Updike’s *Scarlet Letter* Trilogy: Recasting an American Myth

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Though many readers are aware of how John Updike has chronicled America of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in his Rabbit tetralogy, few have paid close attention to his other multivolume work concerning America (and a canonical American text), namely the *Scarlet Letter* trilogy. In 1975 Updike published *A Month of Sundays*, a novel in diary form in which a spiritually tormented and adulterous minister from Massachusetts is ordered to an Arizona motel for ministers-gone-astray; there he is urged to wrestle with his perverse soul and rub out his “stain.”[^1] Updike later referred to that novel as “Dimmesdale’s version” of *The Scarlet Letter*.[^2] In 1986 Updike published *Roger’s Version*, an unreliable first-person narrative in which a Harvard professor, a crusty old doctor of divinity named Roger, manipulates and feeds upon the life of a youthful, pious computer science graduate student named Dale. Most recently, in 1988, Updike published the epistolary *S.*, in which an angry North Shore housewife, with a strong predilection for Vitamin A, rebels against her Puritan heritage and patriarchal society by traveling to a desert ashram in Arizona. In these three novels, each told from the perspective of one of Hawthorne’s three protagonists, Updike has expanded, updated, satirized, and rewritten Hawthorne’s text.

That such a bold and intriguing project should go largely unrecognized by the critical community is surprising.[^3] Though these novels, with the notable exception of *Roger’s Version*, are lighter fare and less substantial than the best of Updike (the Rabbit books, *The Centaur*, *The Coup*), the project is significant. Any reconsideration of a canonical text by a major literary figure should warrant attention, particularly in light of the contemporary interest in intertextuality. In addition, the project is significant in that it reveals a more experimental and postmodern Updike, one who shares Nabokov’s sense of word play and games.
Two questions persist in regard to Updike’s project: Why should a prominent novelist explicitly rewrite a story which has already been told so successfully? And why Hawthorne? In answer to the former, Updike has long relied upon the successful work of previous writers. His first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* (1958), was a futuristic retelling of the story of St. Stephen. *Rabbit, Run* (1960) sprang from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Arthurian grail legend, and Peter Rabbit. *The Centaur* (1963) updated and interlaced a variety of Greek myths, so many in fact that Updike compiled a mythological index as an appendix. The mythic mode, in which a writer appropriates and retells an earlier story or tale which has achieved mythic dimensions, has long been salient in Updike’s fiction, though critics have failed to recognize its importance except in *The Centaur*. And according to Updike, the mythic mode is attractive not only because it offers “a counterpoint of ideality to the drab real level” and provides “an excuse for a number of jokes,” but because it demonstrates the “sensation that the people we meet are guises, do conceal something mythic, perhaps prototypes or longings in our minds.”

In answer to the latter question—why Hawthorne?—one discovers in Hawthorne many of the same themes and conflicts inherent in Updike’s own writing: the conflict between matter and spirit; a fascination with community and communal experiments; the anxiety and fear of moral damnation; the relationship between sex and religion; an interest in what Tony Tanner calls the “unstable triangularity of adultery” and its effect upon a community; and the use of ambivalent symbolism. The link between the two writers is strengthened by the fact that both have lived most of their lives on the same approximate patch of ground near Boston: Hawthorne in Salem and Concord, and Updike in Ipswich, Georgetown, and Beverly Farms. Hawthorne has become more than just a literary antecedent for Updike; he is a figure embedded in the history and myth of Updike’s chosen community, a writer whose town Updike must pass every time he goes to and from Boston.

