THE SCARLET SCREEN: A SURVEY OF THE TRADITION OF
THE SCARLET LETTER IN FILM AND ON TELEVISION, 1926-1995

by

JENNIFER ANNE SOLMES

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Department of Interdisciplinary Studies.

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Frequently called the first American classic, and the only American classic never to be out of print, The Scarlet Letter has been indelibly marked on the American consciousness since Nathaniel Hawthorne published it in 1850. Generations have grown up with its characters and their profound struggle against each other, their community, and themselves. Since the earliest days of film, The Scarlet Letter has been re-presented to each of those generations in a series of diverse cinematic adaptations, providing audiences with an opportunity to re-evaluate those characters, their struggle, and the lessons implicit in them. This dissertation surveys those films in order to produce a production history—one that extends beyond the production details and critical reception to consider how the lessons of The Scarlet Letter have been made to contribute to the cultural conversations of the American twentieth century.

Following Chapter One’s presentation of the method and intent of the study, in Chapter Two I consider the most enduring film in this novel’s cinematic tradition, Victor Sjostrom’s 1926 production starring Lillian Gish. In Chapter Three I examine Robert Vignola’s 1934 ‘B’ movie version in the context of Depression-era sexual politics. In Chapter Four, I unearth two live television plays that come to terms very differently with the Red Scare and the social retrenchment of Eisenhower’s America. Chapter Five also presents a comparison of two very different but contemporaneous Scarlet Letters, one an eccentric feature from Wim Wenders (1972), and the other a prestigious PBS miniseries (1979). Finally, in Chapter Six I examine the 1995 Demi Moore vehicle in the context of the Family Values debates.

By identifying the specific re-presentation strategies as rhetorically motivated, and linking them with the most salient social debates of their times, I argue for the ideological flexibility of the novel as a key to its endurance. I also demonstrate the effectiveness of film study, and specifically of a film adaptation production history focusing on one novel, as a tool for understanding emerging cultural attitudes and values.
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Chapter One—Cultural Portraiture

Hester Prynne is on the scaffold, awaiting the judgement of the magistrates and her punishment. Amid the jeers and catcalls of the assembled townsfolk, she can hear her baby crying. Against all extremities, she has held fast to her principles and her love for the father of the wailing child, and she has not named him.

A commotion erupts. A dark cloaked figure with a flowing mane of black hair storms into the scene on horseback, then flies up the scaffold and addresses the crowd in tones first breathless then rising. He demands the release of Hester and her fellow women condemned for witchcraft (one of whom is her best friend, Harriet Hibbins). After delivering an impassioned plea for tolerance, Dimmesdale (for that is his name) offers to be hanged in their place. But at the moment the noose is flung around his neck, an Indian war party attacks and sacks the town. Later, amid the ashes, Hester and Dimmesdale ride off into the sunset with their child, their hearts full of hope.

If this is not The Scarlet Letter as you remember it, how about this: Hester and Dimmesdale fall in love as children in England and are secretly married aboard ship on their way to the new world. Or perhaps: Hester Prynne gives birth to a daughter, Pearl, whom her husband, Roger, will not own (although he is the biological father) because he wishes to punish Hester for her lustful thoughts (but not deeds) about another man.

Each of these is The Scarlet Letter, or was intended to be. Each is the plot of a film adaptation of the novel (though only the first version recounted here ever reached the screen) intended to refit the story to the needs and desires of the film-going community—to re-author, re-shape, and re-present it—in, in these cases, 1995 and 1926. Each re-delivery of The Scarlet Letter to a popular film or television audience in the twentieth
This study represents part of a continued project to appropriate its considerable cultural capital—as an icon of Americanness, America’s first serious novel—to direct the novel’s, and the novelist’s, presumed authority toward a fixed position in contemporary cultural conversations. This study explores how film seeks to influence the national consciousness. In these cases, filmmakers pursue this aim by bringing to a popular audience (and to national debates) the tremendous cultural authority of a classic text, and re-shaping it for maximum rhetorical effect.

In his discussion of The Scarlet Letter in Practicing Romance, Richard Millington describes how Hawthorne consistently reframes the story to appeal to a mid-19th century sensibility—for example, in narrative appeals to Victorian sentimentality. “Taken together,” he writes,

the effects of this ongoing comparison between the Puritan community and other cultural arrangements, especially those of his own middle-class America, are complex and crucial to an understanding of what Hawthorne is up to in The Scarlet Letter... These versions of cultural comparison finally produce in the reader the sense that a culture is a structure of meaning that is not “natural” or automatic but locally variable, historically changing and thus both inescapable (one is always in relation to one’s cultural system) and humanly revisable as the changing meaning of Hawthorne’s letter within the Puritan community makes clear. And the final reverberation of Hawthorne’s cultural portraiture is this: the nineteenth-century middle-class culture that he writes from and to, and makes a presence within the book, is also revisable and always also the subject of The Scarlet Letter. (68-9)

This study represents an attempt to extend Hawthorne’s project into the twentieth century. The diverse ways in which his text has been made flexible by filmmakers from 1926 to 1995, for certain incarnations of the American culture, expose the ‘revisability’ of that culture and its values. While refitting the story’s value structure to contemporary
norms, several of the films also use a rhetoric of comparison to either valorize progress by emphasizing our difference from they of the Puritan period, or criticize the current culture by linking it with the “dark age.” Thus this study aims to be, like the novel itself, cultural portraiture.

The seven feature and television films I propose to examine engage their audiences (in 1926, 1934, 1950, 1954, 1972, 1979, and 1995) in a discussion about a variety of contemporary concerns—the changing role of women and society’s reaction to it, the place of traditional morality in a modern America, the conflicting pulls of individualism and social order, and the constant reexamination of national identity—through a culturally-specific redelivery of the classic text. The Scarlet Letter has remained a touchstone of national feeling through these re-presentations. Each film is a battleground where conflicting ideas about the national character—especially in terms of moral values, since that is the novel’s most obvious application and one of continuing popular and political interest—often produce a confused and self-contradictory film that is, actually, an accurate register of the confusion in the culture. As the classic American novel, The Scarlet Letter, through these interpretations, allows Americans a chance to interrogate their values. Each adaptation re-shapes the novel to its own rhetorical program, and its own culture. Taken together, these re-tellings demonstrate the novel’s peculiar ability to speak to a variety of cultural debates and historical moments as diverse and contradictory as the 1920s and 1930s, or the 1950s and the 1970s.

