Hawthorne's Dimmesdale: A Small Man Gone Wrong
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HAWTHORNE'S DIMMESDALE:
A SMALL MAN GONE WRONG
WILLIAM H. NOLTE

While it is true that an artistic masterpiece is capable of being many different things to different men, it is patently not true that all interpretations are equally sound. Moreover, the fact that our critical judgments are of necessity subjective to some extent has opened the gate to all sorts of interpretations of the artist's intentions and, in turn, the meaning of the work of art. These statements doubtless smack of the truism; but they are worth repeating over and over, and then defending in our evaluations, or re-evaluations, of individual works.

Among American masterpieces which offer themselves as illustrative cases of inordinate subjectivism, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter must stand near the top. The novel is, of course, capable of being read in different ways; and various aspects of the work may be concentrated upon to the edification of the student. Still, I think it not only possible but necessary to reach some sort of general agreement concerning Hawthorne's attitude towards Puritanism and, more importantly, concerning the meaning of his story. To anyone who has read the Hawthorne criticism, it is at once evident that no such agreement has been forthcoming. I here make no lofty claim that my reading of the novel will induce agreement. Rather, I shall endeavor to cast a little light in dark places, and at the same time question a few of the more popular critical views which seem to me wholly untenable.

Of the three principal characters (Pearl is not one of them, being almost pure symbol), only Chillingworth has provoked anything resembling unanimity of critical response. He is generally painted "black," to use the favorite word of Hawthorne, and little more is said about him. Actually, he is not so black as he is painted. His desire for revenge, which is used by most critics as the most damning evidence against him,
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grows out of the great injustice done him by the fates. That he should seek revenge on the man, unknown to the community, who has presented him with his cuckold's horns is, after all, only to be expected. Furthermore, revenge is not altogether an evil act—certainly not so contemptible as the hypocrisy of Dimmesdale—since it can act as justifiable retribution. Without attempting to justify Chillingworth's desire for revenge, which becomes an obsession and thereby dehumanizes the man completely, I think it only fair to remind the critics who take seriously Dimmesdale's self-pitying lament at the end that he has been as much sinned against as sinning that Chillingworth was extremely kind, in the circumstances, to both Hester and Pearl, the offspring of her adultery. He even insists that his folly and weakness in marrying a woman who did not love him are more to blame for the adultery than is Hester's full-blooded passion. That he performs "a fiend's office" he readily admits, further remarking that once the chain of events was set in motion he was beyond the realm of free choice. It seems obvious to me that Hawthorne believed him when he placed in his mouth the answer to Hester's request that he forgive Dimmesdale. "It is not granted me to pardon," he replies. "I have no such power as thou tellest me of. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer. By thy first step awry thou didst plant the germ of evil; but since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity. Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiend-like, who have snatched a fiend's office from his hands. It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may!" Being incapable of such philosophical detachment, founded on a belief in behavioristic determinism (a belief which Hawthorne evidently shares and which gives the novel its powerful sense of verisimilitude and inevitability, qualities necessary to tragedy in the novel as well as the drama), Hester quite naturally hates the old man. "He betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him!" Immediately following Hester's outburst, Hawthorne comments that men, winning the hand of woman,
might well tremble, "unless they win along with it the utmost passion of her heart! Else it may be their miserable fortune, as it was Roger Chillingworth's, when some mightier touch than their own may have awakened all her sensibilities, to be reproached even for the calm content, the marble image of happiness, which they will have imposed upon her as the warm reality." The one character in the novel who understands himself, and is willing to accept that self with both its good and evil, is Chillingworth. Moreover, the salient quality of his character is not altogether contemptible. Concerning his place in the novel, one may recall a speech in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*: "Rats die in Holes and Corners, Dogs run mad; Man knows a braver Remedy for sorrow: Revenge!" But Chillingworth is not of the first importance in the story, neither to the reader nor to Hawthorne. He is the catalyst in the brew, the forwarder of the action. Bigger game is afoot—the malefactors who set the catalyst to work.