Yet in appropriating Hawthorne’s text, Updike presumably was
driven by more than just similarities between his work and that of Hawthorne; he must have hoped to gain some benefit. Though enormously successful in both critical and popular circles, Updike has been rather viciously attacked by a small group of critics for lacking depth, for capturing “only the outside of things, the shell of the corporate experience we all have in being twentieth-century Americans.” These critics tend to view him as a writer who is all style and little content: “Updike, out of kindness or acedia, has very little to say. And no one writing in America says it better.” In light of Updike’s often eager responsiveness to address his critics, it seems likely, as Denis Donoghue suggests, that by rewriting The Scarlet Letter, Updike expresses “his middle-aged determination to give his art a metaphysical darkening.” And in recent novels—The Witches of Eastwick (1984), Roger’s Version (1986), and Rabbit at Rest (1990)—there is a darker resonance, a more sustained reflection upon death and solitude, and a growing interest in voyeurism and vicariously experienced life.

Updike becomes the latest apprentice in what Richard Brodhead refers to as “The School of Hawthorne.” According to Brodhead, Hawthorne, unlike Whitman or Emerson, was so uncommunicative and gave such little guidance to his followers that they “have been free to put him to any purpose they have required.” Writers from Melville, James, and Howells to the present have been able to reinvent Hawthorne so as to suit their own personal needs, creating or aligning themselves with “the Hawthorne tradition” and appropriating the authority and success that are conferred by such a tradition. In turning to Hawthorne, Updike carves out an emotional stance for himself which expresses a mixture of devotion and aggression toward his predecessor. Through his intertextual echoings, Updike works to maintain and confirm a connection with the past, offering homage to an earlier writer and text. The author of a series of essays on writers whom he refers to as “American Masters” (Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, Emerson, Howells, Franklin), Updike has long expressed his awareness and reverence for such writers and for the hierarchy which confirms such a
status. In his utilization of Hawthorne, Updike endeavors to absorb some degree of his predecessor’s genius and align himself with a tradition of American “masters,” in hopes no doubt that his work at some point will be pondered in relation to Hawthorne. Yet that is only part of the picture. Updike also parodies and deromanticizes Hawthorne’s text, calling into question its authority and moral stance. With his clinical frankness and post-Freudian desire to verbalize, Updike rejects the warfare between body and soul which is so central to Hawthorne, and he satirizes Hawthorne’s protagonists for their fragility, prudishness, and self-deception. Updike’s stance toward Hawthorne is complex; he pays homage to the past “master” and yet questions and satirizes the master’s moral tenets.

In attempting to transform Hawthorne’s text, Updike is seeking to alter an American myth. Explaining his project, Updike states: “The Scarlet Letter is not merely a piece of fiction, it is a myth by now, and it was an updating of the myth, the triangle as redefined by D. H. Lawrence, that interested me.” By referring to Hawthorne’s novel as a myth, Updike appears to use the term not primarily in the sense of indicating a primitive pattern of behavior, such as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Northop Frye, C. G. Jung, and others might suggest, but more specifically as a story or a pattern of behavior “linked with a particular culture and dealing with named characters and locations” as generated in a work of literature. René Wellek and Austin Warren point to the social elements inherent in myth, defining the term as “the explanation a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do.” As witnessed in high-school English curricula across the nation, Hawthorne’s novel of adulterous love, perhaps more than any other text, is what America offers its young, both as literature and as history.

At its core a myth expresses, as Denis de Rougemont points out, “the rules of conduct of a given social or religious group,” and it exposes how the individuals of that historical group relate to one another. In Hawthorne’s text, characters remain largely isolated from
one another, residing in separate “spheres” and rarely touching. Human contact, in particular coitus between Hester and Dimmesdale, is a legal and moral violation. According to Updike, “Hawthorne’s instinctive tenet [is] that matter and spirit are inevitably at war,” and in the course of this battle, “matter verges upon being evil; virtue, upon being insubstantial.” Hawthorne’s characters are literally divided between public and private self, interior and exterior world, body and soul. And as seen in Dimmesdale’s dramatic death upon the scaffold, the soul, apparently with Hawthorne’s approval, is victorious over the transgressions of the body. In his trilogy, Updike endeavors to transform The Scarlet Letter myth by affirming corporeal impulse, and thus reconciling body and soul.