The Scarlet Letter has been read, by its first reviewers, modern critics, and certainly filmmakers, in often-contradictory directions. Sometimes a parable of crime and justice, it has been at other times a tragedy of overzealous persecution and hypocrisy.
It has always been a reflection on the American character—whether the reader believes the national character is best represented in the outlaw lovers or the pious townsfolk. It is the novel’s ideological flexibility that has been crucial to its continued success in both classroom and movie house. Richard Brodhead argues that this ambiguity is central to both the novel’s appeal and its design. He asserts:

because he gives so little guidance, Hawthorne’s followers have been free to put him to any purpose they have required. The indefiniteness of his direction explains why his tradition, most unusually, has been compatible with every later project and resistant to none. But the very elusiveness that makes Hawthorne so adaptable as a model builds another trait into the legacy he offers. A strong head of tradition establishes a way for work to be done...If Hawthorne does little to constrain his followers, he does little too to authorize the plans they take from him. They can put him in the service of what project they please, but he does not thereby validate that project. Instead he brings his enigmatic openness inside their work, unleashing his unconfirmingness on their own sense of mission. (Brodhead School 16)

The multiplicity Hawthorne invokes in his telling, and his tale’s ability to embrace a multitude of sometimes-contradictory meanings, has encouraged the freedom with which adaptors have used The Scarlet Letter. Because it permits many readings but consecrates none, filmmakers have been free to seek a consecration of their own, in individual readings determined by the values and prejudices of their different audiences.

In their study of The Last of the Mohicans on film, Martin Barker and Roger Sabin begin by postulating a theory to explain how Cooper’s novel, despite its aesthetic flaws, has come to be retold in countless comic books, plays, film and television series throughout the twentieth century. What quality does Mohicans possess that, say, his more critically acclaimed The Deerslayer lacks, that would explain its staying power for successive generations? Barker and Sabin suggest that
for the story to survive at all, it had to have qualities working simultaneously in contrary directions. It had to lend itself to being reworked in many opposed ways. But it had to have enough of a ‘presence,’ an inner strength, to make it worth repeatedly returning to...It is the book’s very ambiguities that have made it so pliable to other people’s uses. Produced on the cusp of all those [early nineteenth-century political, social, and ideological] changes, the story becomes what we would call a flexible template. It is incomplete, almost requiring interpretive completion, and thus lends itself to being rewritten, especially in that medium that has become preeminently ‘American,’ the film. (32-3)

The Scarlet Letter shares this flexibility. The timeless quality of its concerns—the nature of sin and guilt, the relationship between society and the individual self, and the richly symbolic but starkly simple story give it the ‘presence,’ the emotional power, to resist becoming dated in the way Hawthorne’s other long romances can be. The Scarlet Letter possesses the quality of myth—like Mohicans, “it presents symbolically rich characters in a landscape, whose adventures and eventual tragic conclusion are also rich in symbols” (5). Like other myths, its reinterpretation for successive generations in a popular form, in this case film, ensures the handing on of meanings from one generation to the next.

As with Mohicans, it is the ideological ambiguities of The Scarlet Letter that ensure its staying power, because its uncommittedness allows for free interpretation in its retelling for later generations. A contrast with a novel like Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin makes this point more explicit. While that novel would seem to offer great cinematic potential because of its dramatic power (and its frequent stage productions in the nineteenth century), it has rarely been adapted to film, because its dated concerns, its didacticism, and its committed rhetoric, the very qualities that ensured its phenomenal success in the nineteenth century, make it too inflexible to be shaped for a twentieth
century film audience. Mohicans' seemingly confused mixed messages about the moral value of colonization and the relationship between the races, for Barker and Sabin, result in an ideological tension that creates “a wealth of possibilities for subsequent use” (201).

Similarly, The Scarlet Letter’s narrator alternately endorses and rejects the Puritan community’s values, and Hester’s as well. Barker and Sabin name this ideological indecision ‘coherent incoherence.’ The filmmaker can exploit these inconsistencies; they provide a certain flexibility in interpreting the text as either conservative or liberal, according to the leanings of his audience. This is evident not only in the films which comprise this study, but in the body of academic Hawthorne criticism.

By way of example of how the book’s key issues are flexible enough to permit reinterpretation over time, Jane Tompkins offers two disparate readings of the character of Chillingworth that seem, initially, similar. She quotes a Unitarian minister’s review of the newly released romance, which asserts that the old doctor illustrates “the danger of cherishing merely an intellectual interest in the human soul” (qtd. in Tompkins Sensational 20). While this seems similar to modern critic Donald Ringe’s assessment of Chillingworth as “a cold, speculative, intellectual man who commits a sin of isolation which must ultimately destroy him,” Ringe is using ‘sin’ metaphorically to express Chillingworth’s rejection of normal emotion and community norms. The minister, however, is referring to sin literally, as an offense against God, from whom the doctor has willfully turned away. Tompkins explains that the critics use the same terms to describe Chillingworth’s character, but

the Chillingworth of PMLA transgresses the social and psychological norms of a secular humanism, while the Chillingworth of Hawthorne’s era dramatizes liberal
Protestant convictions about the soul's relation to God. These accounts of what Hawthorne meant to convey are not interchangeable and do not testify to the existence of some central truth in Hawthorne's text which both critics have grasped. What they show is that the critic, the context within which the critic reads, and the text that is interpreted are simultaneously features of a single historical moment. As the concept of sin changes from theological fact to metaphor for a psychological state...the text of The Scarlet Letter changes accordingly. (20)

It is in large measure the aim of this study to discuss this process, and analyze similar examples from the seven films, of the text's transformation in successive interpretive hands. While Hester's story, in 1926, is interpreted through the Roaring Twenties' reaction against Victorianism, in 1950 its themes of hidden sin and persecution are examined by an entertainment industry under pressure from the forces of anti-Communism. The 1934 film constructs Hester in the image of its ideal female, and the 1995 film does the same with strikingly different results.

No text is stable, as reader-response theorists have argued. Every text is created in interaction with an individual who is shaped by his own experiences, as well as his time and place (Dunne Hawthorne's 196). Jane Tompkins seems to echo Barker and Sabin when she concludes that the "very description of The Scarlet Letter as a text that invited constant redefinition might be put forward, finally, as the one true basis on which to found its claim to immortality. For the hallmark of the classic work is precisely that it rewards the scrutiny of successive generations of readers, speaking with equal power to people of various persuasions" (Sensational 35). This comment is equally applicable to film adaptations as to academic criticism. Neil Sinyard asserts that every adaptation is a critical gloss on the novel (117), and it is at least certainly a reading of the text, in that,
especially with *The Scarlet Letter*, interpretations of the narrative necessitate making choices, and to some degree, taking a position on the issues of sin and guilt, society and the self, or even merely whether this novel bears a liberal or conservative agenda. These choices are always based on the attitudes and values of the filmmaker’s audience; this is true of the film interpretation even more than the scholarly one, since most Hollywood films are made to appeal to mass tastes. The scholarly community is (largely) not held to the same standard. This study is thus a compelling and sometimes surprising companion to the body of academic criticism of the novel.

Much of this study will be devoted to a detailed examination of changing popular attitudes, values and prejudices, guided by a methodology that reads context and sees interpretation of a literary text (and I will argue that film adaptations constitute interpretations) as critically engaged with their culture in a discursive relationship. I have used as my methodological model Steven Mailloux’s formulation of *rhetorical hermeneutics*, developed in his three books, *Interpretive Conventions* (1982), *Rhetorical Power* (1989), and *Reception Histories* (1998). Mailloux defines rhetorical hermeneutics, very succinctly, as “using rhetoric to practice theory by doing history.” It will be my argument that film adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter* can be read as contextually sensitive, politically engaged interpretations of the novel just as are reviews of it in 1850 and critical commentaries in *PMLA*.

