellum public discourse about fiction. As the 1852 Graham’s reviewer indicates, Hawthorne’s contemporaries were likely to view *The Scarlet Letter* as a corrective to what the reviewer calls the damaging individualistic “code of ethics” that was “predominant in the French school of romance” (p. 333). The Graham’s reviewer judged *The Scarlet Letter*, with its unequivocal punishment of sexual transgression, to be superior to the kinds of French books that a Peterson’s Magazine reviewer had earlier denounced as “covertly injurious to morals.” Reviewers repeatedly complained of the cheap translations of European fiction that dominated the United States book market in the 1840s. Victor Hugo was ranked among the worst offenders; his novels, the American Review proclaimed in March 1846, show “the whole foundations of the social system uprooted and overturned.” In contrast, a March 1850 review in the Literary World voiced its approval of *The Scarlet Letter*, a book that apparently kept society’s ethical structure right-side-up: “Then for the moral. Though severe, it is wholesome.”

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8 “Recent French Novelists,” American Review, 3 (1846), 239.

9 Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Literary World, 6 (1850), 324. Not only did *The Scarlet Letter* garner good reviews, but it also sold well. As Susan Geary points out, between 1849 and 1858, “of the twenty-three English and American novels [that Ticknor and Fields] published . . . , only two made it over the 10,000 mark (one of which was the *Scarlet Letter*); and in the 1850s, editors considered “a book that sold by the tens of thousands” to be a best seller (“The Domestic Novel as a Commercial Commodity: Making a Best Seller in the 1850s,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 70 [1976], 368, 370). By this definition, *The Scarlet Letter* qualifies as a
Such severe morals appealed to reviewers who assumed that the main audience for fiction was female and who deemed depictions of social rebellion particularly dangerous. These reviewers expressed their anxieties in complaints—such as the one made by a Knickerbocker Magazine contributor in February 1839—that “depravity dressed up in a fascinating garb . . . constitutes the greatest objection to books otherwise delightful and useful.”

Similarly, a North American Review writer’s rant uses imagery reflecting fears that “immoral” fiction might feminize men and corrupt women: “After reading one of Bulwer’s novels, we have a feeling that mankind is composed of scoundrels and sentimentalists, and that the world is effete. The atmosphere is that of a hot-house . . . in which adultery and seduction are gracefully adorned in alluring sentiments, and saunter, with a mincing gait, to the pit that is bottomless.”

According to this reviewer, a novelist like Bulwer-Lytton who did not adequately punish characters engaged in sexually illicit behavior revealed an inability “to conceive character at all” (p. 364). Such critiques employed rhetoric equating both novelist and novel with the “painted women” whom antebellum reviewers feared female novel-readers might become.

Yet even authors who did not adorn “adultery and seduction” with “alluring sentiments” were not guaranteed favorable reviews. A book’s ethical code might determine the way that some reviewers judged the work, but the proper moral stance was not always enough to win critics’ approval. A novel must offer its lesson in the right way. “Convenient morality” could easily be dismissed, just as a Graham’s reviewer discounted one novelist guilty not only of “writing a book decidedly injurious” but also of unsuccessfully attempting “to atone for all, by a page of morality at the finale.”

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commercial success even if it did not match the astonishing sales of The Wide, Wide World or Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

10 Rev. of Rob of the Bowl: A Legend of Saint Inigo’s, [by John Pendleton Kennedy,] Knickerbocker Magazine, 13 (1839), 162.

11 When reading such comments, it is important to remember that in the mid-nineteenth century the word “sentimental” was not always used negatively; reviewers praised “good” affecting sentimentality as often as they critiqued “bad” mawkish sentimentality.


13 Rev. of The Fatalist, [by Nicholas Michell,] Graham’s Magazine, 17 (1840), 144.
morals was apt to be found wanting if “the morality of the story is . . . too pertinaciously thrust into the reader’s face.” As James L. Machor explains in his discussion of public responses to antebellum fiction, moral messages were expected to be “consistent and subtle rather than overt and intermittent”; direct instructive comments were condemned. As one North American Review essayist noted, a serious moral can “crush down the narrative with its weight,” and the “fleet of religious novels, oppressed with their leaden cargo, have shown marvelous alacrity in sinking where they were never heard of more.”

Clearly, antebellum novelists who wished their work to be judged ethically sound and artistically superior had to negotiate a dense landscape of moral and aesthetic judgments. And although these judgments were heavily gender-inflected, it is important to distinguish the expectations of Hawthorne’s era from the stereotypes put forward in our own. Contrary to what some of us have been taught, Hawthorne’s audience did not automatically disapprove of the novel as a genre, and unlike many late-twentieth-century readers, they neither equated popularity with poor aesthetic quality nor viewed American literature as a particularly male-dominated domain. Antebellum reviewers did believe in an essential biological difference between men and women that necessarily produced distinctly “masculine” and “feminine” writing. Yet these same

16 Rev. of Margaret; a Tale of the Real and Ideal, Blight and Bloom, [by Sylvester Judd] North American Review, 62 (1846), 103.
18 The 1848 review in The North American Review illustrates the stereotypes of male and female writing put forth at mid-century. The reviewer mistakenly thinks that a brother helped “Currer Bell” write Jane Eyre because “the clear, distinct, decisive style . . .
reviewers might have approached women's writing more open-mindedly than a modern reader conditioned to expect any female-authored antebellum novel to be unrealistic and overly emotional. In fact, in the 1850s some of the domestic novels by women that we think of today as highly melodramatic were hailed for their realism, while jokes about silly scribblers often gendered the writer male.19 Even calls for "manly" writing privileged qualities that might seem "sentimental" by today's standards.20

continually suggests a male mind," while the sister's input is revealed by "some unconscious feminine peculiarities, which the strongest-minded woman that ever aspired after manhood cannot suppress. These peculiarities refer not only to elaborate descriptions of dress, and the minutiae of the sick-chamber, but to various superficial refinements of feeling... there are niceties of thought and emotion in a woman's mind which no man can delineate" ("Novels of the Season," pp. 356-57).