In the reader's attitude towards Hester, we learn a great deal more of the reader's moral convictions than we learn of Hester. The moral absolutist or traditionalist will invariably condemn her. She broke the seventh commandment. Ergo, she is fallen from grace. The romantic critic—that is, the relativist—sees quite another woman. He sees a beautiful figure of tragedy, a victim of an insular age, the one character capable of loving and being loved. Mark Van Doren has wisely observed, "She is not the subject of a sermon; she is the heroine of a tragedy, and understands the tragedy." Of all the characters in the novel, Hester is the least Puritanical. She is, indeed, as we shall see, an anti-Puritan, an individual better fitted to converse with Emerson and Margaret Fuller than with the Puritan forefathers. She is, in brief, a nineteenth-century heroine with transcendentalist coloration, placed, ironically, among bigoted seventeenth-century Puritans. It is easy enough to say, as has Austin Warren, that Hawthorne "found more intellectual satisfaction in the older Calvinist faith with its dogmas of the

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Fall (the total depravity of the natural man) and Predestination (theological determinism) than in its nineteenth-century liberal alternatives.” To offer substantial evidence for such a theory is to grapple with the impossible. Like most denigrators of Romanticism, Mr. Warren endeavors to “save” Hawthorne by simply saying, without offering any reasons for the belief, that he was not a Romantic. Of course, Hawthorne was a Romantic, just as were Melville, Poe, Emerson, and Thoreau—all in their different ways. Writing in 1879, Anthony Trollope called attention to the satire to be found everywhere in Hawthorne. Nor did he leave any doubt as to Hawthorne’s sympathy for Hester.

I can fancy a reader so loving the image of Hester Prynne as to find himself on the verge of treachery to the real Hester of flesh and blood who may have a claim upon him. Sympathy can not go beyond that; and yet the author deals with her in a spirit of assumed hardness, almost as though he assented to the judgment and the manner in which it was carried out. In this, however, there is a streak of that satire with which Hawthorne always speaks of the peculiar institutions of his own country. The worthy magistrates of Massachusetts are under his lash throughout the story, and so is the virtue of her citizens and the chastity of her matrons, which can take delight in the open shame of a woman whose sin has been discovered. Indeed, there is never a page written by Hawthorne not tinged by satire.

Hester never considers her illicit love for Dimmesdale a sin—at least not until the very last page of the novel when Hawthorne, as was his wont at a story’s end, suddenly introduces a “moralistic” touch to mar the canvas. She had given all to love, and thereby followed the Emersonian dictum, fully realizing the penalties for getting caught. Unlike Dimmesdale, she never regretted her love—which continues unabated to the very end—but was uncomplaining when that love was published before the bloodthirsty Puritans. After the initial despondency that caused her to think of suicide as the only way out, she grows steadily in strength and beauty of character,
willing at any moment to renew her liaison with Dimmesdale. Indeed, it is her very nobility of character that Hawthorne contrasts with the supine cowardice and hypocrisy of Dimmesdale. If there were reason in love, one might doubt the realism of her continuing respect for the minister. Since there is not, one can only regret her bad taste.

It is with the character of Dimmesdale that I am most concerned, for he has not, I am convinced, been properly understood. For one thing, too many readers fail to see, as Trollope saw so clearly, that Hawthorne was one of the most ironic of writers. For another, Hawthorne’s use of Chillingworth as a kind of Vengeance incarnate has led some to believe that Dimmesdale, the object of so much hatred, must therefore be deserving of sympathy despite—and even because of—his weakness, self-pity, cowardice, hypocrisy, masochism, egotistic humility, and overbearing Puritanism. Indeed, his Puritan moralizing, festering within him like a cankerous growth, is his most despicable flaw. He is the finished portrait that Hawthorne had begun in his sketches of Ethan Brand and Young Goodman Brown. Nothing matters to him except himself. As we shall see, his “love” for Hester was no more than a flirtation with the devil (in his eyes); and his love for God, or the strictures of his peculiar God, was a debasing form of self-aggrandizement, darkly tinged with self-abuse. Is it any wonder then that he is one of the most fascinating characters in the Hawthorne opera?