Rhetorical hermeneutics uses rhetoric to practice hermeneutic theory by doing reception studies within cultural history. Within this context, rhetoric is defined as “the study of textual effects, of their production and reception” (Mailloux *Reception* xii), or the effect of texts on an audience, which is inherently political. The nature of culture
makes it so, as culture is figured as "a heterogeneous, interconnected tangle of rhetorical practices extending and manipulating other practices and structures—social, political, and economic" (186). Hermeneutic theory, derived from Hans-Georg Gadamer's work, is focused on the process of textual interpretation. Gadamer originated the notion of the hermeneutic circle, wherein a reader approaches a text and derives meaning from it, but this meaning is always contingent on what is already meaningful to him or her prior to the interaction. In other words, meaning is created by the interpreter according to what elements in the text resonate in the reader's mind, which is influenced by a unique combination of experiences and predispositions.

So hermeneutic theory, and thus rhetorical hermeneutics, focuses on the reader's experience of a text, "what the reader contributes to interpretation rather than what the text gives the reader to interpret" (47). However, unlike the reader-response theories promulgated in the Seventies by Wolfgang Iser, this reader is not considered in isolation, a mind interacting in a vacuum with words on a page. Rhetorical hermeneutics posits a historically situated, culturally interpolated reader, or rather, following Stanley Fish, a reading community. But unlike in Fish's work, here it is a fully contextualized community that we observe approaching the hermeneutic circle and forming an interpretation which is always inextricable from the surrounding culture and institutions. As such, the interpretation is always a "politically-interested act of persuasion" (50). The rhetorical hermeneuticist studies these interpretations, these events within cultural history that are catalyzed by a text. Similarly, in his The Political Unconscious, Frederic Jameson posits that

we never really confront a text immediately, in all its
freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive conditions. This presupposition then dictates the use of a method (which I have elsewhere termed “meta-commentary”) according to which our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and appreciate it. (10)

Since this is a theory of a reader’s political unconscious, it stands to reason that among the sedimented layers of interpretation that contribute to the always-already-read are the layers of context that accrue from being-in-the-world.

Following Hans-Robert Jauss’s reception aesthetic theory, rhetorical hermeneutics involves detailed reception studies, “focusing on the historical effects of texts for specific reading communities” (Mailloux Reception xii). Mailloux explains that in contrast to various forms of reader talk that focused on a fictionalized reader represented in a text or an ideal reader implied by the text or an actual reader today reading the text, Jauss’s reception aesthetics advocated talking about past historical readers within their specific horizons of expectations. Such talk could develop critical analyses and stories of reading open to a range of factors usually ignored in most reader-oriented criticism, factors constituted by social, political and economic categories. (77)

Because every act of interpretation is inherently political, rhetorical hermeneutics describes the debates that ensue from conflicting interpretations of a text, and contextualizes each side’s position to account for it. For rhetorical hermeneutics, there is no “correct” interpretation—a text has no meaning outside of specific interpretations. So the scholar’s job is to produce histories of interpretations and interpretive disputes, accounted for contextually. In this, Mailloux finds his direction in the neo-Pragmatism of Richard Rorty. Neo-pragmatism posits that
in a multiple world of conflicting practices of thinking and speaking, it makes no sense to try to promulgate laws for how the mind should work, because to do so would be to propose only another manner of interpreting and talking about the world, not the way to end all ways. Consequently, Rorty advises, in order to come to grips with certain perpetually vexing philosophical problems, one should not try to develop an improved model of mind but should examine the historical record to see how they arose. (Armstrong qtd. in Mailloux Reception 63)

Rhetorical hermeneutics takes up this pragmatic rejection of the possibility of a final answer, of a foundation. Mailloux calls it anti-Foundational. Unlike formalism, it does not investigate what a text means. Unlike language-based theories like semiotics, and unlike some forms of reader-response, it does not investigate how a text means. Instead, it investigates why a text means certain things to certain groups at certain moments in time, and how the groups reacted. The practice of theory resides in the doing of history—not in arguments about how to find the meaning, but narratives about why some people found this meaning and others did not. The disputes over a text's meaning form part of a cultural conversation which is a rhetorical hermeneuticist's ultimate object of study.

Rhetorical hermeneutics places “theory, criticism, and literature itself within a cultural conversation, the dramatic, unending conversation of history” (Mailloux Rhetorical 18).

It reads a culture as the culture reads a text, and it reads the culture’s reading as a rhetorical act meant to contribute to arguments within that culture. And the cultural conversation to which Mailloux refers is composed of arguments—it is a pitched rhetorical battle of Foucauldian power-knowledge. He asserts that “we must view the cultural conversation as a complex rhetorical struggle of everyone with everyone, a conversation traversed by uneven power relations, a rhetorical conflict implicated in
social formations of race, class, gender, age and nation” (147).

I use rhetorical hermeneutics in my study of seven film and television adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter* by postulating that a film adaptation of a novel is an interpretation of it, for a particular (film) audience at a particular moment in the ongoing cultural conversations about nation, gender, community and morality. Jean Mitry was the first to hint at a critical and creative role for adaptation. Contesting George Bluestone’s long-unchallenged description of the successful film adaptation as a translation of the novel from one narrative mode to another, Mitry asserted that in adaptation,

the means of expression *in being different* would express different things—not the same thing in different ways...

We talk as if an adaptation were a matter of translation, like passing from one language to another, when in fact it is a matter of passing from one *form* to another, a matter of transposition, of reconstruction. (qtd. in Griffith 25, italics Mitry’s)

I would add that the question here is not merely semiotic and generic, concerning the narrative’s estrangement from its meaning-making mode, but in the case of modern adaptation of classics, the adaptor’s temporal and cultural distance from the period of the novel’s production creates a host of historical issues of rhetorical significance. The adaptor as interpreter works within a culture quite different from the one of which the novel was a part. So there are context-based influences determining the rhetorical direction of the film, its argument, its political effectivity.

