what specific rights and privileges they describe.
2. How would some Quislings help the enemy re-write the Preamble if we lost the war?
3. What parts of the Constitution are Fascists most anxious to destroy?
4. How does the Preamble safeguard the rights of Americans?

Step 5. Assignment for intensive evaluative reading of the Preamble.—Each student is asked to write out carefully in his own words what the Preamble means to him and what benefits he enjoys that it helps to safeguard. Individuals or small groups are also asked to illustrate or dramatize the key parts of the Preamble For example, what is meant by “We, the People”?

To interpret that question, a group can present a recording of “Ballad for Americans,” with words in the hands of the class, and unison singing accompanied by the recording at the end. Another group can prepare a different interpretation from the Atlantic booklet, We Americans—Who We Are, Where We Came From, What We Believe, Whither We Are Going, or similar material gathered in the library. Whitman’s “Salute au Monde” is excellent.

Individuals or groups in turn can then develop the meaning of “to form a more perfect union” and the Preamble’s five following statements of purpose. In one or more of them the connections should be made between such key phrases in the Declaration of Independence as “all men are created equal” and key ideas in the Bill of Rights and the “Gettysburg Address.”

Such preparation will make it possible to organize a directing committee and prepare a dramatic program to highlight the many meanings that the Preamble has for all of us today. It can lift “reading” out of the cloister into the field of action and change word-calling into applied semantics.

SCARLET A MINUS

FREDERIC I. CARPENTER

From the first The Scarlet Letter has been considered a classic. It has appealed not only to the critics but to the reading public as well. The young Henry James described the feeling of mystery and terror which it aroused in his childish mind—a feeling not easily definable, but reaching to the depths of his nature. The scarlet letter has seemed the very symbol of all sin, translating into living terms the eternal problem of evil. And in 1850 the book was timely as well as timeless: it specifically suggested the nineteenth-century answer to the eternal problem. “Sin” might sometimes be noble, and “virtue” ignoble. Rousseau himself might have defined the scarlet letter as the stigma which society puts upon the natural instincts of man.

But in modern times The Scarlet Letter has come to seem less than perfect. Other novels, like Anna Karenina, have treated the same problem with a richer humanity and a greater realism. If the book remains a classic, it is of a minor order. Indeed, it now seems not quite perfect even of its own kind. Its logic is ambigu-

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1 Formerly in the Departments of English of the University of Chicago and Harvard; author of Emerson and Asia.
ous, and its conclusion moralistic. The ambiguity is interesting, of course, and the moralizing slight, but the imperfection persists.

In one sense the very imperfection of The Scarlet Letter makes it classic: its ambiguity illustrates a fundamental confusion in modern thought. To the question “Was the action symbolized by the scarlet letter wholly sinful?” it suggests a variety of answers: “Yes,” reply the traditional moralists; “Hester Prynne broke the Commandments.” But the romantic enthusiasts answer: “No; Hester merely acted according to the deepest of human instincts.” And the transcendental idealists reply: “In part; Hester truly sinned against the morality which her lover believed in, but did not sin against her own morality, because she believed in a ‘higher law.’ To her own self, Hester Prynne remained true.”

From the perspective of a hundred years we shall reconsider these three answers to the problem of evil suggested by The Scarlet Letter. The traditional answer remains clear, but the romantic and the idealistic have usually been confused. Perhaps the imperfection of the novel arises from Hawthorne’s own confusion between his heroine’s transcendental morality and mere immorality. Explicitly, he condemned Hester Prynne as immoral; but implicitly, he glorified her as courageously idealistic. And this confusion between romantic immorality and transcendental idealism has been typical of the genteel tradition in America.

I

According to the traditional moralists, Hester Prynne was truly a sinful woman. Although she sinned less than her hypocritical lover and her vengeful husband, she nevertheless sinned; and, from her sin, death and tragedy resulted. At the end of the novel, Hawthorne himself positively affirmed this interpretation:

Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin.

And so the traditional critics have been well justified. The Scarlet Letter explicitly approves the tragic punishment of Hester’s sin and explicitly declares the impossibility of salvation for the sinner.