19 In January 1853 a review praising the realism of Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World and Queechy and Amy Lothrop's Dollars and Cents appeared in the North American Review. Its author (often identified as Caroline Kirkland) calls Warner's first novel "a story of real life" (North American Review, 76 [1853], 122). The essay also says that these novels reflect the fact that "nowadays... there is no truth but literal truth; heroines are no longer 'mad in white satin'; troubles, to touch our hearts, must be every-day troubles; heroes, who do not interest themselves in political economy and the condition of the masses, are unworthy of good fortune" (p. 105). Although the judgment of succeeding generations would be very different, it is interesting to see a reviewer praise the lack of melodrama in novels that are today considered examples of extreme "sentimentality." In a similar reversal of modern expectation, a joking "Epigram on a Poor But Very Prolific Author," making fun of the weak literary product that twentieth-century stereotypes associate with female "sentimentalists," genders its author male. The epigram laments: "A modern novelist, compelled by need, / Writes eighty pages ere the day is o'er; / Alas, poor man! I feel for him indeed, / But pity his afflicted readers more!" (Knickerbocker Magazine, 33 [1849], 140).

20 An 1849 review of Dickens by E. P. Whipple is one example of a nineteenth-century call for masculine writing that actually privileges traits that modern readers stereotype as feminine. Whipple laments that in the United States, "Novelists we have in perilous abundance, as Egypt had locusts; some of them unexcelled in the art of preparing a dish of fiction by a liberal admixture of the horrible and sentimental;... but a series of national novels, the production of men penetrated with an American spirit... we can hardly plume ourselves upon possessing" (rev. of Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son, by Charles Dickens, North American Review, 69 [1849], 405-6). The reference to spirited men and the negative use of the term "sentimental" might make us think that Whipple is calling for unemotional realism, but in fact he wants more sensitive characterizations. He praises the "moral beauty" of Little Nell and wants this sort of character to replace "libelled or caricatured" depictions of Americans (pp. 404, 406). The spirited "production of men" he asks for requires the very "sentimentality" that a twentieth-century reader might assume he is criticizing: "Are there, then, no materials here for the romantic and heroic... nothing of sorrow for pathos to convert into beauty... no sweet household ties, no domestic affections, no high thoughts, no great passions, no sorrow, sin, and death?" (p. 406).
Nineteenth-century readers who recognized the diversity of their era’s literature probably would have been surprised by the range of works that succeeding generations have lumped together under the category of “sentimental” fiction. Hawthorne’s audience made distinctions—between uplifting sentiment and mawkish emotion; between the melodramatic tales of the previous century and the domestic novels of their own—that have been obscured by the generalizations of later historians. To understand Hawthorne’s relation to both his literary predecessors and critical contemporaries, we need to recover the distinctions between the seduction novels popular in the early national period and the women’s novels that reached their height in the 1850s with the success of Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854).

The eighteenth-century seduction novel—both the English form characterized by *Clarissa* and the American variation typified by *Charlotte Temple*—portrays women as vulnerable and in need of male protection. Rowson’s novel illustrates the basic plot of the American books, wherein an innocent heroine is tricked by a cruel seducer and then abandoned to suffer, repent, and die. Highly emotional, these novels acknowledged female passion, but despite the tragic consequences, the authors did not blame their heroines for having and expressing emotion. Rather, seduction novels often implicitly critiqued the culture that constrained and suppressed personal feelings. A novel such as *Charlotte Temple* encourages the reader to sympathize with the flawed and fallen title character and to condemn the unfeeling nature of her seducer and the society that empowers him.

Unlike these eighteenth-century works, which emphasize the heroine’s passion and suffering, domestic novels reject “depictions of overemotional, helpless heroines” (Baym, *Woman’s Fiction*, p. xxix). In antebellum “woman’s fiction”—the genre that Baym defines as “novels of contemporary life by and about American women published between 1820 and 1870”—we meet competent protagonists who “survive in a difficult world” (*Woman’s Fiction*, p. ix). These books abandon the seduction plot and instead follow the progression of a young woman who, without familial or financial resources, must educate herself and find a secure place in the world. Although only a minority of
antebellum novels employed this plot, it was particularly influential because at mid-century “one formula blockbuster after another dominated the market,” ensuring that the reading public would be very familiar with the model of womanhood that these books depicted (Woman’s Fiction, p. xi).

Woman’s fiction—in its critique of weakness and hypocrisy and its praise of fortitude and self-discipline—rejects eighteenth-century literary models and reinforces the moral values advocated by nineteenth-century critics. The writers that Baym studies avoided “the spectacle of victimized innocence” that “denied just what woman’s fiction insisted on: that innocence was compatible with agency” (Woman’s Fiction, p. xxix). Antebellum reviewers offered a similar critique of weak female characters. A North American Review essayist, for example, complained of the “utterly characterless and insipid” women in James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, works that failed to show woman’s “real power, her influence over the course and issue of events.”

Similarly, the Christian Examiner ridiculed the “common-place novel-heroine” with her “useless sensibilities, and unrestrained enthusiasm, the creature of circumstance or emotion.”

Hawthorne’s readers would have been very familiar with such commentaries condemning outmoded characterizations and praising “new” novels depicting a different type of womanhood. Several modern critics have pointed out that Hawthorne took notice of these shifts in public opinion. Stephen Railton emphasizes that Hawthorne, hoping for financial success, aimed The Scarlet Letter at “the same kind of audience that had read his tales and sketches for twenty-five years in such ‘middlebrow’ publications as Godey’s.” Although it seems obvious, we should not forget that unlike today’s readers, this audience would not have come to the book predisposed to admire Hester, steeped in the tradition that “she is the only significant female protagonist in nineteenth-century literature.” Rather, they picked up

23 “The Address of The Scarlet Letter,” in Readers in History, p. 159, n. 3.
24 Barlowe, p. 208; see also Railton, p. 140.
the novel prepared to place her among the many literary heroines of both their own and previous generations.