Neil Sinyard, whose theory I have already touched on, enlarges Mitry’s ideas in his *Filming Literature* (1979). In a chapter rather pointedly titled “Adaptation as Criticism,” he argues that

the best adaptations of books for film can often be best approached as an activity of literary criticism, not a
pictorialisation of the complete novel, but a critical essay which stresses what it sees as the main theme. Like a critical essay, the film adaptation selects some episodes, excludes, offers preferred alternatives. It focuses on specific areas of the novel, expands or contracts detail, and has imaginative flights of fancy about some characters. In the process, like the best criticism, it can throw new light on the original. (117)

Going further, he claims that such critical adaptations should be “not afraid to kick the novels around, to take liberties with character and structure when they feel they have more convincing readings to offer than the original, to emphasize some features and disregard others” (117, italics mine). I emphasize “convincing” readings to highlight Sinyard’s assumption regarding the rhetorical purpose of film adaptation as criticism. An adaptor identifies the issues in the original text that he or she considers central. Entering the hermeneutic circle, he or she really identifies those aspects that are most meaningful to him or her, those that really register. They register because they allow the adaptor to use the interpretation as an argument in the power-knowledge struggle of the cultural conversation. And of course, the cultural currency, the presumed authority of a classic novel, lends weight to the adaptation as a rhetorical weapon. In the case of The Scarlet Letter, totally conflicting readings of its meaning exist in different adaptations from different periods in film history, but each was received as “Hawthorne’s story” because the audience failed to understand the film as an interpretation, not a translation, of the novel. I approach the adaptations as attempts to argue a side (or sometimes more than one side) in the cultural conversations about gender, morality, religion, community control (including censorship), individuality, and American identity, in the 1920s, 1930s, 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s. Individually, each chapter provides a description of one moment in the novel’s reception history; collectively, the project provides a history of the
cultural conversations surrounding these issues in the twentieth century—because collectively, this is what the adaptations do. Of course, in each film a few of these issues are highlighted and others ignored, because each interpreter sees in Hawthorne’s novel the issues that most resonate in the culture in which the film will participate rhetorically. And as the cultural consensus about these issues changes over seventy tumultuous years, the meaning that is read and offered in the interpretation changes too.

The way I proceed in each chapter of my reception history of The Scarlet Letter can be quickly summarized by Mailloux’s prescription for rhetorical hermeneutics:

> Embed the act of interpretation first in its most relevant critical debates (and there may be several); then the act and its participation in ongoing arguments must be situated in the rhetorical traditions within relevant institutional discourses; and then the interpretive act, its arguments, and its framing institutions must be placed within the cultural conversations, relevant social practices, and constraining material circumstances of its historical moment. And of course this moment has its specific temporal history and geographical location within a culture’s evolving social, political, and economic formations. (Mailloux Rhetorical 134)

So I begin by closely reading the adaptation’s interpretive rhetoric, or in Sinyard’s terms, how it “kicks the novel around” (117), selecting, rearranging, inventing and deleting character and incident, assuming that it does so for thematic, rhetorical reasons. Then, by progressively widening my investigation of the adaptation’s context, I attempt to explain why the novel was interpreted that way, specifically. By way of example, one of the adaptations was produced in 1934, during the Depression, and in the midst of the controversy over the Hays Code that resulted in strict censorship of Hollywood film. The film participated in debates concerning the rise of sophisticated character drama (with the
coming of sound), film censorship, the return of the cult of maternity and womanly shape with the rejection of the youthful flapper as a feminine ideal, an increasing appreciation of female strength and autonomy as so many men fell idle in the Depression (and a concurrent backlash against it for the same reason), and the morally-conservative turn of post-Crash, post-Roaring Twenties America. The film adaptors read The Scarlet Letter as an indictment of community repression and a paen to the resources of mothers. Hester is presented, consequently, as a sympathetic victim of a corrupt, repressive regime and as a doting and (relative to her predecessor Gish) shapely mother. This is the meaning the adaptors found in the novel, because that is what they were looking for. My summary of the cultural conversations in which the film participated reveals the way, following Mailloux’s prescription, I widen my scope progressively—first dealing with institutional traditions like conventions, and institutional discourses like the Hays censorship debate that are particular to Hollywood as the film/interpretation’s framing institution. Then this film and Hollywood practice in general are read in terms of larger cultural conversations which influence them.

Mailloux offers rhetorical hermeneutics as a way out of theoretical debates over the meaning of meaning, a way to reconceptualize our study of culture. I have used it as a way to historicize and politicize film adaptation, and a way out of film adaptation theory’s particular theoretical debate about the limits of fidelity and just what a film of a novel should be. My study of the political effectivity of the film and television adaptations here presented rests, in part, both on the belief that “ostensibly American movies have been dedicated to the reinforcement of middle-class morality. Certainly they have done their share to strengthen capitalism, chauvinism, racism, sexism and so
on" (Schlesinger xii) and, as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argues and my study will show,

film is a notably ambiguous, even duplicitous art. Its testimony is hard to decipher. Its manifest content often heads in one direction, its latent content in quite another...The implicit meaning and force of a film may often be at war with its explicit moral. Moreover, the audience, supposedly passive in the shrouded theater, is actually an active collaborator, seizing from the movie what it needs for its own purposes of tutelage and fantasy. (xii)

Film’s remarkable ability to shape public opinion even while it is being shaped by public opinion has made it a power watched jealously by conservative social forces like the Legion of Decency, HUAC, and the contemporary Religious Right, as I shall explore.

The study of a film in its cultural moment presents a challenging puzzle for the rhetorical hermeneuticist, since

the film document must be analysed with reference to both its surface and its deeper implied meanings. It must be considered in relation to the specific conditions which led to its production (studio rivalry, director’s taste, star availability, financial limitations), the broader social and political context from which it took shape (the era of prohibition, the Cold War, or the bicentennial year), and the audience for which it was intended [particularly useful when we turn to television]. (John E. O’Connor xix)

Frederic Jameson construes interpretation as “an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code” (10).

In adapting The Scarlet Letter to film, the filmmaker’s reinterpretation of the novel is filtered through the cinematic ‘master code,’ that is, the peculiarities of making a film that can constrain or even make meaning themselves—production conditions, the market (feature or ‘B’ film, commercial or public television), and contemporary tastes as much as over-arching cultural values. This study attempts to account for all of these meaning-making conditions. The unique feature of this study in the deluge of cultural studies is
not only my use of rhetorical hermeneutics but the decision to limit myself to adaptations of one novel. Because all of the films discussed here are ostensibly retelling of the same story, taking as their source material one novel, one flexible template, the variety of the films that have resulted is astonishing and a testament to the flexibility of the template. The template is stable enough, however, to provide a solid basis from which to compare the interpretations that result both against the novel and against one another. Most social histories of American film provide a range of different examples, films telling very different stories. While many of these studies, such as Molly Haskell’s classic From Reverence to Rape, are extremely evocative, I believe that it is only when comparing (apparent) like to like, comparing films of different eras that ostensibly spring from the same source, that we can make reliable assessments of the evolution of the film art and the social history of which it is a part. By starting with the novel and documenting the additions, deletions and reformulations (so often frustrating to the lovers of the novel), and examining them symptomatically, it is possible to produce an analysis of precision. And while a few Hawthorne scholars—Sacvan Bercovitch, Bruce Daniels, Michael Dunne and most recently Jamie Barlowe—have considered the film history of The Scarlet Letter within their larger projects, no one study has taken detailed account of the adaptations collectively. This study presents a fresh perspective on adaptations well known to Hawthorne scholars, such as the classic Gish/Sjostrom film of 1926, and uncovers versions that have been ignored or perhaps unknown—the two fascinating television adaptations from the 1950s. This is thus the first study to focus exclusively on films of The Scarlet Letter, to consider all of the extant films, and to make judgements. 