But for the traditionalists there are many kinds and degrees of sin, and The Scarlet Letter, like Dante’s Inferno, describes more than one. According to the orthodox, Hester Prynne belongs with the romantic lovers of the Inferno, in the highest circle of Hell. For Hester sinned only through passion, but her lover through passion and concealment, and her husband through “violating, in cold blood, the sanctity of the human heart.”

Therefore, Hester’s sin was the least, and her punishment the lightest.

But Hester sinned, and, according to traditional Puritanism, this act shut her off forever from paradise. Indeed, this archetypal sin and its consequent tragedy have been taken to symbolize the eternal failure of the American dream. Hester suggests “the awakening of the mind to ‘moral gloom’ after its childish dreams of natural bliss are dissipated.”

Thus her lover, standing upon the scaffold, exclaimed: “Is this not better than we dreamed of in the forest?” And Hawthorne repeated that Hester recognized the eternal justice of her own damnation. The romantic dream of natural freedom has seemed empty to the traditionalists,

because sin and its punishment are eternal and immutable.

That Hester's sin was certain, and her dream of freedom impossible, traditional Catholicism has also agreed. But the Catholic critics object that Hawthorne's Puritanism denies the Christian doctrine of the forgiveness of sin. They believe that Hester expiated her evil by means of repentance and a virtuous later life: "Hester represents the repentant sinner, Dimmesdale the half-repentant sinner, and Chillingworth the unrepentant sinner." Therefore, Hester individually achieved salvation, even though her sin was clear and her dream of universal freedom impossible.

But all the traditionalists agree that Hester's action was wholly sinful. That Hester herself never admitted this accusation and that Hester is never represented as acting blindly in a fit of passion and that Hester never repented of her "sin" are facts which the traditionalists overlook. Moreover, they forget that Hawthorne's condemnation of Hester's sin is never verified by Hester's own words. But of this more later.

Meanwhile, other faults in Hester's character are admitted by the traditional and the liberal alike. Even if she did not do what she believed to be evil, Hester nevertheless did tempt her lover to do what he believed to be evil and thus caused his death. And because she wished to protect her lover, she consented to a life of deception and concealment which she herself knew to be false. But for the traditional moralists neither her temptation of her lover nor her deception of him was a cardinal sin. Only her act of passion was.

Therefore Hester's passion was the fatal flaw which caused the tragedy.

Either because of some womanly weakness which made her unable to resist evil, or because of some pride which made her oppose her own will to the eternal law, she did evil. Her sin was certain, the law she broke was immutable, and the human tragedy was inevitable—according to the traditional moralists.

II

But, according to the romantic enthusiasts, The Scarlet Letter points a very difficult moral. The followers of Rousseau have said that Hester did not sin at all; or that, if she did, she transformed her sin into a virtue. Did not Hawthorne himself describe the radiance of the scarlet letter, shining upon her breast like a symbol of victory? "The tendency of her fate had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread." Hester—if we discount Hawthorne's moralistic conclusion—never repented of her "sin" of passion, because she never recognized it as such.

In absolute contrast to the traditionalists, the romantics have described The Scarlet Letter as a masterpiece of "Hawthorne's immoralism." Not only Hester but even the Puritan minister becomes "an amoralist and a Nietzschean." "In truth," wrote Hawthorne, "nothing short of a total change of dynasty and moral code in that interior kingdom was adequate to account for the impulses now communicated to the ... minister." But Hester alone became perfectly immoral, for "the world's law was no law for her mind." She alone dared renounce utterly the dead forms of tradition and dared follow the natural laws of her own instinctive nature to the end.

4 Yvor Winters, Maule's Curse (Norfolk, Conn., 1938), p. 16.
6 Ibid., p. 44.
Therefore, the romantics have praised *The Scarlet Letter* for preaching "la mystique de l'Amour." And especially the French critics, following D. H. Lawrence, have spoken of Hawthorne's "gospel of love." "Hester gave everything to love," they have repeated:

- Give all to love;
- Obey thy heart;
- Friends, kindred, days,
- Estate, good-fame,
- Plans, credit and the Muse,—
- Nothing refuse.

As Emerson counseled, so Hester acted. In spite of Hawthorne's moralistic disclaimer, his heroine has seemed to renounce traditional morality and to proclaim the new morality of nature and the human heart.