In the third chapter, “The Recognition,” Hawthorne remarks that it would not be easy to find men “less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman’s heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil, than the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester Prynne now turned her face.” Her face is turned, of course, to the clergymen occupying the balcony above the scaffold on which she stands with the infant Pearl in her arms. Immediately after commenting on the incompetence of the judges, Hawthorne refers to “the reverend and famous John Wilson, the eldest clergyman of Boston, a
great scholar, like most of his contemporaries in the profession, and withal a man of kind and genial spirit." This clergyman tells Hester, in a speech that is highly ironic for us, that he has asked "the pale young man beside him," under whose preaching of the word Hester had been privileged to sit, to deal with her, "here in the face of Heaven, and before these wise and upright rulers, and in hearing of all the people, as touching the vileness and blackness of your sin." Since Dimmesdale, according to Wilson, knows Hester better than any other of the judges he should be the one to address her concerning the partner of her sin. Dimmesdale's words are perfectly chosen. Among other things, he says, "If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer!" Since he knows that Hester loves him, he is almost sure she will not consider the revealing of her "fellow-sufferer" a more effectual means to salvation. He even asks, "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin?" Hypocrisy, indeed! When she refused to name the man, Dimmesdale draws back, "with a long respiration," and remarks (as, we might assume, the god of Irony titters obscenely): "Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart! She will not speak!" Thus Hester is left to bear all the weight of public ignominy, Chillingworth is left to make his cruel search, and Dimmesdale is left the masochistic joy of examining his own heart.

Three years pass in which Hester does not converse with Dimmesdale, years in which pastors preach to her, children mock her, rich and poor alike revile her. Hester observes the children of the settlement, "disporting themselves in such grim fashion as the Puritanic nurture would permit; playing at going to church, perchance; or at scourging Quakers; or taking scalps in a sham-fight with the Indians; or scaring one another with freaks of imitative witchcraft." A few pages later, Hawthorne speaks of the Puritan children looking up "from their
play,—or what passed for play with those sombre little urchins” —and speaking “gravely one to another.” Are we to believe that there was no joy even among the children? Hawthorne overstates his case. In no other novel have Puritans been depicted with such bitterness and hatred—“the most intolerant brood that ever lived,” Hawthorne calls them. And yet there are still those critics who insist that Hawthorne was a Puritan! Here is the contemporary love of paradox gone to seed. For some, the urge to associate a man with what he most dislikes is overpowering. Such “paradoxical” reasoning betokens a kind of bastard profundity. A case in point: H. L. Mencken wrote an extraordinary essay on “Puritanism as a Literary Force” (in *A Book of Prefaces*), devoted a good part of his enormous energy to attacking Puritan restraints and insularity, and defined Puritanism as “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” Yet Mencken is often referred to as a Puritan himself—particularly after he openly confessed his belief in monogamy!

When Hester does see Dimmesdale, it is in the home of Governor Bellingham, to whom she has gone to beg that Pearl not be taken from her. She had heard that efforts were being made by leading citizens to take Pearl from her since if it really were true that Pearl was of demon origin, “a Christian interest in the mother’s soul required them to remove such a stumbling-block from her path.” If, on the other hand, the child were really capable “of moral and religious growth, and possessed the elements of ultimate salvation, then, surely, it would enjoy all the fairer prospect of these advantages by being transferred to wiser and better guardianship than Hester Prynne’s.” In effect, they had Hester coming and going. When she encounters Dimmesdale in the Governor’s home, she turns to him, both asking and demanding that he plead her case. “I will not lose the child! Speak for me! Thou knowest,—for thou hast sympathies which these men lack!—thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother’s rights, and how much the stronger they are, when that mother has but her child and
the scarlet letter! Look thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!” And that is precisely what Dimmesdale does. Obviously fearing that he will be betrayed, he convinces the Governor that Pearl should remain with her mother.