When he addressed this audience of experienced novel-readers, Hawthorne chose to avoid reform fiction's explicit moralizing; but he still managed to convey a "severe" yet "wholesome" mainstream Victorian moral. Numerous critics have remarked that Hawthorne achieves his effect through tableaux, visual images carrying clear connotations for his audience, and I would add that these tableaux alternately evoke the eighteenth-century seduction novel and nineteenth-century woman's fiction. Hawthorne employs images that middle-class culture had already taught his readers to interpret. "The iconicity of these tableaux" not only "adds emblematic richness while assuring verbal economy," as Rita Gollin and John Idol, Jr., point out, but these tableaux also become "essential to Hawthorne's mode of depicting the human condition in relation to the past" (p. 54). Evocative images associated with earlier literary forms direct readers' moral judgments. Hawthorne's peers would likely have considered the Puritan townspeople, who take so long to recognize Dimmesdale's hypocrisy and Hester's virtue, to be "a terrible audience" that has misread the signs revealed in the couple's bodies and actions (Railton, p. 142). But Hawthorne's pattern of imagery makes it unlikely that the real audience of The Scarlet Letter would make the fictional townspeople's mistake of sympathizing with the sickly minister. Hawthorne describes Dimmesdale in terms, and places him in scenes, associated with disparaged eighteenth-century characters. The minister's body and soul reflect the worst of the seduction genre (as it was judged in the antebellum era): physically he is as weak and drooping as the seduced heroine, and morally he is as hypocritical and deceptive as the seducing villain. The strong negative associations of these qualities would guide readers to definite conclusions even without an overt authorial intrusion telling them what to think.

From the moment he is introduced, Dimmesdale is depicted in feminine terms. The young minister is "a person of

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very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow, large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which, unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint.” Dimmesdale lacks “the ruddy cheek, the frank, manly, blue-eyed gaze . . . [that] denoted intelligence and trustworthiness in the male” in Hawthorne’s era (Baym, Woman’s Fiction, p. xxxvii). And the narrative will soon make us question the townspeople’s perception that their minister possesses great self-restraint. A “man of ethereal attributes” (Scarlet Letter, p. 142), Dimmesdale is clearly feminized by nineteenth-century standards, which saw a “relatively fixed . . . contrast between women’s more graceful, yielding, tendril-like outline and . . . men’s more blocky shape” (Woman’s Fiction, p. xxxvii). For Hawthorne’s contemporaries “the male body implicate[d] volume or density, the woman’s airy ethereality” (Woman’s Fiction, p. xxxvii). Dimmesdale, who questions whether he has any substance at all—“what was he?—a substance?—or the dimmest of all shadows?” (Scarlet Letter, p. 143)—certainly lacks such “manly” density.

Those schooled in the tradition of Ann Douglas’s The Feminization of American Culture (1977) might assume such an effeminate depiction is typical of the disempowered antebellum minister who—having lost all “practical function” in society—“accommodates and imitates” middle-class women in hopes of sharing their perceived “emotional dispensability.” Indeed, T. Walker Herbert argues that Dimmesdale possesses the characteristics of the maligned antebellum clergymen who “attained social power by exploiting the womanly domain to which they found themselves consigned.” But, in fact, numerous scholars have complicated both Douglas’s claims and the “separate spheres” ideology upon which they are based,

ferring good evidence to suggest that effeminacy was not the primary quality associated with nineteenth-century ministers, either in popular literature or in daily life. In depictions of ministers in American literature prior to the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, there are few clergymen who share Dimmesdale’s sensitivity.\(^3\) As Joan D. Hedrick points out, ministers were just as likely to be viewed as rigid and patriarchal as drooping and disempowered.\(^3\) Hawthorne himself, in his journals and in his other fiction, most frequently depicts scholarly churchmen as figures who fail to understand emotion. Dimmesdale’s peers in *The Scarlet Letter*—viewed by Hester as “iron” men (p. 141)—are such figures. The most frequent antebellum ministerial stereotypes seem to be the cold intellectual or the bumbling fool (the type that nineteenth-century newspaper columnist Fanny Fern was thinking of when she wrote in “Notes upon Preachers and Preaching”: “I don’t believe in a person’s eyes being so fixed on heaven that he goes blundering over everybody’s corns on the way there.”)\(^3\) Although often severely flawed, such literary clergymen do not fit the weak model of Dimmesdale.\(^3\)

While Dimmesdale lacks the rigid strength attributed to most ministers in early-American literature as well as the density of the nineteenth-century male physical paradigm, his similarity to the female protagonists of eighteenth-century novels

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\(^3\) See Donald Wesley Cowart, “A Minister I Will Not Be: Historical Ministers in the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne” (Diss., Univ. of South Florida, 1995); David Glenn Davis, “The Image of the Minister in American Fiction” (Diss., Univ. of Tulsa, 1978); and Richard Hugh Gamble, “The Figure of the Protestant Clergyman in American Fiction” (Diss., Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1972).


\(^3\) “Notes upon Preachers and Preaching,” in *Folly As It Flies; ‘Hit At’* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), p. 89.