Updike’s revision of The Scarlet Letter appropriates and builds upon two concepts outlined in Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature: Hawthorne’s duplicity, and the American quest for renewal. According to Lawrence, the primary impulse in Hawthorne is toward subversion and deception: “that blue-eyed darling Nathaniel knew disagreeable things in his inner soul. He was careful to send them out in disguise.” In recasting Hester, Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale, Updike, like Lawrence before him, compels the reader to reexamine Hawthorne’s characters, particularly in regard to what has been repressed or disguised. In addition, Lawrence speaks of the self’s ability for “shedding skins,” a term which Updike appropriates. Lawrence explains the founding of America as arising not from a desire by the “Pilgrim Fathers” for freedom, but as a desire “largely to get away. . . . To get away from everything they are and have been.” The objective was to slough off the old European skin and grow a new American one. Updike’s characters, in America of the 1970s and 1980s, find themselves in a rather similar situation, though it is no longer a European skin which must be sloughed off. Bored and oppressed by their own predictable lives and by a repressive middle-class Protestantism (handed down from Hawthorne’s characters), Updike’s characters are in need of passionate experience, what de Rougemont refers to as a
“transfiguring force.”22 And so they follow the same spirit of quest which once lured Hawthorne’s characters across the Atlantic. In his three novels, *A Month of Sundays*, *Roger’s Version*, and *S.*, Updike recasts Hawthorne’s three “divided” protagonists and demonstrates how the “mythic” American situation persists: that of individuals struggling within themselves and against their communities in an effort to shake off the past and reinvent the world.

Updike’s first attempt at rewriting *The Scarlet Letter* was *A Month of Sundays*, or Dimmesdale’s version. Though the novel has been accurately criticized as excessive and self-indulgent, it is nonetheless more self-consciously clever and complex, more reflexively post-modern, than Updike’s earlier productions. Delivered in the form of a diary, *A Month of Sundays* is the Reverend Thomas Marshfield’s account of the infidelities and transgressions which landed him in exile at a motel for ministers-gone-astray in Arizona. Like Dimmesdale, Marshfield is an anxious and confused Protestant minister from Massachusetts who has become entangled in adultery with his parishioners. From his desert exile, Marshfield explains how his marriage to Jane Chillingworth, a woman of “goodness” and a model of Christian ethics, had become stale and unsatisfactory. He then describes how he fell passionately into an affair with his parish organist, Alicia Crick, which “opened the floodgates” and “slashed the walls of my prison.” Soon he finds himself administering to the sexual needs of a large number of his female parishioners: “there was a smell about me now. Women sensed it. They flocked to be counselled” (*MS*, p. 132).23 Marshfield is Dimmesdale with a hint of Don Juan, reminding us of the strong attraction which Hawthorne’s preacher had upon his female parishioners: “the virgins of his church grew pale around him, victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment that they imagined it to be all religion” (*SL*, p. 142). *A Month of Sundays* is Marshfield’s account of himself and his overactive libido, recorded as he struggles with his inner being and undergoes self-therapy to return home after his month in desert exile.
In his revision Updike reminds us of just how significant the act of verbalization (speaking, writing) is to the character of Dimmesdale, and how Dimmesdale’s duplicitous and clever speech serves as a metaphor for his divided and conflicted self. Repeatedly in *The Scarlet Letter* Dimmesdale finds himself in pulpits and on balconies and scaffolds, speaking and preaching to the people of Boston. In his initial appearance Dimmesdale is called upon by his superiors to rectify an element of social disorder, Hester’s adultery, by acting in the capacity for which he is best suited: speaking to the public. It is an ironic moment as Dimmesdale employs clever language and veiled speech, representative of his divided self:

“Hester Prynne, . . . thou hearest what this good man says, and seest the accountability under which I labor. If thou feelest it to be for thy soul’s peace . . . I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer!” (*SL*, p. 67)

Speech is a crucial act for Dimmesdale not only because he is a minister, an occupation which almost exclusively relies upon verbal communication, but more importantly because he is guilty of an act that he feels demands public disclosure through speech. Tempted and yet fearful of speaking truthfully, Dimmesdale divides and tortures himself, employing a language of double-speak.