Therefore, according to the romantics, the tragedy of *The Scarlet Letter* does not result from any tragic flaw in the heroine, for she is romantically without sin. It results, rather, from the intrinsic evil of society. Because the moral law imposes tyrannical restraints upon the natural instincts of man, human happiness is impossible in civilization. *The Scarlet Letter*, therefore, becomes the tragedy of perfection, in which the ideal woman is doomed to defeat by an inflexible moral tradition. Because Hester Prynne was so perfectly loyal and loving that she would never abandon her lover, she was condemned by the Puritans. Not human frailty, therefore, or any tragic imperfection of character, but only the inevitable forces of social determinism caused the disaster described by *The Scarlet Letter*—according to the romantic enthusiasts.

III

Between the orthodox belief that Hester Prynne sinned utterly and the opposite romantic belief that she did not sin at all, the transcendental idealists seek to mediate. Because they deny the authority of the traditional morality, these idealists have sometimes seemed merely romantic. But because they seek to describe a new moral law, they have also seemed moralistic. The confusion of answers to the question of evil suggested by *The Scarlet Letter* arises, in part, from a failure to understand the transcendental ideal.

With the romantics, the transcendentalists agree that Hester did wisely to "give all to love." But they insist that Hester's love was neither blindly passionate nor purposeless. "What we did," Hester exclaims to her lover, "had a consecration of its own." To the transcendental, her love was not sinful because it was not disloyal to her evil husband (whom she had never loved) or to the traditional morality (in which she had never believed). Rather her love was purposefully aimed at a permanent union with her lover—witness the fact that it had already endured through seven years of separation and disgrace. Hester did well to "obey her heart," because she felt no conflict between her heart and her head. She was neither romantically immoral nor blindly rebellious against society and its laws.

This element of conscious purpose distinguishes the transcendental Hester Prynne from other, merely romantic heroines. Because she did not deny "the moral law" but went beyond it to a "higher law," Hester transcended both romance and tradition. As if to emphasize this fact, Hawthorne himself declared that she "assumed a freedom of

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9 Critics suggesting this “transcendental” point of view include the following: Moncure D. Conway, *Life of Nathanial Hawthorne* (London, 1870); John Erskine, “Hawthorne,” in *CHAL*, II, 16-31; and Stuart P. Sherman, “Hawthorne,” in *Americans*, pp. 122-52.
speculation which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.” Unlike her lover, she had explicitly been led “beyond the scope of generally received laws.” She had consciously wished to become “the prophetess” of a more liberal morality.

According to the transcendentalists, therefore, Hester’s “sin” was not that she broke the Commandments—for, in the sight of God, she had never truly been married. Nor was Hester the blameless victim of society, as the romantics believed. She had sinned in that she had deceived her lover concerning the identity of her husband. And she admitted this clearly:

“O Arthur,” cried she, “forgive me! In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue to which I might have held fast, and did hold fast, through all extremity; save when thy good . . . . were put in question! Then I consented to a deception. But a lie is never good, even though death threaten on the other side.”

Not traditional morality, but transcendental truth, governed the conscience of Hester Prynne. But she had a conscience, and she had sinned against it.

Indeed, Hester Prynne had “sinned,” exactly because she put romantic “love” ahead of ideal “truth.” She had done evil in allowing the “good” of her lover to outweigh the higher law. She had sacrificed her own integrity by giving absolutely everything to her loved one. For Emerson had added a transcendental postscript to his seemingly romantic poem:

Leaving all for love;  
Yet, hear me, yet   
. . . . . . .   
Keep thee to-day,  
To-morrow, forever,  
Free as an Arab  
Of thy beloved.

That is to say: True love is a higher law than merely traditional morality, but, even at best, human love is “daemonic.” The highest law of “celestial love” is the law of divine truth.

According to the transcendental idealists, Hester Prynne sinned in that she did not go beyond human love. In seeking to protect her lover by deception, she sinned both against her own “integrity” and against God. If she had told the whole truth in the beginning, she would have been blameless. But she lacked this perfect self-reliance.