\(^3\) For example, none of the ministers depicted in the popular novels of James Fenimore Cooper, James Kirke Paulding, William Gilmore Simms, or Harriet Beecher Stowe are marked by insubstantial physiques or overdeveloped sensibilities. The fictional clergymen of these authors are closer to the model of Father Mapple, the hardy and masculine former sailor of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), than to the drooping form of Dimmesdale.
is striking. His pale cheeks, drooping form, bleary eyes, and melancholy aspect are not merely "feminine" qualities but the specific physical markings of the seduced heroine, a form that nineteenth-century commentators saw as degraded. When we first meet Dimmesdale, a request for him to speak "drove the blood from his cheek, and made his lips tremulous" (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 67). Later, the narrator describes the minister's "large dark eyes [that] had a world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth" (p. 113). As the novel progresses we are repeatedly reminded that "his cheek [grows] paler and thinner, and his voice more tremulous" (p. 122). This "tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken" voice, which "brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy" (p. 67), has exactly the same effect as the qualities that Rowson gives the prototypical eighteenth-century seduced heroine, Charlotte Temple, whose "tremulous accent, [and] tearful eye, must have moved any heart not composed of adamant."34

Hawthorne not only emphasizes "the paleness of the young minister's cheek" (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 120), but he also describes Dimmesdale's physical decline in the conventional terms used to depict seduced heroines wasting away after they fall.35 As Herbert Ross Brown states, "the 'decline' became a fashionable attribute of the daughters of sensibility"; eighteenth-century conduct manuals praised "attractive pallor" and "cautioned females that the possession of even an average share of vitality

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35 Dimmesdale also has what Susan Sontag describes as the "extreme contrasts: white pallor and red flush," associated with tuberculosis (see Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977], p. 11). At one point Dimmesdale exhibits "first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain" (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 120). These shifting skin tones also routinely characterize the seduced heroine—such as Sally Wood's protagonist in *Ferdinand and Elmira* (1804), to whose "complexion dazzlingly fair" is frequently "added the brightest glow of carnation" (Sarah Sayward Keating Wood, *Ferdinand and Elmira: A Russian Story* [Baltimore: Samuel Butler, 1804], p. 21). Tubercular qualities fit the eighteenth-century novel's emphasis on passion. As Sontag explains, "having [tuberculosis] was imagined to be an aphrodisiac, and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction" (p. 13). The consumptive's "fever . . . was a sign of an inward burning: the tubercul is someone 'consumed' by ardor, that ardor leading to the dissolution of the body" (Sontag, p. 20). But for the antebellum audience such associations would only heighten the sense of failed self-regulation and weak morality.
and animal spirits was something less than fashionable and
more than feminine.”36 Once Charlotte Temple begins her de-
cline, “her cheeks were pale from want of rest, and her eyes . . .
were sunk and heavy” (Charlotte Temple, p. 95). In the end, the
“unhappy girl” is left “to sink unnoticed to the grave, a prey to
sickness, grief, and penury,” and the reader witnesses her “high
fever,” “fits,” and “pale, emaciated appearance” (p. 98). Simi-
larly, Dimmesdale’s “form grew emaciated,” and like the hero-
ine whose bearing reflects knowledge of her inevitable doom,
“his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain
melancholy prophecy of decay in it” (Scarlet Letter, p. 120).

Although the Puritan townspeople view Dimmesdale as
virtuous and feel that his suffering enhances his powers of symp-
athy, the novel’s readers would likely have considered the sit-
uation more critically. As Alison Easton argues, in Hawthorne’s
time, as in his novel, “the capacity of humans to be receptive to
others’ emotions” was not judged an absolute good unto itself—
take Chillingworth’s evil “sympathy” for example—“to be ‘sen-
sitive’ (a word used nine times about Dimmesdale) is a two-
edged instrument.”37 Dimmesdale’s “sensibility of nerve” and
“spiritual intuition” (Scarlet Letter, p. 130) are not noble quali-
ties unless they benefit others. If “his power of experiencing
and communicating emotion, [are] kept in a state of preternat-
ural activity” (p. 141) by self-absorbed emotional excess, and
he convinces his parishioners of falsehood rather than truth,
then he is as contemptible as the overwrought seduced heroine.
Such characters—like the protagonist of Sally Wood’s Julia
and the Illuminated Baron [1800] who admits, “I indulged my afflic-
tions; I even nursed them”38—exemplify the wasted emotion
that mid-century reviewers criticized. Although, as Hester says,
Dimmesdale “hast sympathies which [other] men lack!” (Scarlet
Letter, p. 119), he may still be open to what D. A. Miller calls
the “mortifying charges” of “sentimentality, self-indulgence,
narcissism . . . [brought] against anyone who dwells in subjec-

36 The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789–1860 (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press,
1940), p. 125.
37 The Making of the Hawthorne Subject (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1996),
p. 231.
tivity longer or more intensely than is necessary to his proper functioning as the agent of socially useful work.”

Certainly many antebellum commentaries complained of those who indulged impractical sensibility, ridiculing—as the author of an 1849 *Knickerbocker Magazine* essay titled “A Chapter on Women” did—the “Delicate Ladies” whose “exquisite sensibilities” and “keen sympathies unfit them for action,” who “while away their days and . . . pay worship to the god of Self, whose devotees they are.”

Like the self-absorbed heroine whose exaggerated emotion leaves her vulnerable to a lustful man’s manipulations, Dimmesdale, whose “thought and imagination were so active, and sensibility so intense” (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 124), is left open to evil influences. The minister’s introspective “order of mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of a creed, and wore its passage deliberately deeper with the lapse of time,” eats away at his strength (p. 123). He is reduced to a “poor, forlorn creature” (p. 141), cast in the role of the victimized girl at the mercy of the conscienceless seducer played by Chillingworth. Like Charlotte Temple, who “fainted into the arms of her betrayer” at the crucial moment and so was carried off unconscious to her “fall” (*Charlotte Temple*, p. 48), so Dimmesdale is in “a deep, deep slumber” when Chillingworth “advanced directly in front of his patient, laid his hand upon his bosom, and thrust aside the vestment” (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 138). Here Chillingworth is the betrayer, and his assault of the sleeping minister is “a parody of the sexual act” (Easton, p. 209).