In the very next chapter, “The Leech,” Hawthorne begins his analysis of Dimmesdale’s character—a pre-Freudian study in abnormal psychology. As in nearly all his works, he was most concerned with moral sickness, and the human cripples whose disease often infected and destroyed those about them. He was no more concerned with portraying the heroic in man than was August Strindberg. His vision was of another sort entirely. He calls Dimmesdale “a true priest, a true religionist, with the reverential sentiment largely developed, and an order of mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of a creed, and wore its passage continually deeper with the lapse of time. In no state of society would he have been what is called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework.” If Dimmesdale were nothing more than a “true priest,” dependent upon his creed for his very being, we should not be much concerned with him. That is to say, he would be incapable of free choice; he would act simply as the tongue to the body of religious dogma. But Hawthorne continues his description by remarking that the minister, with “a tremulous enjoyment,” felt “the occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect than those with which he habitually held converse. It was as if a window were thrown open, admitting a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study, where his life was wasting itself away, amid lamplight, or obstructed day-beams, and the musty fragrance, be it sensual or moral, that exhales from books.” The presence of this free or diabolic, we might say, side of his character acts as a constant reminder to his closed or angelic side that he is forever cut off from divine grace. And it acts as the motivating force for his masochism and hypocrisy. Dimmesdale was fully aware of how his constant
protestations about his sinfulness before his congregation were used by that congregation to elevate him in their eyes. "The minister well knew—subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!—the light in which his vague confession would be viewed. He had striven to put a cheat upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but had gained only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame, without the momentary relief of being self-deceived. He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood." Loathing himself, he becomes narcissistic, cherishing the self he loathes. "He kept vigils, likewise, night after night, sometimes in utter darkness; sometimes with a glimmering lamp; and sometimes, viewing his own face in a looking-glass, by the most powerful light which he could throw upon it. He thus typified the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not purify, himself." This self-torture is most dramatically revealed in the second scaffold scene—in the chapter entitled "The Minister's Vigil."

Dimmesdale's confession, on that obscure night of early May, to the powers and principalities of the air was the act of a man in ruins. When he climbed the scaffold, the author assures us, "There was no peril of discovery." No eye could see him, "save that ever-wakeful one which had seen him in his closet, wielding the bloody scourge." Hawthorne's contempt for the man was too strong to allow his usual ambiguity of statement. "Was it but the mockery of penitence? A mockery, indeed, but in which his soul trifled with itself! A mockery at which angels blushed and wept, while fiends rejoiced, with jeering laughter." He had been driven there by Remorse and Cowardice—two of the most despicable of qualities, according to Hawthorne, who called Cowardice the "sister and closely linked companion" of Remorse. What right, Hawthorne asked, "had infirmity like his to burden itself with crime? Crime is for the iron-nerved, who have their choice either to endure it, or, if it press too hard, to exert their fierce and savage strength for a good purpose, and fling it off at once!" Dimmesdale was too
feeble to do either. This may remind one of Mencken's remark that "Sin is a dangerous toy in the hands of the virtuous. It should be left to the congenitally sinful, who know when to play with it and when to let it alone." The primary difference between Mencken and Hawthorne in this context is that Mencken truly sympathized with the subject of his essay, Henry Judd Gray, while Hawthorne was contemptuous of Dimmesdale. Standing there in the moonlight, Dimmesdale gleefully dreams of being found in the morning light by all the neighborhood, still bearing his cross in saintly confession. He is found, of course, by Hester and Pearl, who asks him if he will stand with her and her mother "to-morrow noontide." At which time, the dream is shattered, and Dimmesdale's fear and trembling return in full force. The next day, a Sunday, his sermon is richer and more powerful than ever—the final irony!