Nevertheless, tragedy would have resulted even if Hester Prynne had been transcendentally perfect. For the transcendental ideal implies tragedy. Traditionally, tragedy results from the individual imperfection of some hero. Romantically, it results from the evil of society. But, ideally, it results from a conflict of moral standards or values. The tragedy of The Scarlet Letter resulted from the conflict of the orthodox morality of the minister with the transcendental morality of the heroine. For Arthur Dimmesdale, unlike Hester Prynne, did sin blindly through passion, committing an act which he felt to be wrong. And because he sinned against his own morality, he felt himself unable to grasp the freedom which Hester urged. If, on the contrary, he had conscientiously been able to flee with her to a new life on the western frontier, there would have been no tragedy. But:

“It cannot be!” answered the minister, listening as if he were called upon to realize a dream. “I am powerless to go. Wretched and sinful as I am, I have had no other thought than to drag on my earthly existence where Providence hath placed me.”
To those who have never believed in it, the American dream of freedom has always seemed utopian and impossible of realization. Tragedy results from this conflict of moralities and this unbelief.

IV

According to the orthodox, Hester Prynne sinned through blind passion, and her sin caused the tragedy. According to the romantic, Hester Prynne heroically "gave all to love," and tragedy resulted from the evil of society. According to the transcendentalists, Hester Prynne sinned through deception, but tragedy resulted from the conflict of her dream of freedom with the traditional creed of her lover. Dramatically, each of these interpretations is possible: The Scarlet Letter is rich in suggestion. But Hawthorne the moralist sought to destroy this richness.

The Scarlet Letter achieves greatness in its dramatic, objective presentation of conflicting moralities in action: each character seems at once symbolic, yet real. But this dramatic perfection is flawed by the author's moralistic, subjective criticism of Hester Prynne. And this contradiction results from Hawthorne's apparent confusion between the romantic and the transcendental moralities. While the characters of the novel objectively act out the tragic conflict between the traditional morality and the transcendental dream, Hawthorne subjectively damnns the transcendental for being romantically immoral.

Most obviously, Hawthorne imposed a moralistic "Conclusion" upon the drama which his characters had acted. But the artistic and moral falsity of this does not lie in its didacticism or in the personal intrusion of the author, for these were the literary conventions of the age. Rather it lies in the contradiction between the author's moralistic comments and the earlier words and actions of his characters. Having created living protagonists, Hawthorne sought to impose his own will and judgment upon them from the outside. Thus he described Hester as admitting her "sin" of passion and as renouncing her "selfish ends" and as seeking to "expiate" her crime. But Hester herself had never admitted to any sin other than deception and had never acted "selfishly" and had worn her scarlet letter triumphantly, rather than penitently. In his "Conclusion," therefore, Hawthorne did violence to the living character whom he had created.

His artificial and moralistic criticism is concentrated in the 'Conclusion.' But it also appears in other chapters of the novel. In the scene between Hester and Arthur in the forest, Hawthorne had asserted:

She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness ..... Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.

And again Hawthorne imputed "Shame" to Hester, and declared that her "strength" was immoral.

This scene between Hester and her lover in the forest also suggests the root of Hawthorne's confusion. To the traditional moralists, the "forest," or "wilderness," or "uncivilized Nature" was the symbolic abode of evil—the very negation of moral law. But to the romantics, wild nature had become the very symbol of freedom. In this scene, Hawthorne explicitly condemned Hester for her wildness—for "breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristian-
ized, lawless region.” And again he
dammed her “sympathy” with “that
wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never
subjugated by human law, nor illumined
by higher truth.” Clearly he hated moral
romanticism. And this hatred would
have been harmless, if his heroine had
merely been romantic, or immoral.

But Hester Prynne, as revealed in
speech and in action, was not romantic
but transcendental. And Hawthorne
failed utterly to distinguish, in his moral-
istic criticism, between the romantic and
the transcendental. For example, he
never described the “speculations” of
Hester concerning “freedom” as any-
thing but negative, “wild,” “lawless,”
and “heathen.” All “higher truth” for
him seemed to reside exclusively in tra-
ditional, “civilized” morality. But Haw-
thorne’s contemporaries, Emerson and
Thoreau, had specifically described the
“wilderness” (Life in the Woods) as the
precondition of the new morality of free-
dom; and “Nature” as the very abode of
“higher truth”: all those transcendental
“speculations” which Hawthorne im-
puted to his heroine conceived of “Na-
ture” as offering the opportunity for the
realization of the higher moral law and
for the development of a “Christianized”
society more perfectly illumined by the
divine truth.