Updike appropriates this speech metaphor for Marshfield in *A Month of Sundays*. Like Dimmesdale, Marshfield has been asked by his superiors to address, with words, a social wrong: “my keepers have set before me a sheaf of blank sheets—a month’s worth, in their estimation. Sullying them is to be my sole therapy” (*MS*, p. 3). Employing significant rhetorical skills, Marshfield, too, proves to be a clever and deceptive speaker with his own “tongue of flame.” Yet, where Dimmesdale strives to repress dangerous thoughts and words, Marshfield endeavors to express everything; Dimmesdale’s retention is replaced by Marshfield’s volubility. Holding his secret and passion within, Dimmes-
dale allows his Calvinistic soul to devour his body. But Marshfield, with a clinical frankness and a post-Freudian desire to be expressive, attempts to restore himself by reconciling body and soul.

In *A Month of Sundays*, there is undoubtedly a strong relationship between writing and adultery. As John Matthews suggests, Marshfield comes to understand that writing repeats adultery as it tries to cure it.\(^{24}\) Writing allows another form for Marshfield’s seductive and desirous inclinations. Tony Tanner points out that the chaos of adultery can be related to the chaos of language, suggesting that “puns and ambiguities are to common language what adultery and perversion are to ‘chaste’ . . . sexual relations.”\(^{25}\) Marshfield’s narrative—loose, comic, colloquial, sexually explicit, and playful—adopts a singular form of speech which creatively breaks away from conventional language. In addition, just as adultery undermines social order, law, and authority, Marshfield’s writing questions and subverts the authority of the text itself and creates a level of uncertainty and ambiguity: “or perhaps these words were never spoken, I made them up, to relieve and rebuke the silence of this officiously chaste room” (*MS*, p. 33). Much like adultery, writing creates an awakening of energy which can lead to the forging of a new kind of expression, yet it may also pose a threat to the social order, as we see in Hawthorne’s discussion of his own authorship in “The Custom-House.”

Updike’s Marshfield stands in direct contrast to Michael Davitt Bell’s contention that if *The Scarlet Letter* were told from Dimmesdale’s point of view it might sound like a tale by Poe.\(^{26}\) Marshfield’s diary is parodic and humorous, filled with word play and silly puns. The solemn and highly proper Dimmesdale is replaced by the witty and radically improper Marshfield. By recasting Dimmesdale as a prankster and a clown, Updike of course parodies Hawthorne’s preacher and demonstrates how sexual attitudes have changed drastically since 1850 (and 1640), yet there is more. Through the voice of Marshfield, Updike is attempting to revise America’s understanding of Christianity. As he stated in an interview, Updike is not at all pleased with the contemporary critical perspective on Christianity:
People nowadays, at least liberal literary, assume that the Christian religion is primarily a system for enforcing ethics. It is not. It is an organization for distributing the good news of Jesus Christ. 27

Like so many of Updike’s protagonists, Marshfield is a disciple of Karl Barth, the neo-orthodox Swiss theologian who depreciates ethics because it is solely an affair of the lowly human element, having nothing to do with the Divine. For Marshfield a vital belief in the Incarnation of Christ, not good ethical behavior, is central to Christianity. Though much of Marshfield’s discourse is comic (he suggests the commandment, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is meant to encourage adultery), he does warn his readers to resist Christian ethical humanism and its intolerance of the corporeal: “we and our bodies are one . . . [and] we should not heretically . . . castigate the body and its dark promptings” (MS, pp. 44, 135).