We learn in the next chapter that four more years have passed. Pearl is now seven years old. Hester's scarlet letter now symbolizes "Able" and has the same effect as that of the Cross on a nun's bosom. The years have also brought a maturity of speculation to the woman who, as a full-blooded girl, had unthinkingly and without reservation accepted the punishment meted out to her for having loved the young minister. She is now a free-thinker, having drunk from the springs of European thought. "Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter." She was not, however, in any sense free to act in accordance with her new-found freedom of thought. She has Pearl to rear in an alien world. "Everything was against her. The world was hostile." Finally, she is still in love with Dimmesdale, though she apparently never sees him. It is this love which drives her to inform Chillingworth that she can no longer keep his secret since to do so entails an injury to the minister. Having informed her husband of her intention,
she meets Dimmesdale in what is surely the climactic scene of the novel (the final scene on the scaffold has great power of shock, but is really anticlimactic).

Several days after her talk with Chillingworth, Hester encounters Dimmesdale on one of his forest walks. (Too much can be and has been made of the fact that their meeting is in the forest. After all, Hawthorne has no other choice for a site that might provide such secrecy.) During their interview Dimmesdale displays in striking fashion his essential hollowness. His self-pity constantly flows over into envy, which in turn becomes petty slander. Has he found peace? Hester asks. Only despair, he answers, since after all he is a man of conscience. "Were I an atheist,—a man devoid of conscience,—a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts,—I might have found peace, long ere now." This self-pity becomes envy on the next page where he pontificates on how happy Hester is for wearing the scarlet letter openly. Still, it is a relief, he says, "after the torment of a seven years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am! Had I one friend—or were it my worst enemy!—to whom, when sickened with the praises of all other men, I could daily betake myself, and be known as the vilest of all sinners, methinks my soul might keep itself alive thereby." Note this carefully. It is a relief to see Hester—but then he knows she will not tell. He wishes that even his worst enemy might know him as the vilest of sinners. So Hester tells him that, indeed, his worst enemy does know, and in fact lives under the same roof with him. She admits that Chillingworth was her husband. What is his response? "O Hester Prynne, thou little, little knowest all the horror of this thing! And the shame!—the indelicacy!—the horrible ugliness of this exposure of a sick and guilty heart to the very eye that would gloat over it! Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!" He is thrown into an ecstasy of fear. First, he cries out that he is not, after all, the worst of sinners: "That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart." He then turns to
Hester, for the first time in the book, for aid and comfort. "Think of me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!" Must he sink down on the forest floor and die at once? The judgment of God, he says, is too strong for him to bear. Hester answers the trembling man: "Wilt thou die for very weakness? There is no other cause!" The universe does not lie within the compass of their little village, and his perverse philosophy. A continent rests to the west; Europe lies to the east. He can begin anew. "Hast thou exhausted possibility in the failure of this one trial? Not so! The future is yet full of trial and success. There is happiness to be enjoyed!" To which, when he answers that he lacks the strength and courage to venture into the world alone, she answers, "Thou shalt not go alone!"

Having heard her offer, Dimmesdale muses over the alternatives left him. In a paragraph Hawthorne endeavors to summarize the ratiocinative processes which led him to choose flight as his only out. I quote the paragraph, for it has led many readers to disagree over his character:

"If, in all these past seven years," thought he, "I could recall one instant of peace or hope, I would yet endure for the sake of that earnest of Heaven's mercy. But now,—since I am irrevocably doomed,—wherefore should I not snatch the solace allowed to the condemned culprit before his execution? Or, if this be the path to a better life, as Hester would persuade me, I surely give up no fairer prospect by pursuing it! Neither can I any longer live without her companionship; so powerful is she to sustain,—so tender to soothe! O Thou to whom I dare not lift mine eyes, wilt Thou yet pardon me!"