The Scarlet Letter is not the easiest novel to film, nor certainly the most
commercially viable story. The Puritan doctrine is hard to communicate, and the gravity of the sin of two lovers is difficult to sell to a film audience accustomed to much more explicit fare—even in the Twenties. The filmmakers who have confronted the enormous challenge of adapting this novel to a visual and commercially-driven popular medium, whether film or television, were motivated by the belief that Hester's story could be meaningful to their audiences and contribute to the popular imaginings of their time. They believed the past could be made to speak to their time. If only it could be made palatable, accessible, its relevance would become clear. What is most fascinating about this is that the lessons they drew from the novel and then propagated are always different—even contradictory. Understanding the novel's appeal to filmmakers is one goal of this study, but more than anything, it is founded on the same belief that drove Sjostrom, Wenders, and the rest—that the past can speak. Their films speak volumes about the emerging and maturing film industry and its role (and belief in its role) in the cultural conversations of a society. We have the luxury of hindsight to measure the success of each film as a rhetorical illustration of a certain kind of America—their success in continuing Hawthorne's own interrogation of the American soul.
Chapter Two—“Not Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, But Yours and Mine”: The MGM/Gish Scarlet Letter (1926)

Almost as soon as the movies began depicting fictional narratives, they began depicting Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous tale. Some of the early silent versions, which unfortunately are now lost, courted controversy, while others avoided it. Robert Sklar records an early episode in Chicago, in 1914, when controversy over a film of The Scarlet Letter resulted in the development of the first film rating system, consisting in the issuing of pink slips for the admittance of adults only (Movie-Made 28-30). Even at this point, the novel was a locus of issues surrounding community control and morality. Most early adaptors, however, rewrote the story so as not to give offense. One film featured a married Hester and Arthur (Wagenknecht 54)! The films resulting from these early attempts to tame the tale were unremarkable, according to the critics who are our only witnesses. The 1911 version with King Baggot provoked enthusiasm from Moving Picture World only as a result of Dimmesdale’s spectacular death fall from the scaffold, which was “a perilous feat” and a “hazardous piece of business.” According to Michael Dunne, the first version to be widely reviewed was a William Fox production directed by Carl Harbaugh, released in 1917, which a Variety review pronounced “subdued” and “acceptable if unexceptional” (qtd. in Dunne “Ninety” 31). Nevertheless, MGM remade the well-worn property in 1926, with Lillian Gish. The result is both a landmark in American film and a fascinating reaction to the swiftly changing movie industry and the truly revolutionary culture of the Twenties.

The story of how Lillian Gish convinced Louis B. Mayer to make the film is legendary. Having come to MGM after a two-film deal with Inspiration Pictures (to
whom she had gone after leaving D.W. Griffith), Gish possessed the clout needed to get a film made. She records in her autobiography that Mayer resisted the idea, because the novel was on the “black list” (285). Gish reports that she was shocked to hear about the novel’s status, and protested that it was an American classic. Its cultural status could not protect the novel from groups who would prefer this story of America not to be told. But in the end, Mayer promised to make the film if Gish could secure approval from the women’s and church groups that might oppose it. She met with them and promised that the film would not be immoral, would not contravene their shared standards. Because of her irreproachable reputation, and because these groups were so pleased with the message of her recent film, *The White Sister* (1923, in which she played a nun), the groups approved the picture (286). While Gish ends the story there, the studio was, in fact, continually busy reassuring the groups during production, offering tours of the set, script approval, and special previews (Beauchamp 178). Gish also claims that it was agreed at the outset that she and Frances Marion would adapt the property. In fact, Irving Thalberg assigned the job to several in-house MGM scriptwriters before Marion, a veteran who worked closely with Mary Pickford, was given the job. The efforts of the MGM writers were uneven, but do suggest MGM’s discomfort with “black-list” material. In a desperate attempt to legitimize the relationship between Hester and her pastor,

the writers had turned creative. One opened the story in England, where Hester and Dimmesdale have known each other since childhood and are separated by a cruel act of fate “which drives Hester into a loveless marriage and Dimmesdale into the Puritan ministry.” Another proposed that Pearl was the child of a secret marriage between Hester and Dimmesdale when they thought Hester’s father was dead. It was even suggested that Pearl be Prynne’s child, whom he refused to acknowledge “to
punish his wife for being unfaithful to him in thought if not in deed." The quintessential example of the length they were willing to go to please modern-day Puritans was Wyndham Gittens' suggestion that they get around the meaning of the letter A on Hester's breast with "another term of reproach less shocking than adulteress or, failing a suitable word, by changing the symbol to another letter which will permit of this envision [sic]." All the scenarios proposed happy endings with "Pearl happily walking down the street with both her parents" or "all three sailing away on a ship." (175-6)

Whatever the final film's faults, Frances Marion's script never reaches these heights of absurdity. The film was hailed as a classic, and is unique among the adaptations under consideration in this study in its contemporary success and its modern status as a masterpiece. Ironically, considering the rejected ideas, the only major criticism of the film, both in its own time and today, is leveled at the script. A contemporary commentator in the *New York Review* noted that "the scenario which was drawn up by Frances Marion deviates considerably from the original. It seems that the first thing a scenarist says when a literary masterpiece is put in his or her hands is 'How can I change this around?'...Thank goodness they didn't add a happy ending" (qtd. in Beauchamp 179). Critical charges of textual infidelity plague every film version of the novel; this attests to the cultural status of *The Scarlet Letter*—each generation's film critics consider it inviolable. The film is still widely praised and discussed, although rarely seen. Its lack of fidelity to Hawthorne is still lamented by some critics, and MGM is held responsible. Mark Estrin insists that "it was doomed from the start—doomed by the studio's desire that it should in no way give offense to any group strong enough to affect its commercial success, that it should sweeten the bitter vision of Nathaniel Hawthorne" (101). It is obvious that the film was, in part, shaped by studio politics and the pressure to reflect the
morality of a vocal, conservative segment of the audience. But the effect is not the "subdued" impression given by Fox’s effort, nor the neutered offerings of the MGM script department, at least if we measure by contemporary critical reaction. While it may streamline the issues in Hawthorne’s novel, it remains highly unconventional in its morality and its tone. Overall, the film uses a symbol of the Victorian old order, Lillian Gish, to critique its construction of femaleness and its repressiveness, against which the Jazz Age rebelled.