According to Marshfield, the American self has been deprived since the early seventeenth century because of “lost baggage” which was apparently left behind in England:

Somewhere . . . an American mystery was circumscribed, having to do with knowing, with acceptance of body by soul, with recovery of some baggage lost in the Atlantic crossing, with some viral thrill at the indignity of incarnation, with some monstrous and gorgeous otherness the female and male genitals meet in one another. (MS, pp. 134-5)

Marshfield reinterprets corporeal impulse affirmatively, arguing that America has been physically handicapped for too long and must recover its wholeness by reconciling body and soul. The endings of the two novels, both triumphant, highlight how Updike and Hawthorne respond differently to the urgings of the body. Dimmesdale, in confessing publicly, allows his soul to triumph over his body; by escaping into death, he terminates corporeal anxiety and torture. Marshfield, on the other hand, proves successful in at last seducing the motel manageress,
a certain Ms. Prynne, and their bodies, wrapped in ecstatic coitus, experience an altogether different form of death, and one which exalts in the mutual pleasures of the flesh.

Updike’s second attempt at rewriting Hawthorne was Roger’s Version, which refers to Roger Chillingworth’s version of events. Chillingworth, the learned and bookish doctor, finds a contemporary counterpart in Updike’s Roger Lambert, an equally bookish doctor of divinity and professor at what appears to be Harvard. Dressed in his academic “armor of amiable tweed,” Lambert, like Chillingworth before him, is resistant to any type of passionate engagement with others. Yet along comes Dale Kohler, whose first name refers to Hawthorne’s minister and whose last alludes to Kaufmann Kohler, an influential theologian of Reform Judaism who tried, much as Dale shall, to reconcile traditional faith with modern knowledge. Young, tall, pale, and pious, Dale is a computer science graduate student in search of a grant. Possessing a born-again Christian’s zeal for prayer and biblical quotation, he hopes to use his knowledge of computers and science to find God, literally to see Him appear on a computer screen. Imagining God to be that “purposeful Intelligence” who “fine-tuned the physical constants and the initial conditions,” Dale determines “to demonstrate from existing physical and biological data, through the use of models and manipulations on the electronic digital computer, the existence of God” (*RV*, pp. 75-6). In a novel largely concerned with visualization, Dale is determined literally to see that which is unseeable, to shine a light on that which has no understandable physical essence. “God can’t hide any more,” Dale declares, expressing his hope that he can show the people of the world, who have been intimidated into not believing in God by the atheistic science community, that God can be proven. If successful, Dale would become a contemporary savior.

Roger Lambert, Updike’s recurring Barthian who envisions God as “Wholly Other,” finds Dale’s project “aesthetically and ethically repulsive. Aesthetically because it describes a God Who lets Himself
be intellectually trapped, and ethically because it eliminates faith from religion” (*RV*, p. 24). Annoyed not only by an attempted heresy, Dale’s technological pursuit of God, but also by Dale’s youthful self-confidence and piety, Roger, the curmudgeon and symbol of old male authority and intellect, responds aggressively, locking the younger man in an intellectual struggle designed to ruin him and his precious faith. The situation ultimately becomes ironic: the scientist is “intent on proving God’s existence,” while the theologian “rejects the possibility of such a proof.”28 Although Dale receives the grant and momentarily sees the outline of a face and hand on the computer screen, the impossibility of his project eventually overwhelms him. In addition, the affair which he has been carrying on with Roger’s young wife Esther has drained him physically and emotionally.