The Freudian critics have generally (and incredibly!) interpreted Dimmesdale's decision to forsake his life of moral introspection as proof that he has been exorcised of his Puritanism and has moved beyond good and evil after the fashion of Nietzsche's Übermensch. Régis Michaud interprets the decision of Dimmesdale thus,commenting that he comes close to

being the American Tartuffe before Hester “rescues him from repression.” (It should be needless to point out that Dimmesdale at no time in his life even faintly resembles Tartuffe, a designing mountebank; and to say that an incipient Tartuffe could ever become a Nietzschean reveals an ignorance of what Nietzsche advocated.) He states further that Dimmesdale’s conversion overthrows his entire philosophy of life and “makes of him an amoralist and a Nietzschean.” Although Michaud is certainly correct in his emphatic statement that it is a great mistake to read The Scarlet Letter as a plea for Puritanism, he carries his thesis beyond the bounds of credibility when he turns the weakest of all Hawthorne’s creations into a Nietzschean. If the novel concluded after Dimmesdale’s decision to go away with Hester, there might have been a small excuse for reading it thus. But the novel does not, and cannot, end on that note. Such a conclusion would have been ruinous to its artistic depiction of Dimmesdale’s character. To believe that his character changes so radically after the interview with Hester is to believe that Hawthorne has created a tinsel figure straight out of melodrama, rather than the psychologically sound religious fanatic which he in fact did create.

Hester is, of course, largely responsible for Dimmesdale’s “conversion,” such as it is. She exhorts him not to look back on a dead past, but rather to live in an ever-new present. In other words, Hester is the spokesman of nineteenth-century transcendentalism, which, Hawthorne admits in the prefatory chapter, “The Custom House,” had largely influenced his thought. Though he objected to the optimism of Emerson’s thought, just as did Melville, there can be no doubt that he was much indebted to the philosopher. Through Hester Hawthorne says that sin is not a static quality, but is, rather, a state of being from which one can move into another state of being. In other words, sin or evil is phenomenological rather than ontological. When Hester casts off the symbolic letter, nature rejoices with her. In the transcendental scheme of things, she is thus in tune with nature: “All at once, as with a sudden
smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood
into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmut-
ing the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the
gray trunks of the solemn trees.” Nature sympathizes, Haw-
thorne says, “with the bliss of these two spirits! Love, whether
newly born, or aroused from a death-like slumber, must always
create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it
overflows upon the outward world.” When Pearl returns to her
mother and insists that the letter be returned to its accustomed
place, she is acting in accordance with the universal childish
trait of conformity. The letter’s symbolic meaning (now Able
or Angel rather than Adultery) plays no part in Pearl’s demand.
Pearl herself retains her symbolic meaning, however, until
Dimmesdale’s death. In her constant questioning of both
Hester and Dimmesdale, she is a reminder of Dimmesdale’s
hypocrisy, not of Hester’s adultery. She repeatedly asks if
Dimmesdale will accompany them, hand in hand, before the
townspeople.