A lot of the credit for the film’s success belongs to its director, Victor Sjostrom. While MGM’s *The Scarlet Letter* is usually considered Gish’s film entirely, its artistry is unmistakably Sjostrom’s. A veteran director when he came to America from Sweden, Sjostrom directed eight Hollywood films in the mid-Twenties before returning to Sweden with the coming of sound. These American films “are so stark and austere that, if it weren’t for the presence of Lillian Gish, Garbo, and other Hollywood names, they could pass as Swedish imports” (Everson 319). Sjostrom was apparently handpicked for the project by Lillian Gish, as was her co-star Lars Hanson, another Swede (he was initially suggested by Mayer.) Gish asserts that she chose Sjostrom because “Scandinavians are closer in feeling to New England Puritans than are present-day Americans” (286). In fact, the power of the film that Sjostrom created from Hawthorne’s novel is more directly attributable to his experience with sexual themes and self/society conflicts, in both his Swedish films (many based on fiction by Selma Lagerloff) and American efforts like *He Who Gets Slapped* and *Name the Man* (both 1924). Many of them feature stories focusing on “sexual guilt, public pressure and persecution, shame, repentance and reconciliation” (Petrie 136). *Name the Man*, made for Sam Goldwyn, is especially
evocative of *The Scarlet Letter*. It is the story of Victor,

the son of a judge who is a pillar of the community, who quarrels with his girlfriend Fennella and has a brief affair with Bessie, a young girl from the countryside. Bessie becomes pregnant, does not tell Victor (who has meanwhile reconciled with Fennella) and kills the baby. Victor replaces his father as a judge and his first case is to try Bessie for child-murder. She refuses to name Victor as the father, but Fennella, and Victor’s best friend (who is acting as Bessie’s lawyer), guess the truth and are horrified when Victor is too cowardly to admit his guilt and condemns Bessie to death. Extant prints of the film end at this point; originally it went on to show Victor helping Bessie to escape from prison (accompanied by his friend, who has fallen in love with her), then confronting an enraged mob in the town square to confess both his part in the escape and his original responsibility for Bessie’s plight. He is thrown into prison, but his action regains him Fennella’s respect and love. (128)

Victor is torn between the pressure to conform to community standards and his personal morality. In the end, he makes what we would deem the ‘right’ choice, and is persecuted for it. Sjostrom’s relative inexperience with Hollywood politics may account for his ability to maintain Hawthorne’s vision of heroic and doomed individualism. The Swedish director may have been less than fully aware of the powerful force that was American Puritanism still, and the hold that interest groups had on the studios. But he would soon learn. After a happy ending was insisted upon for his already-completed second film with Gish, *The Wind* (1929), Sjostrom left Hollywood forever.

Sjostrom’s film begins with the same image that begins Hawthorne’s novel—the rosebush. However its meaning is obscured in the film, since its presentation is not followed by Hester’s ignominious march to the scaffold, but rather by the beginning of a background story that lasts for nearly half the film. The back-story introduces the characters and the community, but most importantly it describes the ‘courting,’ if one
may call it that, of Hester and Dimmesdale; the back-story imposes a romantic, melodramatic construct on the narrative. The second shot is of a man in a cage, and a group of people going to meeting. The milieu of religious conformity and harsh punishment is established within only a few shots. Couples march stoically, almost martially, to the service, with firm grasps on their children. They are modeling appropriate couple behavior; Hester and Dimmesdale will be presented as deviant, in their failure to suppress their natural instincts and relate to each other according to the community’s codes. Dimmesdale’s difference is marked in his first scene, but it is his interaction with a sinner of his own gender, not with a love interest, that is presented first. A man bearing a placard reading “wanton gospeller” sits down in a pew, and immediately its other occupants move away. However Dimmesdale, seeing this, approaches the man, even touches him, and assures him of his (Dimmesdale’s) hope that through discussion he can help the man to once again be “one with us in spirit.” An explicit connection is drawn here between Dimmesdale and Christ among the lepers. For the wanton gospeller is a social leper, as the film makes clear in preparation for Hester’s story.

Hester is first shown arraying herself for church, and her difference from the community is obvious. She wears white, while everyone else is dressed in black. This effect is particularly evocative when she enters the meetinghouse late, and the rest of the congregation is already seated. She attempts to blend in, but it is impossible for her to do so in this world. Her contravention of the society’s laws is immediately signaled in her cottage by the presence of her mirror, hidden by a piece of needlework that reads “Vanity is an evil disease.” Hester is the only Puritan with an appreciation for irony, and the only one willing to bend the community’s repressive laws in favor of her innate nature.
Satisfied with her appearance, she stops to listen to her bird. Passing townspeople hear it too, but instead of taking pleasure in the song as she does, they pronounce the creature, which is of course only following its nature, "wanton" for singing on the Sabbath. When the bird subsequently escapes and Hester runs to the forest after it, the observing townspeople draw an ‘X’ on her door with chalk. Hester has been marked as deviant from the community in only the second scene, and the mark foreshadows her later branding. Hester chases the bird, but then hurries off to church after hearing the final bells even in the depths of the forest. Order penetrates even its depths. Her hair is flowing, having escaped the confines of her cap when she ran into the forest (and out of the confines of the town), and she must quickly restrain it, and her exuberant nature, before going to meeting. Hester arrives late and is called out and punished with time in the stocks, but even after Dimmesdale chides her for running and skipping on the Sabbath (for so he has been informed), her eyes begin to melt his righteous resolve. He brings her water as she sits in the stocks, releases her, and walks her home. The very bird that has led her into the forest and misbehavior is, significantly, waiting, perched on his cage. Hester kisses the minister’s hand and he tears himself away from her reluctantly and temporarily.

In the next scene, community codes regarding sexuality are further described by a shot of a page in the law book, which forbids the display of undergarments before the opposite sex. Then the women of the town are shown beside the pond, washing, of course, their undergarments. It is just then that a passing Dimmesdale discovers Hester. Her attempts to modestly conceal her laundry lead to a comic chase through the forest, and her provocative suggestion that she would enjoy walking beside him and hearing him
condemn her for her sins. This Puritan come-on is successful, and they walk off-screen together, Hester having haphazardly thrown her underwear onto a convenient bush. The couple is next seen emerging from behind the bush, in love and holding hands. At the end of their walk, they engage in a very important exchange while sitting under a tree. She says: "I have told thee my thoughts—thou dost say they are sinful—but why? Why are we taught to be ashamed of love?" He declares that he has fought his feeling for her unsuccessfully, and indeed loves her too. They embrace. While this scene follows a fairly standard melodramatic formula of romantic declaration, Hester's questions are extremely significant. Hester is, or plays at being, unconscious of sin (that is, the sin of passion or unsanctioned love). Her questions resound with a critique of her society, and by extension, of the Victorian repression against which the audience's America was in open revolt. This extra-textual application will be examined later; for now, we must consider the effect of these lines on the audience's perception of her character and situation. Neither the audience nor Dimmesdale (nor the community) is aware that Hester is married. The filmmakers wish to draw the audience's sympathy to the (presumed) ideal lovers, and direct its outrage against the community whose values may destroy the romantic couple. Hester and the audience of the Twenties agree that passion is not sinful, and not a matter for shame. The innocence of her passion is unquestioned at this point—after all, the lover is Lillian Gish, and the beloved is a minister who has already been compared to Christ himself! This scene builds up an identification with and a sympathy for the romantic couple, and especially Hester, that even the revelation of her secret cannot destroy.