By the time that Dimmesdale emerges from his forest meeting with Hester, we might read him as seduced several times over—having begot Pearl, been violated by Chillingworth, and yielded to Hester’s radical ideas. So perhaps it is fitting that he should then suffer the next stage of the seduced heroine’s decline: madness. Eighteenth-century heroines, such as Eliza in *The Coquette*, almost always become physically weak and mentally unstable after their seductions. In the conclusions of these nov-

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els the grief-stricken protagonist is often both ill and insane. So too is Hawthorne’s “minister in the maze,” as he suffers from delusions and temptations prompting him to ask, “am I mad?” (p. 220). Like the seduced woman who, in the nineteenth-century reading, has brought her mental and physical sufferings upon herself, Dimmesdale makes poor choices that bring on his moment of madness and exacerbate his “decline.”

Hawthorne makes clear to his audience that Dimmesdale has made socially unacceptable decisions. He compounds his initial sin with repeated errors in judgment. As the narrator tells us, Dimmesdale “felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own. Therefore, so far as his duties would permit, he trode in the shadowy by-paths” (p. 66). Antebellum culture read such retreat from community as suspect; seclusion encouraged the “exquisite sensibilities” of those “Delicate Ladies” mentioned in “A Chapter on Women” who were “unfit . . . for action.” Such reclusiveness could weaken both men and women. As a North American Review essayist commented in January 1848, “there can be no greater misfortune for a country than for her men of letters to live secluded from the active scenes of life; for no civilization can be complete, where those that think move not in concert with those that act.”41 Those who lead a strictly contemplative existence become “enervated” and lose “vigor of mind and soundness of thought” (p. 23). According to this worldview, the thoughtful scholar should not be stumbling alone in the wilderness but rather walking alongside the common citizen in the marketplace.

Nineteenth-century essayists often praised the communitarian impulses of the people who populated such a town square. These discussions prized fortitude and industry, just what Dimmesdale lacks at several moments when he gives into despair: “There was a listlessness in his gait; as if he saw no reason for taking one step farther, nor felt any desire to do so, but would have been glad, could he be glad of any thing, to fling himself down at the root of the nearest tree, and lie there pas-

sive for evermore” (Scarlet Letter, p. 188). This image of a wilted figure beneath a tree would again have conjured up associations with the seduced heroine, whose “drooping jointless body . . . [stood] for indolence or cowardice” to antebellum readers who judged her as “an anachronism from an earlier time” (Woman’s Fiction, p. 28). The image of an emotional woman musing beneath a tree became so conventional in eighteenth-century fiction that numerous nineteenth-century writers satirized such scenes. Both the original and the parody of this image would come to mind when Hawthorne’s audience considered the “listless” Dimmesdale’s desire to be “passive for evermore” beneath his tree.

Beyond passivity and reclusiveness, of course, Dimmesdale’s greatest crime in the eyes of middle-class readers was his hypocrisy. As Karen Halttunen explains, Americans in the decades preceding the Civil War prized honesty and feared deceit. Popular culture represented the dangers of shifting economic and social standings in the image of the confidence man, who deceived honest citizens by hiding his true character under an attractive exterior. Dimmesdale, with his vague confessions that further convince his parishioners of his holiness, obscures the truth with all the manipulative skill of a con man. Hawthorne’s minister, in fact, comes to embody the flaws that antebellum culture attributed to the Richardsonian school of fiction. One reviewer’s complaint about “the conceit of virtue,” the “deception [and] boasted morality [which] was practically false” in Richardson’s Pamela (1740), could serve as an equally accurate description of Dimmesdale. The reverend hiding his secret “A” beneath his clothing is depicted in the same terms with which nineteenth-century reviewers personified the novels that dressed up subversive characters in virtuous clothes.

42 These scenes satirizing the image of weak, overemotional women have often been misread by modern critics who mistakenly assume that the antebellum authors intended to critique their nineteenth-century domestic-fiction-writing peers, when in fact the images parody eighteenth-century texts.


Dimmesdale is the embodiment of a corrupt and corrupting cultural text. He does not possess a tendency to be honest, and Hawthorne emphasizes his deceitful nature right up until the end, making Dimmesdale reluctant to confess even when he is dying. The hypocritical, fearful minister must fight back not only “bodily weakness” but “still more, the faintness of heart” that would keep him from revealing “his secret” with his final breath (Scarlet Letter, p. 255).

Throughout the novel, of course, the faint-hearted Dimmesdale is contrasted with his strong-willed partner in crime. If Dimmesdale figures the outmoded eighteenth-century novel form, then Hester—who openly wears her “A” and in the end freely chooses its restrictions—embodies the text of the “new” age. She develops into the model of womanhood that antebellum conduct books and woman’s fiction put forth, an ideal figure quite different—albeit equally exaggerated and unrealistic—from the heroine prized in the early national period.

In the decades between the publication of Charlotte Temple and The Scarlet Letter, American culture altered its model of womanhood: “no longer the beautiful, useless, passive, delicate clinging creature of the eighteenth century, [the ideal] woman [became] a hardworking, busy, tireless, resilient, ever-cheerful helpmeet: kind, wise, consolatory, sympathetic” (Baym, Novels, p. 102). Despite our twentieth-century misperceptions, this nineteenth-century figure was neither sickly nor hypersensitive.45 Antebellum depictions of the “angel of the house” have

45 For further discussion of the paradoxical way that antebellum fiction and conduct books portray women as both hardworking housewives and disembodied angels, see Nancy Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 75–81; and Gillian Brown, Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), pp. 64–66. It is also important to distinguish between the literary tropes of the domestic woman and the saintly child. The undeniable public fascination with angelic dying children does not mean that such figures were the unquestioned ideal for adult womanhood. Although many have followed Ann Douglas in considering Stowe’s Little Eva the model of sentimental femininity, such interpretations mistakenly conflate the “angel of the house” and the “divine child.” Not only are the two figures not the same, but the latter need not even be female. For further discussion of the antebellum interest in child death, see Michael McEachern McDowell, “American Attitudes Towards Death, 1825–1865” (Diss., Brandeis Univ., 1978); Ann-Janine Morey, “In Memory of Cassie: Child Death and Religious Vision in American Women’s Novels,” Religion and American Culture, 6 (1996), 87–104; and Wendy Simonds and Barbara Katz
more in common with the hardworking housewife than with the emaciated emotionalist. The domestic angel did not wallow in self-indulgent feeling; rather, she possessed a pragmatic communal worldview that urged her to use her powers of sympathy in order to further benevolent causes.46