When Dimmesdale leaves the forest, he leaves much of his
former fear behind. He carries his hypocrisy with him, how-
ever, and also the author’s growing disgust. At the beginning
of chapter twenty (the novel contains only twenty-four chap-
ters), the reader learns that Dimmesdale was delighted that
their ship was not to leave for four days. He will thus be able
to preach the Election Sermon on the third day from the pres-
ent. By preaching the sermon, he feels that no one will be able
to say that he has left any public duty unperformed. That he
is “miserably deceived” in his self-approval, Hawthorne makes
clear: “We have had, and may still have, worse things to tell
of him; but none, we apprehend, so pitiably weak; no evidence,
at once so light and irrefragable, of a subtle disease, that had
long since begun to eat into the real substance of his character.
No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to
himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting
bewildered as to which may be the true.” He enters the town,
convinced that he is indeed a new man. And, there are those
critics, particularly the Freudians, who believe him. The fact is, of course, that he is the same Puritan from beginning to end. He has simply been turned inside out. The moral core of his being is worm-eaten by his inordinate self-concern. He has been tainted, not so much by sin itself, as by his perverse consciousness of all the sin in the world with which he has associated himself through that act of love some eight years before. Like a naughty child, he seeks to submerge his being in an orgy of sin—while his creator laughs offstage. He stops to chat with an ancient deacon—and can hardly "refrain from uttering certain blasphemous suggestions that rose into his mind, respecting the communion supper." He is petrified at the urge, and yet delighted by the imagined impression on the deacon. He next meets a lonely old widow, in whose ear he almost whispers an "unanswerable argument against the immortality of the human soul." He almost drops into the tender bosom of a young virgin "a germ of evil that would be sure to blossom darkly soon, and bear black fruit betimes." (Let no one say that Hawthorne lacked a sense of humor!) Another hellish impulse almost causes him to "teach some very wicked words to a knot of little Puritan children who were playing there, and had but just begun to talk." He even wants to shake hands with a drunken sailor just off a ship, and "recreate himself with a few improper jests, such as dissolute sailors so abound with, and a volley of good, round, solid, satisfactory, and heaven-defying oaths!" Dimmesdale so wants to sin that he becomes comic. Aside from its being the one thoroughly humorous section of the novel, it also provides further evidence that Hawthorne considered Dimmesdale, the Puritan prototype, frankly pathological. Rather than view Dimmesdale's behavior as that of a man freed from Puritanism and now the advocate of amorality, it is much more judicious to interpret his behavior as that of a man who believes with the faith of a little child that he is, indeed, as he has already told us, "irrevocably doomed." His sincere belief in his damnation not only accounts for his struggle with his inhibitions, but it also makes
comprehensible his final act on the scaffold, at which we must now look.

The final thirty pages of *The Scarlet Letter* are certainly the weakest artistically of the novel. Contrary to what some critics have said, notably Randall Stewart, the final scene on the scaffold lacks proper motivation. Rather, it is evidence that Hawthorne was in need of a conclusion, and in his need he grasped for the nearest *deus ex machina* at hand. He too consciously builds up the reader’s hopes in order to let him down, in order, that is, to tell him that there can be no escapement from the heavy past. Nevertheless, the conclusion cannot be disregarded. When we first see Dimmesdale in the procession, he is described as exhibiting an almost preternatural energy. “There was no feebleness of step, as at other times; his frame was not bent; nor did his hand rest ominously upon his heart.” Is Hawthorne saying that his weakling priest has indeed thrown off the Puritan curse forever? So it seems—at first blush—until Dimmesdale suddenly has a “foreboding of untimely death upon him” and realizes that he must leave his worshippers, not by running away from them, as he had intended, but by dying in their midst, as fate decreed. Just before we learn of the “foreboding”—a direct borrowing from melodrama at its most melodramatic—Hester learns that Chillingworth has booked passage on the ship that was to take them to distant shores. Dimmesdale, however, never learns that Chillingworth has found out their plans of escape. We are not even given the shock value that such knowledge would doubtless have had on Dimmesdale, and thereby partially explained his sudden death. Hawthorne simply takes his character, in this case, and moves it to a new position on the chess board, whereas before this the characters had acted as if they were beyond the power of their creator. Returning from the church, where he has given the finest address of his career, Dimmesdale disintegrates before our eyes. The spectators are amazed at the change that has taken place in him between the time he walked to the church and now when he returns with his fellow clergymen. He en-
counters Hester and Pearl on the return procession and, with the thought of death burning within him, asks them to accompany him to the scaffold. He bids Hester to "come hither now, and entwine thy strength about me! Thy strength, Hester; but let it be guided by the will which God hath granted me! . . . Come, Hester, come! Support me up yonder scaffold!"