Therefore, Hawthorne’s moralistic
passages never remotely admitted the
possible truth of the transcendental ideal
which he had objectively described Hes-
ter Prynne as realizing. Having allowed
his imagination to create an idealistic
heroine, he did not allow his conscious
mind to justify—or even to describe fair-
ly—her ideal morality. Rather, he
dammed the transcendental character
whom he had created, for being romantic
and immoral. But the words and deeds
by means of which he had created her
contradicted his own moralistic criti-
cisms.

V

In the last analysis, the greatness of
The Scarlet Letter lies in the character of
Hester Prynne. Because she dared to
trust herself and to believe in the possi-
bility of a new morality in the new world,
she achieved spiritual greatness in spite
of her own human weakness, in spite of
the prejudices of her Puritan society,
and, finally, in spite of the prejudices of
her creator himself. For the human
weakness which made her deceive her
lover in order to protect him makes her
seem only the more real. The calm
steadfastness with which she endures the
ostracism of society makes her heroic.
And the clear purpose which she follows,
despite the denigrations of Hawthorne,
makes her almost ideal.

Hester, almost in spite of Hawthorne,
envisioned the transcendental ideal of
positive freedom, instead of the romantic
ideal of mere escape. She urges her lover
to create a new life with her in the wilder-
ness: “Doth the universe lie within the
compass of yonder town? Whither leads
yonder forest track?” And she seeks to
arouse him to a pragmatic idealism equal
to the task: “Exchange this false life of
thine for a true one! . . . . . . Preach! Write!
Act! Do anything save to lie down and
die!”

Thus Hester Prynne embodies the au-
thentic American dream of a new life in
the wilderness of the new world, and of
self-reliant action to realize that ideal.
In the Puritan age in which he lived, and
in Hawthorne’s own nineteenth century,
this ideal was actually being realized in
practice. Even in our modern society
with its more liberal laws, Hester Prynne
might hope to live happily with her lover,
after winning divorce from her cruel and vengeful husband. But in every century her tragedy would still be the same. It would result from her own deception and from the conflicting moral belief of her lover. But it would not result from her own sense of guilt or shame.

In The Scarlet Letter alone among his novels, Hawthorne succeeded in realizing a character embodying the authentic American dream of freedom and independence in the new world. But he succeeded in realizing this ideal emotionally rather than intellectually. And, having completed the novel, he wondered at his work: “I think I have never overcome my adamant in any other instance,” he said. Perhaps he added the moralistic “Conclusion” and the various criticisms of Hester, in order to placate his conscience.10 In any case, he never permitted himself such freedom—or such greatness—again.

Where The Scarlet Letter described the greatness as well as the human tragedy which lies implicit in the American dream of freedom, Hawthorne’s later novels describe only the romantic delusion which often vitiates it. The Blithedale Romance emphasizes the delusion of utopianism, and The Marble Faun preaches the falsity of the ideal of “nature” (Donatello). Where Hester Prynne was heroically self-reliant, Zenobia becomes pathetically deluded, and Miriam romantically blind. Hawthorne, rejecting the transcendental idealism which Hester Prynne seems to have realized almost in spite of his own “adamant,” piously recanted in his “Conclusion” and took good care that his later “dark” heroines should be romantic, unsympathetic, and (comparatively) unimportant.

10 Cf. Conway, op. cit.

“NOT JUST GAB”

MARJORIE S. WATTS

The dialogue which follows occurred in a junior English class soon after the opening of the school year. It is a demonstration of the facility with which, under tactful guidance, students will draw on their own experience for oral composition material of interest to themselves. That Miss Frank, the teacher, is an opportunist should not be overlooked. Often an opportunist finds in spontaneous discussion ideas more novel and more useful than his own jaded brain could supply in a month of headaches. He can be reasonably certain, too, that suggestions enthusiastically volunteered by pupils are practical. What a boon to have the problem of creating interest unconsciously solved by the students for the teacher!

One reason for this interest is that students like to feel that they “run the class.” Indeed, we must admit that one way or another they always do, unless we revert to the rule of the rod. Miss Frank and her like are only steering this drive of energy, by an occasional remark deftly placed, into constructive channels. Creative ideas are not born of dictatorship, whether in government or in the classroom. For fear is a potent contraceptive. When we are tempted to mourn that students don’t think, we might well consider first whether we have given them a chance to think. It will be observed that,