Roger’s Version addresses many of the same themes and concerns from *A Month of Sundays*—reparation of the split between body and soul, adultery as a transfiguring experience—yet there is a new focus and controlling metaphor: the act of seeing. Like Chillingworth, whose eyes were said to possess a “strange, penetrating power,” Roger Lambert (who takes his last name from the eighteenth-century German physicist Johann Heinrich Lambert, known for a variety of inventions in the study of light) is proud of “the keenness of my eyesight.” Updike’s Lambert is less a participant and more an observer, witness, and manipulator of others. With his expert vision, Roger is unusually perceptive of how light is continually transforming vision. In virtually every scene in the novel we are made aware of the type of light being generated: “gray, autumnal light,” “double-barrelled light,” “hospital light,” “islands of light in a jagged arboreal ocean.” We are also alerted to the direction from which the light arrives (“behind me,” “overhead”), and light is continually transforming objects and people: “[Dale’s] easy tallness, which in the slant chapel light of my office he quickly folded into the university chair opposite my desk, here in my front hall loomed, all suited and combed, as a costume of grace, a form of potency” (*RV*, p. 95).
Obsessed with the youthful Dale, who himself is attempting literally to see God, Roger endeavors to see into the eyes and mind of the young man so as to reach his soul. Like Chillingworth (and Miles Coverdale from The Blithedale Romance), Roger Lambert delights in seeing into and through the eyes of others, and in the process, manipulating those lives. Roger’s Version is largely a series of visions, fantasies, and daydreams in which Roger telepathically follows the movements of Dale Kohler. Longing to escape his dull, middle-aged existence, Roger is simultaneously attracted and repulsed by Dale, yet he experiences “a grateful inkling that [Dale] was injecting a new element into [his] life” (RV, p. 90). In sharing Dale’s “field of vision,” Roger temporarily sheds his gray skin and is able to see anew. His wife Esther, who has ceased as a stimulating presence, becomes transformed when seen through Dale’s eyes:

I saw her through his eyes, my little wife, her tense and tidy figure foreshortened even more from his angle than from mine. . . . Esther had put on a glint, an alertness, an older woman’s assured and ironic potential playfulness. (RV, p. 96)

Updike follows the lead of both Hawthorne and James, not only in his concern with voyeurism, but also in what Brodhead refers to as “literature’s essential vicariousness”: “the need to remedy a felt life-deficiency not by living one’s own life more fully but by appropriating life in simulated or surrogate forms.”

Dale is used as a pawn by the Lamberts in an effort to improve their conjugalit y (D. H. Lawrence reads The Scarlet Letter as an attempt by Hester and Chillingworth, accomplices tied by marriage, to subdue the pure spiritual man). Through Dale, each attempts to annoy, hurt, frustrate, reawaken, and anger the other. And by the end of the novel Dale has become so disillusioned and abused by the people of the East that he returns, like Nick Carraway of The Great Gatsby, to his roots in the Midwest. Yet just as The Scarlet Letter concludes with Dimmesdale’s
“triumph,” Roger’s Version ends with a triumph of sort for Dale Kohler. He not only has escaped Roger’s visionary grasp (by leaving Boston), but much to Roger’s annoyance he has impregnated Roger’s wife and inspired her to attend church.

The epistolary novel S., or Hester’s version, is Updike’s most recent addition to the trilogy, and it forms the final side of the Scarlet Letter triangle. The volume most interested in the American experiment of dissent, separation, and heroic struggle to rebuild the world, S. arises not only from The Scarlet Letter, but also from The Blithedale Romance, Frances FitzGerald’s 1986 Cities on a Hill, and Hawthorne’s letters from Brook Farm. From Hawthorne’s Brook Farm letters to Sophia, Updike appropriates a vehicle and genre for telling his story, namely the epistolary, and the seeds for a character type: a less-than-committed pilgrim adventurer who has an obsessive need to possess and control the lives of those residing back in the world left behind. In this respect, Updike is satirizing Hawthorne the pilgrim and letter writer. The Blithedale Romance, echoing strongly throughout S., provides for Updike the backdrop of social duplicity, in which a society not only “repeats” and “intensifies” the features of the society it has rejected, but also indulges its own personal desires under the guise of communal reform. Finally, from Cities on a Hill, Updike utilizes a real-life blueprint—the guru-inspired, Rolls Royce-outfitted Rajneeshpuram in Oregon—and appropriates its philosophy, organization, and dynamics for his own fictional Ashram Arhat.