The scene in which Hester reveals the truth raises a lot of unanswered questions,
unanswerable within the world of the film. Dimmesdale arrives at her home excited at the news that he is to travel to England as a colonial envoy, and she is to join him as his wife. This is an important plot innovation in the film, because Dimmesdale's trip provides an excuse for his inaction on her behalf when she is discovered to be pregnant and imprisoned. In the novel, of course, a much less noble Dimmesdale stands by and allows his pregnant lover to be punished. Hester is joyous for a moment when she learns of Dimmesdale's plans, then hardens her face and reveals her previous marriage by showing him, silently, the ring she has kept hidden. She protests that she was "never wife to him" (meaning her husband), as they married on the very day she sailed for Boston. Hester may be many things, but she is not promiscuous. Dimmesdale is the only man she has ever known. He leaves and she is miserable, but given the romantic formula of the story so far, the scene seems to present the conventional impediment or misunderstanding that forms the middle point of the boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-regains-girl plot structure (Wexman 4). The question of how Hester can justify her deception, much less her adultery, is glossed over—she claims she was afraid to lose his love—in Gish's psychologically rather simple portrayal of her as a virtuous maiden ruined by love, and persecuted unjustly. Dimmesdale also escapes real scrutiny as a minister who, although duped into adultery, does commit fornication consciously, if not entirely willingly.

Some time elapses between this scene and the next—the duration of Hester's pregnancy and Dimmesdale's mission to England. He returns on the day she is called to the scaffold. But before the first scaffold scene, Dimmesdale rushes to Hester's side, upon learning what has transpired in his absence. He offers to stand beside her in admission of his culpability, but she forbids it, urging him (as her counterpart in 1934 and
1995 will do) to hide his guilt and continue ministering to the community. She urges him to atone for both of their sins, ignoring the fact that his was more an unwitting misstep.

The first scaffold scene follows the novel closely. Interestingly, this scene is punctuated by the use of more inter-titles than in any other scene. Frances Marion seems to want to include as much of Dimmesdale’s speech as possible, to heighten the drama of Hester’s eventual silent refusal to name him. At the end of it, Hester displays her badge. While, of course, the filmmakers had little choice but to keep the original A, it contradicts the story they have built. If Hester’s marriage is a secret, she should be branded with an “F” as a fornicator, rather than the A of an adulteress.

The scene determining Pearl’s custody is moved up to follow the scaffold scene. Pearl is still an infant, so her behavior does not motivate the confrontation; only Hester’s presumed unfitness in the eyes of the community is at issue. The baby is called a “brat of the devil,” and is later pronounced possessed, but this aspect of Hawthorne’s novel is downplayed. While there is a Mistress Hibbins in the film, she is not a witch and a symbol of lawlessness, as in the novel, but rather a gossip and a zealot. The supernatural dimension is ignored. Dimmesdale deflects the custody issue by baptizing Pearl during the scene. This action substitutes for his defense, in Hawthorne’s text, of the fitness of preserving the bond between sinning mother and child of sin. It is a more dramatically economical way of communicating his enduring passion for his family, and will be used again in 1995. Its effectiveness resides not only in the dramatic, ritualized action, but in its direct association of father and daughter, as he holds her, names her, and rescues her from the community, all at considerable risk to his reputation. Community values have prevented the natural pair from loving each other openly. The community’s unnatural
values are exposed in its attempt to sever another natural bond, the one between parent and child.

Pearl grows into a young girl, but displays none of the torturing behavior of Hawthorne’s elf-child, except for once drawing an ‘A’ in the sand. This act is, significantly, not followed by an inquiry by the child into the meaning of the badge. A title proclaims the mother and child “Outcasts! Shunned and Despised!” but adds that “Hester’s happy child reflected the hope that still lay in her mother’s heart.” Hawthorne’s Pearl reflects her mother’s hidden lawlessness, but this would be impossible in the film given Gish’s persona and the way the character is constructed. In all, there are few scenes with Pearl. Hester is defined in the film primarily as a lover, not a mother (in 1934, this will be reversed, to reflect the changing notion of women.) However, her maternal nature is presented during Pearl’s illness crisis. Transplanted from the early part of the novel, Pearl’s illness shows, in an effective economical way, Hester’s love for the child (as does her ferocity during the custody scene). But even here providing a pretext for maternal display is not the primary function of Pearl’s illness in the film. The crisis also foregrounds the natural humanity of Giles (which I will address later in my discussion of the subplot) and sets up the Dimmesdale/Chillingworth/Hester confrontation.

Dimmesdale hurries to Hester’s cottage when he hears that Pearl is ill. We presume that they have rarely spoken in the intervening years, because a few scenes earlier he stood looking longingly at her window with his Bible over his heart (a clever evocation of their love’s impediment) but did not enter, and skulked away at the approach of a wagon. Pearl draws the audience’s attention to his gesture by asking why the minister always keeps his hand over his heart. Dimmesdale has been shown, earlier,
branding himself by firelight. The inter-title accompanying that segment reads: “the tortured heart—doubly tortured by the love and veneration of his people.” But this is not strongly presented in the film. Chillingworth only arrives very late in the action, so the audience, lacking the novel’s dialogues between the men, cannot fully appreciate the depths of Dimmesdale’s guilt and suffering. Sjostrom and Frances Marion also delete the midnight vigil sequence, which provides such insight for the reader into Dimmesdale’s psychology and his conflicted attitude toward his family, his inner struggle with community values and natural morality (love). Instead, the branding scene seems out of place and extreme, and Dimmesdale’s rush to Hester’s side during Pearl’s illness appears more consistent, given our notion of him as a noble romantic lover.

Of course, the minister reveals his identity immediately upon entering Hester’s cottage, to the delight of the recently-arrived Chillingworth. Hester immediately identifies the old man as her husband, and the lovers cling tenaciously but fearfully to one another, in a conventional melodramatic way. The total elimination of Chillingworth’s slow psychological torture of the unsuspecting minister keeps the focus on the love relationship, making the plot less triangular and complex. There is only Hester-Dimmesdale to consider, not Hester-Chillingworth or Chillingworth-Dimmesdale (Higashi 21). This focus on the romantic pair is reinforced in the forest scene, in which Hester outlines her plan for their escape. Again here, the romantic couple cannot be diluted by the triangulation, so Pearl’s role in the scene is minimized. She appears only at the end, to restore to her mother her letter and cap, nonchalantly and without comment.

The Election Day sequence follows. Dimmesdale is shown entering the church in a trance, but Chillingworth and Hester’s movements are the focus, until the sermon
begins. A study of the various Election Day sermons presented in the film adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter* would make for a fascinating investigation alone. Hawthorne, of course, does not reveal the text of the sermon, but only its powerful effect on the listeners. In a film, however, the words are essential. Marion sums up Dimmesdale’s speech with only one title, reading: “Purge yourselves of intolerance! Judge not, for only the eyes of God may see into the heart of a sinner!” His eyes seem never to move from one of the congregation—Chillingworth. When he has finished, the congregation praises the eloquence of the sermon—ironically, since it is their intolerance that moves Dimmesdale to write it, and their intolerance that (the film argues) causes the ensuing tragedy.