In Hawthorne’s time, as in ours, ideals of femininity were neither fixed nor coherent. As the author of “A Chapter on Women” complained, “few women are born angels,” and the “overflowing abundance of ‘Essays,’ ‘Sermons,’ ‘Helps,’ ‘Addresses,’ ‘Guides,’ ‘Aids’ and ‘Exhortations’” was far more likely to annoy women than to turn them into “the perfect article” (p. 291). The woman who reads these commentaries “looks first for a standard upon which to model herself,” but “no two men have the same”; therefore, “she can suit nobody unless she becomes a sort of universal-patent-medicine, good for all things” (p. 292). Although real women could not hope to become such a “universal-patent-medicine,” the fictional Hester, by novel’s end, comes quite close.

Before attaining the enviable state of being “good for all things,” however, Hester—like the protagonist of a domestic novel—must embark upon a journey during which she will overcome adversity and isolation, subdue selfishness and passion, find faith and self-discipline, and learn obedience and usefulness. Understandably, late-twentieth-century readers, exposed to inaccurate descriptions of antebellum heroines, have rarely noticed how much Hester has in common with her nineteenth-century fictional counterparts. Yet placing Hester’s traits and trials alongside those of two prototypical heroines of woman’s fiction—Ellen of The Wide, Wide World and Gerty of The Lamplighter—underscores the similar moral values and feminine ideals of the respective authors.

At the outset of The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne endows Hester with the same privileged traits, and places her in the same isolated situation, that mark the typical heroine at the opening

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46 Many critical misreadings of antebellum women’s novels might be explained by the fact that, as Baym notes, “these books connect a liberal individualism with conservative communitarianism in a way that is typical of the antebellum era but eccentric to contemporary analysis” (Woman’s Fiction, p. xxviii).
of an antebellum domestic novel. These heroines possess commendable strength and virtue, but they are still flawed. Left without protection or assistance, they must turn to their inner resources as they embark upon the difficult process of self-reform. When he first introduces Hester, Hawthorne tells us that she and her fellow Puritan women are made up “morally, as well as materially,” of “a coarser fibre . . . than . . . their fair descendants” (Scarlet Letter, p. 50). The narrator compares Hester’s strength to the weakness of later generations: “every successive mother has transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity, than her own” (p. 50). He also emphasizes the contrast between this dark-haired woman who possesses “a certain state and dignity” and the pale, ladylike figures who possessed “the delicate, evanescent” bearing that the narrator says his misguided nineteenth-century contemporaries praise (p. 53). Thus Hawthorne presents the same two contrasting models of femininity offered by the authors of woman’s fiction. Yet these authors, more optimistic than Hawthorne, attribute strength to the younger generation by privileging the capable heroine over her insipid mother. So, for example, we see in Catherine Sedgwick’s Clarence (1830) Gertrude’s “active, decisive, practical nature . . . contrasted to [her mother’s] timid and self-destructive passivity” (Baym, Woman’s Fiction, p. 59).

Deprived of a mother’s guidance, heroines of woman’s fiction have to learn on their own to control the passionate tempers and individualistic impulses that endanger their security and salvation. We often meet these heroines when they are completely alone and friendless. Hester exists in such isolation, her crime “taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself” (Scarlet Letter, p. 54). She must “sustain” her strength “by the ordinary resources of her nature,” “without a friend on earth who dared to show himself” (pp. 78, 81). So, too, early in The Wide, Wide World Ellen must leave her mother, and “in her loneliness” she knew that “nobody . . . cared in the least for her sorrow.”47 Even more

dramatically, in the opening pages of The Lamplighter Gerty is literally thrown out onto the pavement and left “alone in the cold, dark night” by her cruel guardian.48

These abandoned characters have every reason to be angry, and all three narrators emphasize the powerful emotions of their heroines. Hester exhibits an abundance of “spirit,” “desperate recklessness,” a “combative energy of . . . character,” and “lawless passion” (Scarlet Letter, pp. 53, 78, 165). Similarly, in The Wide, Wide World “Ellen’s passions were always extreme” (p. 148). At times “she sobbed aloud, and even screamed” at injustices, but “these fits of violence” must be overcome: “Strong passion—strong pride,—both long unbroken” mark the young Ellen’s character; and “much help from on high, must be hers before she could be thoroughly dispossessed of these evil spirits” (pp. 148, 181). In The Lamplighter Gerty also has a “fierce, untamed, impetuous nature” that “expressed itself in angry passion” (p. 7); her “violent temper, . . . when roused, knew no restraint” (p. 43). Even when taken in by a kindly guardian, “the fire of her spirit was not quenched, or its evil propensities extinguished” (p. 43). Like Hawthorne and Warner, Cummins indicates that her heroine’s temper is a dangerous and “dark infirmity”—society will not tolerate female anger—but such rage will not be contained without a struggle (p. 63).

In domestic novels, as in The Scarlet Letter, reform is gradual. In the midst of this process the heroine’s virtues are balanced by flaws, her attempts at doing good only partially successful. Usually she finds it much easier to regulate her actions than her ideas, behaving obediently and submissively even while her thoughts remain rebellious and independent. Yet the narrators of woman’s fiction emphasize that proper behavior is still an important first step on the path to proper emotion. Knowing this, Ellen “prayed that if she could not yet feel right” she “might be kept at least from acting or speaking wrong” (Wide World, p. 157). She acts out the lesson that every heroine of woman’s fiction must learn, struggling to be “perfectly mute and uncomplaining” in the face of trial and “submissive and patient under . . . affliction” (pp. 84, 25). Eventually she wins over her

“unreasonable and unkind” aunt with “untiring gentleness, obedience and meekness” (p. 241). Hester, in the middle of *The Scarlet Letter*, appears to be in this same position, able to act correctly even while her mind still wanders in dangerous directions: “She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worse usage” and earned respect with “the blameless purity” of her life after imprisonment (p. 160). The Salem townspeople are won over by her “genuine regard for virtue” (p. 160), just as Ellen’s aunt, Miss Fortune, “was softened by Ellen’s gentle, inoffensive ways and obedient usefulness” (*Wide World*, p. 334).