The American experiment of dissent, separation and heroic struggle to rebuild the world is the focus of all of the above texts, and in each, individual selves attempt to shed old skins in an effort toward self-transformation. Implicit, of course, in any such experiment is the question of whether the self can indeed be altered. In S. Sarah Worth, the contemporary Hester Prynne, is a pilgrim on a quest to change herself and the world. She informs her husband: “I will change my name. I will change my being. The woman you ‘knew’ and ‘possessed’ is no more. I am destroying her. . . . I shed you as I would shed a skin” (S., p. 12).
Frustrated by her husband’s infidelity and trapped by a Puritan heritage, Sarah leaves her safe suburban Massachusetts home and travels to the wilderness, here a desert ashram in Arizona (the desert in Updike’s trilogy is the topos of temptation, instruction, enlightenment, and redemption). At the ashram, she seeks to realize her spiritual and physical potential, practicing yoga to awaken the kundalini, or “coiled up” female energy lying dormant at the base of her spine.

More than the other two novels in the trilogy, S. most consciously and playfully alludes to *The Scarlet Letter*. Sarah is continually pushing Vitamin A on her mother for her eyes, skin, and thyroid. Sarah’s female lover Alianga is addressed as “Dearest A,” and together they live in an “A-frame.” Instead of displaying a scarlet A on her breast as a sign of her adultery, Sarah conceals a mini-tape recorder in her bra in order to document the actual moment of adultery. And in the town of Forrest, a day’s drive from Hawthorne, California, Sarah stays at the Babbling Brook Motor Lodge, whose stationery portrays a child dabbling in the brook while dark ominous trees surround.

Yet in spite of its comic and playful nature, S. challenges and attempts to revise significantly our understanding of *The Scarlet Letter*, offering a reconsideration of both Hester Prynne and the American quest for spiritual rebirth. For many readers Hester has evolved into a feminist heroine of literature, a sacred sister, a model of dignified defiance. Mark Van Doren refers to her as New England’s “most heroic creature,” a heroine who is “almost a goddess.” More recently Nina Auerbach has spoken of Hester as “a solitary icon,” “a feminist saint, the vehicle for a new truth of empowered and transfigured womanhood.” In *S.* Updike deromanticizes Hester, challenging feminist readings which confer sainthood upon her. Updike’s Sarah Worth resists Hester’s stoicism, releasing a torrent of anger and bitterness directed mostly at the male species: “Shams. That’s what men are. Liars. Hollow frauds and liars” (*S.*, p. 229). Though some critics have argued, with cries of sexism and misogyny, that Updike has reduced Hester to “a wholly hateful woman,” Updike suggests rather that Hester is far
more complex, conflicted, defiant, and self-deceptive than is commonly imagined. Updike is following Hawthorne’s lead:

The world’s law was no law for her mind. . . . She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter. (SL, p. 164)

However, where the shadowy Hawthorne resists explicitly exposing the interior Hester, Updike takes us beneath the textual surface to reveal an angry and defiant woman.

Updike’s purpose in S. is largely satirical, as he exposes the duplicity, hypocrisy, and folly of the spiritual community and quest. Supposedly based upon antimaterialism, the Ashram Arhat boasts of its own shopping mall which sells Arhat t-shirts and tapes, and the Arhat can be spotted wearing large diamonds and being driven about in expensive automobiles. Ma Prapti, the ashram administrator, is ultimately arrested for having sprinkled drugs into the vegetarian curry so as to keep the pilgrims passive. And the Arhat himself, the Supreme Meditator, turns out to be not an Indian guru but rather a Jewish dropout named Art Steinmetz from Watertown, Massachusetts. As the Dimmesdale figure in the novel (Art, Arthur, Arhat), the guru is another example of the fraudulent holy man, whose fictional predecessors include Dimmesdale and Sinclair Lewis’ Elmer Gantry, and whose real-life counterparts are such figures as Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. The Arhat is a prime example of that uniquely American mode of thinking in which one believes that one can transform oneself into anything one chooses. Steinmetz is the Jay Gatsby of religion.