Chillingworth, who all the while has been trying to pull Dimmesdale away from Hester, admits that only on the scaffold—that is, only by making public confession—could Dimmesdale escape him. Chillingworth can no more live without Dimmesdale, on whose being he feeds, than can, or could, Dimmesdale live outside the moralistic walls of Puritanism. Dimmesdale confesses to the multitude, tears away his ministerial vestment, and reveals to all whatever it was that appeared on his chest. Fortunately we are never told. The rather naïve symbolism, as Henry James was one of the first to point out, reeks enough as it is.

Thus, at the hour of death, does Dimmesdale endeavor to make amends for the seven years of cowardice and hypocrisy. When Hester asks him if they will not spend eternity together (this question from one who, we were told, was now a free-thinker!), he implores her not to think of it. Rather, he asks her to think only of their sin, in the hopes that by thinking of it God may prove merciful after all. "The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! It may be that, when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. God knows; and He is merciful!"

He concludes with a hymn of praise to His name. Is it not obvious that Dimmesdale, in his final confession, is again endeavoring to barter with his god, who is, perhaps, merciful? He feels that perhaps he can pluck an eternal victory from out the hands of earthly Defeat. With complete faith, Dimmesdale knows that within twenty seconds after taking his last breath on earth, he will be inhaling the sulphurous fumes of
hymn or else basking in the light of Glory. And there is, he feels, still a chance—small to be sure, but it still exists—of landing safely in the harbor of the blessed—*that is, if he confesses his sin before he dies*. In that confession, at the end of the novel, no credit should or can be given to Dimmesdale.

Still, some readers persist in declaring that the minister, for one reason or another, receives sympathetic treatment at the end. Mark Van Doren feels that Dimmesdale, though heretofore utterly without a saving grace of any sort, is finally redeemed “because his suffering makes him beautiful and because Hester continues to love him.” I fail to see how his suffering, largely masochistic, makes him in any way beautiful; and I refuse flatly to believe that Hester’s love elevated anyone but herself. Randall Stewart went a good deal further when he wrote that Hawthorne “was unquestionably a Puritan, or a kind of Puritan.” Not satisfied with this partially qualified statement, he says a moment later: “Yes, Hawthorne was a Puritan, perhaps the Puritan of Puritans among the Great American Writers.” Having listed the author as a Puritan, Stewart readily—and logically, it seems to me—compounds his mistakes tenfold by not only admiring Dimmesdale but actually claiming that he is the tragic hero of the novel! “If heroism is measured in terms of the magnitude and severity of the struggle which is undergone,” Stewart writes, “then Arthur must be adjudged the more heroic of the two, for Hester never did anything which cost a tithe of the bloody sweat, the agony, which Arthur’s public confession cost.” It appears to me evident that Arthur’s confession cost him absolutely nothing, that indeed it was an act designed to win him immortal life. That is, he had nothing to lose (unless one considers his hypocrisy and cowardice a loss) by his confession, but he had everything to gain. Only by overlooking the chief irony of the novel could Mr. Stewart conclude that Dimmesdale’s “public confession is one of the noblest climaxes of tragic literature.” He goes on to say that “There could be no salvation without that [confession].” Precisely! I could not express my view more
clearly. Moreover, the agony a character undergoes does not mean that he is, *ipso facto*, a hero. We can, and must, pity Dimmesdale. But pity alone is hardly enough to make a man heroic. The Aristotelian pity was reserved for the strong individual overthrown by circumstance primarily and an inner flaw secondarily. There is no element of disgust in such pity. But in our pity for the weaklings and misfits there is always the tincture of nausea and revulsion. That Hawthorne was contemptuous of Dimmesdale should be obvious from his authorial statements. It is also fairly obvious that Dimmesdale will continue to find admiring readers who are addicted to the outlandish belief that suffering ennobles, when the fact is that suffering generally degrades, as in the case of Dimmesdale. My major objection is that these readers will find support from various critics, who, after all, should know better.