

happiness." When Fuller comments on the prospects for feminist reform, she writes, "then and only then will mankind be ripe for this, when inward and outward freedom for Woman as much as for Man shall be acknowledged as a *right*, not yielded as a concession." The unusual word "ripe" stands out in each passage; Hawthorne's use of the word in a sentence that echoes Fuller's in other respects as well suggests that he was borrowing from Fuller. Both writers look forward to a time when American society will be "ripe" for the growth of real women, and both find it very difficult to specify that time. . . .

Despite his disparagement of most women writers, Hawthorne populated his fiction with many powerful female artists. Hester Prynne is not a writer, except in the loosest sense, but she is an artist, and she comes before the public, in a sense, "stark naked." She embroiders the scarlet letter as if the Devil were in her before displaying it to the public for the first time and so asserts some power over the letter as a signifier. For the rest of the novel, her artistry seems confined to the domestic sphere, although even there it is not without its subversive power.

## Hester as Hero

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*In the following selection Nina Baym asserts that Hester's actions and strengths reveal her to be a true hero. Her power is shown, early on, in her decision to remain in Boston. The letter she wears never changes her inwardly, as is evident from her radical musings and her forest conversation with Dimmesdale. It is her love of Pearl that reins her in and keeps her from witchcraft and open reformism. By embellishing the A she is forced to wear, Hester controls her own way of life, in defiance of the Puritans. She practices her calling as an artist through the only means available to her—as a seamstress. In this way, the society of Puritans appropriate her art for their own purposes, as luxurious apparel that only those of high social standing are allowed to wear. The A, once standing for "adultery," is, at the end, interpreted by many people as "able."*

**I**n Hester Prynne, Hawthorne created the first true heroine of American fiction, as well as one of its enduring heroes. Hester is a heroine because she is deeply implicated in, and responsive to, the gender structure of her society, and because her story, turning on "love," is "appropriate" for a woman. She is a hero because she has qualities and actions that transcend this gender reference and lead to heroism as it can be understood for anyone.

Nina Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*. Belmont, CA: Twayne Publishers, 1986. Copyright © 1986 by G.K. Hall & Co. Reproduced by permission of Gale, a part of Cengage Learning.

## Good Power

"Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength." "Neither can I any longer live without her companionship; so powerful is she to sustain,—so tender to soothe!" It is impossible to miss, in these and many other passages, the stress on Hester's remarkable strength as well as the fundamentally humane uses to which she puts it. Without going beyond the license that Hawthorne allows, one might allegorize Hester as Good Power, which is, after all, precisely what, in the basic structural scheme of all narrative, one looks for in a hero. The power is remarkable in that its existence seems so improbable in an outcast woman. If the Puritan state draws its power from the consensual community and the laws that uphold it, then clearly Hester has access to a completely different source of power—or is, perhaps, herself an alternative source of power. And it is a power that even the Puritan world cannot deny, for "with her native energy of character, and rare capacity, it could not entirely cast her off."

Perhaps, however, it is precisely her essential alienation from the community that explains this power. Although Hester can hardly doubt the power of the Puritan community to punish her and define the circumstances of her life, she knows—as we do—that they have this power only because she has granted it to them. She is free to leave Boston whenever she chooses. Her decision to stay entails a submission to Puritan power, but since she can withdraw her consent at any time this submission is always provisional. Her reasons for staying may be misguided, but they are her own. In schematic terms, if the Puritans symbolize the law, then Hester symbolizes the individual person—with this important proviso: she also symbolizes good. It would be easy to deduce from this polarity that Hawthorne wants us to think that law is bad and the in-

dividual good—but that would be too easy. Matters in Hawthorne are never so clear-cut. But he certainly gives us a situation wherein two kinds of power confront each other in conflict, and strongly suggests that any society that regards the power of the individual only as an adversary to be overcome, is profoundly defective and deeply inhuman.

Hester's situation, even before the commission of her "sin," is that of an outsider. She was sent to Massachusetts in advance of her husband; he has decided to emigrate, not she. The native strength of her character is certainly abetted by the fact that, as a young woman in a society dominated by aging men, she has no public importance. Even when she becomes a public figure through her punishment, her psyche is largely left alone. The magistrates condemn her to wear the letter but thereafter seem to have only a very superficial interest in her. A minister who sees her on the street may take the opportunity to preach an extempore sermon; people stare at the letter; children jeer; but none of this behavior represents an attempt to change Hester's mind. It is hoped that the external letter will work its way down into Hester's heart and cause repentance, but nobody really cares and this indifference is Hester's freedom. In fact, the effect of the letter so far as Hester's character is concerned is the opposite of what was intended: turning her into a public symbol, it conceals her individuality and thus protects it.