No one, however, is more hypocritical or duplicitous than Updike’s Hester, Sarah Worth. For a woman who has recently freed herself from material concerns, Sarah inventories family possessions like an accountant and hoards them like a miser. And she has deceived herself
into believing that her quest is centered upon spirituality and love, rather than revenge and hatred. Sarah is not unlike a comic Shakespearean heroine who fails to see her own hypocrisy and hidden motives. Like Hester, Sarah too fails to become the “destined prophetess” for womankind. Her quest for a new identity, intimately associated with the dream of America, fails largely as she discovers that her old self cannot be fully shed: “We shed our skins but something naked and white and amara slithers out and is always the same” (S., p. 262).

In his *Scarlet Letter* trilogy Updike has retold an earlier story which concerns America, its history, and as Lawrence would say, its very “spirit.” The story concerns the American self as it is isolated from others and imprisoned by its own oppressiveness. Though contemporary America is no longer beleaguered by the gray, iron men of Hawthorne’s sensibility, there is nevertheless a new beast that menaces the land: an “ease and comfort,” a “milky human kindness,” a yawning boredom (*MS*, pp. 50, 59). Without the rigid restraints of Puritanism (as Sarah Worth puts it, “Puritanism in my parents had dwindled to a sort of housekeeping”), Updike is suggesting that America has mellowed and lost its passion. Updike’s characters have become stifled, bored, and oppressed by their predictable lives, and, like Hawthorne’s characters, they are in need of a transfiguring passionate experience. Once again, geographical movement offers the remedy: as Hawthorne’s Puritans crossed the Atlantic in their quest for renewal, Updike’s contemporary pilgrims leave familiar communities (Marshfield and Worth travel to Arizona, and Lambert to the projects of Boston and to the interior of Dale’s mind) in hopes of escaping past identities.

Updike’s America is vastly different from Hawthorne’s; it has been released not only from the constraints of Puritanism, but also from the claims of tragedy. The torment that Updike’s characters experience is comic. In upper-middle-class America, life and death struggles against primitive forces have become less visible; a more trivial and darkly comic existence is mandated. Hawthorne’s America, supernaturally marked by primitive forests, ghostly images, and divine celestial mes-
sages, is transformed by Updike into the locus of quotidian concerns, domestic squabbles, and bourgeois angst. And Updike’s America is no longer one in which we can catch only shadowy glimpses of Hester and Dimmesdale together; Updike offers lengthy and graphic scenes in which the Hester and Dimmesdale figures are intimately wrapped in coitus. Updike attempts to undo the traditional body-soul division in Hawthorne. Following Tertullian and Barth, Updike’s Roger Lambert argues for the significance of human flesh, blasting those “who make an outcry against the flesh . . . who accuse it of being unclean . . . infirm, guilty . . . burdensome, troublesome” (RV, p. 152). Updike departs from Hawthorne in refusing to punish immoral behavior. Affirming corporeal impulse, Updike argues that America has been physically handicapped for too long and must recover its wholeness. Through acceptance of the body and its needs, the American self can rise from its bourgeois malaise, taste the exhilaration of freedom, and experience faith in the divine.


Notes
1. In his essay “Hawthorne’s Creed,” Updike states: “Where the two incompatible realms of Hawthorne’s universe impinge, something leaks through; there is a stain . . . . The stain, this sinister spillage from another world, can take the form of poison, of a potion . . . of overinsistent symbols like the scarlet letter.” See Hugging the Shore (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 77.


10. In an interview with Mervyn Rothstein (“In *S.*. Updike Tries the Woman’s Viewpoint,” *New York Times* [March 2, 1988], p. C21), Updike says of his portrayal of women that “knowing that there is this reservation out in some quarters about my portraits of women, I’m constantly trying to improve them. . . . *The Witches of Eastwick* . . . was one attempt to make things right with my, what shall we call them, feminist detractors, and *S.* is another.” The caveat, of course, is Updike’s tendency toward irony, particularly since these two novels have most angered feminist critics.


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22. De Rougemont, p. 16.
25. Tanner, p. 53.
35. Updike states: “I see Hester, in the context of her time, as tough and defiant and practical as she could be” (letter to the author, Jan. 26, 1989).