Such usefulness brings contentment in the world of the domestic novel. While early on in *The Lamplighter* Gerty is “always idle,—a fruitful source of unhappiness and discontent” (p. 9), she later finds the equanimity that woman’s fiction associates with continual household employment. When working hard, “Ellen grew rosy and hardy . . . she was very happy too. Her extreme and varied occupation made this possible” (*Wide World*, pp. 335–36). So, too, Hester initially employs “her native energy of character” with sewing, finding “ready and fairly requited employment for as many hours as she saw fit to occupy with her needle” (*Scarlet Letter*, pp. 84, 82). Yet she humbly “sought not to acquire any thing beyond a subsistence, of the plainest and most ascetic description” and “bestowed all her superfluous means in charity” (p. 83). Despite—or perhaps because of—her trials, Hester has at least developed the appearance of the feminine ideal of total self-denial, altruistic sympathy, and practical activity.

Hawthorne makes clear, however, that Hester’s thoughts and feelings have yet to match the virtue of her actions: “persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society”; “so it seemed to be with Hester” (pp. 164–65). Although she is “patient—a martyr, indeed,” she cannot “pray for her enemies; lest . . . the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse” (p. 85). Hester, like the young Ellen, has not yet learned “to feel just as kindly disposed toward [cruel people] as if they had never offended you—just as willing and inclined to please them or do them good” (*Wide World*, p. 80).
This is not the only rule that Hester has yet to accept: “In her lonesome cottage, by the sea-shore,” her “freedom of speculation” leads her to conclude falsely that “the world’s law was no law for her mind” (Scarlet Letter, p. 164). “In the dark labyrinth” with “a home and comfort nowhere” and “wild and ghastly scenery all around” (p. 166), Hester is far from the restrictions of the conventional domestic order that, in the nineteenth-century worldview, provide salvation. In this darkness her thoughts travel from the possibility of gender equality to suicide and infanticide—the novel linking all of these ideas as equally horrifying—and at this moment the narrator underscores that “the scarlet letter had not done its office” (p. 165). Only when her thoughts and feelings conform to the selfless ideals of feminine communitarianism will she have learned her lesson. Unlike the feeble Dimmesdale, however, Hester has the strength to leave the dark maze and finish the difficult, instructive journey.

The tough lessons of self-denial and social conformity are only learned over time. The heroines of woman’s fiction also struggle and resist before accepting “the world’s law.” Just as Hester ponders the inequitable position that “long hereditary habit” has forced “the whole race of womanhood” into (Scarlet Letter, p. 165), so Ellen clings to a belief in equitable treatment and screams that her aunt has “no right” to speak to her harshly (Wide World, p. 159). Hester expresses frustration by throwing off her letter and letting down her hair (Scarlet Letter, p. 211), while Gerty responds to her tormentors by throwing actual sticks and stones (Lamplighter, pp. 11, 49). Antebellum readers would be likely to read these childish tantrums and Hester’s meandering thoughts in the same manner: as irresponsible and uncontrolled moments. No matter how understandable the reactions given the provocation, they would still be judged as moments of weakness and sin.

But in each of these three narratives, the young woman repents her actions and continues the step-by-step process toward feminine virtue (as defined at the time). Respecting the difficulty of achieving self-discipline, readers expected a protagonist such as Ellen to experience “alternate surgings of passion and checks of prudence and conscience” (Wide World, p. 553).
Hawthorne's narrator, after noting that Hester still resents Chillingworth, sternly concludes that she "ought long ago to have done with this injustice" and asks "had seven long years ... wrought out no repentance?" (Scarlet Letter, p. 177). This query is left unanswered, but the response could be the same as that to the Lamplighter narrator's inquiry whether Gerty, after two years in a loving household, had "learned self-control?" "learned religion?": "She had begun; and though her footsteps often falter, though she sometimes quite turns aside, and, impatient of the narrow way, gives the rein to her old irritability and ill-temper, ... there is the strongest foundation for hopefulness in the sincerity of her good intentions, and the depth of her contrition" (Lamplighter, p. 72).

Only a sincerely contrite and humble heroine will be able to achieve the antebellum feminine ideal, building a house of virtue upon the foundation of inner strength and sympathy. Strong emotion alone is not enough. This feeling must be directed toward others; it is not a response to one's own sense of being injured. The antebellum domestic angel marshals her emotion practically and altruistically. Gerty has yet to achieve such emotional control when early in The Lamplighter she feels personally wronged and is "easily roused, her spirits variable, her whole nature sensitive to the last degree" (p. 69). Her role model, Emily Graham, embodies the type of sensitivity that Gerty must develop. Emily "never forgot the sufferings, the wants, the necessities, of others"; "her own great misfortunes ... were borne without repining; but the misfortunes and trials of others became her care, the alleviation of them her greatest delight. Emily was never weary of doing good" (p. 57).

In the final stages of her development Hester displays a similarly admirable balance of altruism and action: "Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (Scarlet Letter, p. 161). Hawthorne may not elaborate on what qualifies as "a woman's strength," but his contemporaries frequently did, repeatedly equating it with selflessness. Cummins's narrator, for example, tells us that love and "a higher light" bring Gerty the
qualities that she needs to survive: “a woman’s strength of heart and self-denial” (Lamplighter, p. 34).