## Hester and the Law

As the representative of individuality, Hester, rather than subjecting herself to the law, subjects it to her own scrutiny; as I have said, she takes herself as a law. She is not, by nature, rebellious; and during the seven-year period of *The Scarlet Letter's* action, she certainly attempts to accept the judgment implicit in the letter. If she could accept that judgment she would be able to see purpose and meaning in her suffering. But ultimately she is unable to transcend her heartfelt convic-

tion that she has not sinned. She loves Dimmesdale, with whom she sinned; she loves the child that her sin brought forth. How, then, can she agree that her deed was wrong?

She goes so far in her thinking as to attribute her own law to God, thus denying the entire rationale of the Puritan community, their certainty that their laws conform to divine intention. "Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter, which had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, save it were sinful like herself. God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child, whose place was on that same dishonored bosom, to connect her parent for ever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven!"

In fact, while the outward Hester performs deeds of mercy and kindness throughout the seven years, the inward Hester grows ever more alienated and over time becomes—what she was not at first—a genuine revolutionary and social radical. . . .

### Pearl Tempers Hester's Rebellion

Had she spoken her thoughts, she probably would "have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment." If it were not for the existence of Pearl, for whose sake she lives quietly in Boston, she would have become, like Anne Hutchinson, a religious reformer.

But just as Hester refuses to take the road to witchcraft on account of Pearl, she rejects Hutchinson's radical path for the same reason. She feels particular obligations to human beings far more than she feels general social responsibilities. She behaves as a sister of mercy in the community because this is the way to live unmolested, not because she believes in doing good. And she wants to live unmolested so that she can bring up Pearl. Staying in Boston on account of Dimmesdale, and living there as she does on account of Pearl, Hester's behavior

is appropriate to her role as representative of individual and personal, rather than social, power. A reformer is dedicated to social power and has abandoned an individual center. No doubt this makes the whole issue of social reform on behalf of individualism highly problematic; so far as Hester is concerned—and this is our concern at present—the very consistency of her individualism keeps her within the sphere of the personal. At the end of the story, with her group of women clustered about her, she invokes the memory of Hutchinson only to contrast with it. The subject of talk among the women is entirely personal, centered on secular love; Hester counsels patience. Thus, the narrator's suggestion that her radicalism stems from an unquiet heart is partly validated by her behavior. If in Hawthorne's world a true radical, motivated by the impersonal, is somehow anti-individual, and if a true individual, motivated by the personal, is ultimately not radical, then our current popular understanding of these terms is quite different from Hawthorne's. His distinction is between ideologues and individuals rather than between varieties of ideology: an "individual-ist" is an ideologue. The individual as a reality rather than a concept is always extremely vulnerable.

### An Artistic Nature

Among Hester's key defining traits we cannot overlook her "skill at her needle." If her nature includes the characters of outcast, rebel, lover, mother, and sister of mercy, it also includes the character of artist. Her gift for needlework is the expression of an artist's nature; the embroideries that she produces are genuine works of art.

We meet her skill first, of course, in the letter, which, "surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread," is "so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration" to her splendid apparel. Hester's grand costuming for the scaffold scene, far more el-

egant than what the dress code of the colony normally would allow her, is not seen again. She wears nothing but drab gray gowns. Her dreary dress, however, becomes a frame for the letter, and the letter remains, as it is clearly meant to be, an ornament. Beautifying the letter through art is another way in which Hester breaks the Puritan law (although the Puritan rulers—unlike the women in the crowd—are too literal-minded to notice it). The letter becomes the chief ground for the struggle between Hester and the Puritans, and it is able to play this role because of Hester's gift as an artist.

It is tempting here to associate artistic skill with social rebellion, but the equation does not hold. For Hester supports herself in Puritan Boston chiefly by making the elaborate decorative garments that the magistrates wear for public occasions and that are allowed to the better-off in the colony. "Deep ruffs, painfully wrought bands, and gorgeously embroidered gloves, were all deemed necessary to the official state of men assuming the reins of power; and were readily allowed to individuals dignified by rank or wealth." Art does not have an inherently political nature, although—as the instance of the letter shows—it can become highly politicized. Rather, it is the expression of an original and creative energy, of fertility, of imagination, and of the love for the beautiful, even the gorgeous. This energy and creativity have no reference to society at all. Artists and their products can be appropriated by society or condemned by it; but society cannot make art, only individuals can. Indeed, only individuals who retain, or contain, a profound nonsocial element in their makeup (as Hester does) can make art. Although the social structure of the age denies virtually all forms of artistic expression to women, it does allow this one, and Hester makes use of it as an outlet for this side of her nature. For its part, society makes use of *her*. The Puritans may be incapable of producing art, but they certainly want to possess it. Therefore, despite everything, they want Hester in their community; and they want her *as she is*.

But this is something they have to learn about themselves; and if they do not learn in time, there will be a society with no more Hesters.