In The Scarlet Letter, as in The Lamplighter and The Wide, Wide World, the heroine’s moral victory depends upon her vanquishing all individualistic desire. Before she accomplishes this, Ellen meets Mrs. Vawse, who provides an “example of contentment” (Wide World, p. 194). A widow with “no money nor property,” Mrs. Vawse remains “independent” and “does all sorts of things to support herself,” “isn’t above doing any thing, and yet she never forgets her own dignity,” and is always “cheerful and happy” (pp. 194–95). At the end of The Scarlet Letter we get the picture of the fully reformed Hester, who has also perfected this sort of self-denial and usefulness. When we meet her in the “Conclusion,” the letter has at last “done its office”—leaving a “deep print” of its moral lesson (p. 259). In her final incarnation Hester has resumed wearing the letter “of her own free will”; she has “no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment,” but leads a “toilsome, thoughtful” existence devoted to others (p. 263). She has achieved the ideal state that the heroines of domestic fiction finally attain. Near the end of The Wide, Wide World the narrator can say of Ellen that though “she had been a passionate child in earlier days; under religion’s happy reign that had long ceased to be true of her” (p. 553). Just like Hester at the conclusion of Hawthorne’s novel, the mature Ellen embodies “that singular mixture of gravity and sweetness that is never seen but where religion and discipline have done their work well” (Wide World, p. 559).

Once they become fully self-disciplined, with their individualistic impulses reined in, these heroines are able to perpetuate the cycle of religious influence prized by the authors of domestic fiction. We see Ellen—who has modeled herself on the virtuous Alice, who in turn learned from the saintly Mrs. Vawse—continue the pattern by bringing Nancy and Mr. Van Brunt to accept Christianity. Hawthorne does not fail to remind his readers that Hester, too, provides positive influence: “people brought all their sorrows and perplexities” to her cottage, and “Hester comforted and counselled them, as best she might” (Scarlet Letter, p. 263). Although she was once guilty of leading
Dimmesdale astray with “radical” ideas, it seems likely that Hester at the conclusion offers very different counsel, teaching the same lesson—of restraining passion and conforming to social law—that she herself has learned, putting off the hope for “new truth” and an equitable “relation between man and woman” to a distant future (p. 263). True to the conservative feminine ideal, she is humble, knowing that she is too “bowed down with shame” to be the prophetess of this coming era (p. 263). In this final stage of her development Hester illustrates The Lamplighter’s lesson that “the power of Christian humility, engrafted into the heart,—the humility of principle, of conscience” is the “one power that never fails to quell and subdue earthly pride and passion” (Lamplighter, p. 73). In the end, Hester—like Ellen and Gerty—is devoid of all such pride and passion and exemplifies angelic humility and self-denial. The author of “A Chapter on Women” concludes her commentary with a description that could describe the “Able” Hester of the novel’s end, noting that what society should value in a woman is “good sense”: such a woman’s “high destiny is not to achieve any great or wonderful work, or to prove the perfection of her sex, but to do what she can; daily fulfilling daily duties, daily experiencing daily pleasures; her home her kingdom; a few loving hearts the objects of her untiring care; she moves on, and her influence will be felt” (“A Chapter on Women,” pp. 294–95).

Seeing how well Hester fits this antebellum ideal and how closely Dimmesdale matches the disparaged eighteenth-century alternative, it is hardly surprising that critics responded accordingly when Hawthorne’s novel initially appeared. The North American Review claimed that we feel most for Hawthorne’s heroine when “we see her humble, meek, self-denying, charitable, and heart-wrung.”49 This reviewer judged Hester’s maternal and domestic qualities to be “humanizing traits,” but he thought that her character “disappoints” the reader when she expresses her rebellious sentiments (p. 140). Similarly, he judges Dimmesdale harshly because the minister fails to live up to the cultural ideals of usefulness and self-restraint. The essayist critiques the reverend’s wasted emotion,

49 Rev. of The Scarlet Letter, a Romance, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, North American Review, 71 (1850), 140.
complaining of Dimmesdale's "mere suffering, aimless and without effect... Every pang is wasted. A most obstinate and unhuman [sic] passion, or a most unwearying conscience it must be, neither being worn out, or made worse or better, by such a prolonged application of the scourge" (p. 141). The minister feels strongly, but his emotion has no purpose or impact and so elicits contempt rather than sympathy from the nineteenth-century reader.

Clearly, Hawthorne's connotative depiction of his protagonists succeeded in convincing mid-century audiences of Dimmesdale's contemptibility and Hester's worthiness. In accordance with this role reversal, it is the "fallen man" who crumbles and dies at the end of the novel. As Hester holds the dying minister in her arms—"Then, down he sank upon the scaffold! Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom" (p. 255)—we see the new model for capable womanhood watching the decline of the old model of eighteenth-century fictional values.50

The portrayals of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter, like the depictions of characters in woman's fiction, critique the eighteenth-century seduction novel and respond to nineteenth-century literary commentary. With powerful iconography Hawthorne constructs a conservative tale that reinforces the "code of ethics" put forth in public discourse, teaching readers to suppress "individual instinct and impulse" and uphold those "moral truths" that the Graham's Magazine reviewer wrote of in 1852. Reviewers might accuse French novelists—or even Dimmesdale—of dressing "depravity" up in a deceptively "fascinating garb," but Hawthorne himself could not be so charged. The "morals" of his story connect him to—rather than distance him from—the values expressed by both his culture and his female contemporaries.

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50 Such death scenes often appear in eighteenth-century novels. Charlotte Temple is held in her last moments by her father (see Charlotte Temple, p. 115), just as in Samuel Woodworth's The Champions of Freedom (1816) we see "Amelia at the death-bed of Harriet Palmer... sustaining her head on her bosom, and wiping the clammy dews of death from her sunken cheeks" (The Champions of Freedom, or The Mysterious Chief: A Romance of the Nineteenth Century, 2 vols. [New York: Charles N. Baldwin, 1818], II, 100–101).