Chillingworth approaches him after the service, and warns him that he too is to sail on the ship. He asks, “Dost think thou shalt ever have happiness? I will always follow thee!” This would seem to be the fulfillment of his vow, pronounced earlier in Hester’s cottage, that his “revenge will be infinite.” The effect of this latest warning on Dimmesdale is profound. He appears in the doorway of the meetinghouse with Chillingworth directly behind him, whispering in his ear. It is at this point that Dimmesdale realizes that in a social world, it is impossible to escape the community and its order. There is no space for natural bonds in a society. Hester stares at the pair with obvious alarm, but Dimmesdale does not return her gaze. He looks only at the pillory, and ascends it with Hester right behind him. Significantly, again, Pearl is not included in the final tableau. This is the romantic couple’s moment. Hester supports his head, creating the pieta-like arrangement that many of the later films will copy. Dimmesdale’s last words constitute the question, to Hester, “is this not a better freedom?”—a point
familiar to readers of the novel. But Gish’s Hester is not given the responding line that casts doubt on Dimmesdale’s reasoning: “I know not.” The novel’s Dimmesdale asserts, in his dying speech, that moral law is inescapable even in death, but for the film there really is a freedom to be gained in death—a freedom from external social constraints. The minister’s last act is to remove Hester’s badge of shame and allow it to fall on his branded chest, directly on the brand itself. With this gesture, Dimmesdale absolves Hester of her social sin, the implication being that she will live on unburdened as a result of his presence on the scaffold. He has done what she requested before her first exposure to public humiliation there: he has atoned for them both.

Despite Mordaunt Hall’s complaint, in the *New York Times*, that “The Reverend Dimmesdale strikes one as being a peculiarly spineless person, wavering between a confession of his sin and clinging to his position as a minister,” Lars Hanson’s Dimmesdale is considerably stronger than his literary predecessor. Brian McFarlane asserts that

the venerated minister is seen: (a) as trying to resist his feelings for her (cf. his sternness in reproving her, first in church, later in the woods); and (b) also as humanely sympathetic toward her when she is treated unkindly by the community. A film in 1926 (and for many subsequent years) would be unlikely to risk with its audience a hero as weak and cowardly as Hawthorne’s Dimmesdale; and Sjöström’s male star, Lars Hanson, is given opportunities to appear handsome, virile, and sympathetic. Further, he is presented as a passion for a woman who has been established: (a) as essentially innocent and playful, filled with a delight in life which is at odds with the community; and (b) as actively, if innocently, the pursuer in the situation. In fact, she literally pursues him in the forest scene where, we assume, they finally make love. Such was the effect of Lillian Gish’s persona that, in structural terms, the film can afford to present her as the pursuer without any danger of a loss of
sympathy for her, and this reduces Dimmesdale’s guilt in the matter. He becomes a strong man beguiled by love in the form of a girl whose innocently beguiling quality audiences could be counted on to endorse. (43)

In fact, the film constantly juggles his strength and weakness. He claims to have fought his attraction to Hester, but it exceeded his strength. He is, in a way, overpowered by a girl whose very innocence beguiles. She seduces him with her looks and her words, such as her repeated questioning of the basis of the prohibition against love. She is the voice of the natural self, rebelling against society. This sense of his weakness will return at the end of the film, when he puts his life in her hands in the forest, and then clings to her for strength on the scaffold. The hidden resources of strength in Gish’s Hester, absent in most of her previous roles, are obvious in the forest scene, in which she offers Dimmesdale hope with not only words of love but a concrete plan for escape. It is Hester who then makes arrangements with the sailors. If Hester is straightforwardly anti-communitarian (she has shown this in betraying her marriage and questioning the basis for social control), then the self/society struggle is Dimmesdale’s—and society is winning. But Dimmesdale is strong when melodrama demands it. Upon hearing of her disgrace, he bursts in manfully. He insists on shouldering the blame. But again, Hester convinces him to follow her instructions. As a result, he appears never to be at fault.

McFarlane’s remarks about Lillian Gish’s unique ability to play a seductress with complete innocence will be investigated in the next section of this chapter, but here it is important only to note the effect of this on an audience’s interpretation of Dimmesdale. He is clearly blameless: we know he was deceived by Hester regarding her prior marriage and manipulated by her into concealing his guilt. He is a virtuous man transfixed by a
pure, natural, truly moral love that conflicts with his society’s ‘false’ morality. A less romantic, heroic Dimmesdale would be rejected by the audience as a leading man, a compassionate figure, and a match for Lillian Gish. But a less innocent figure than Gish’s Hester could never retain the endorsement of that audience despite her sins. The film constructs those sins as only social; not an affront to morality, they instead are assertions of nature over society, natural morality over social control. Hester is innocent of corruption by society; her innocence resides in her naturalness. Where Hawthorne closes his novel with Hester’s resumption of the badge late in life, Sjostrom ends the film with her loss of it on the scaffold. The novel’s message of sin’s persistence is inverted, because in the film there is no universally agreed upon notion of sinfulness—it is ideological and contested by competing moral systems.

Who is left to blame for their tragedy? The community itself stands accused at the end, along with the cuckolded husband. Through the invention of the back-story and the reconstruction of characters, “the audience is comforted into believing that it is somehow remote from and far above the moral level of a group behaving badly in the film it is viewing, and the ‘message’ is reduced to terms that are delineated in the clearest possible extremes: Hester-Lillian is ‘good;’ Dimmesdale is ‘good;’ Chillingworth is ‘bad;’ the frowning, sometimes silly Puritans who want to take Hester’s baby from her are ‘bad’ ” (Julian Smith 118). While Chillingworth wears the black hat and the menacing scowl, the true villain of the piece is announced in the first title, in which the Puritans are condemned as “a stern, unforgiving people,” and subsequent scenes offer them as hypocritical, bigoted and buffoonish. The outrage directed at the Puritan community by the film’s reviewers is guided both explicitly and implicitly by the film.
Chillingworth’s threats are nothing compared to the evil of a community that *Variety* characterized as “fanatics” and the *New York Times* as “ignoble bigots.” But is the community, in the end, so unforgiving? Their attitude toward Hester never softens, as it does in the novel and in some later film versions. The dunking of Mistress Hibbins, late in the film, is a satisfying moment for the audience both because of her personal offensiveness and her status as the most clearly drawn representative of the community and its values. The film does not address the changing perception of Hester within the community, nor her good works, since the community’s capacity to accommodate the outcast is left unexplored. The positions of the natural self and the unnatural society are more polarized and irreconcilable in the film. But the gesture at the end of the film as Dimmesdale lies dying, the removal of hats and the stunned, sorrowful looks, point, if obliquely, to a capacity for sympathy. And the minister’s Christ-like gesture, the assumption of Hester’s badge as well as his own brand, suggests the possibility of not only spiritual but also social redemption.

While the film diminishes the complexity of its romantic pair, it also simplifies Chillingworth by assigning to him all of the qualities of the stock villain of melodrama. In his appearance, his gestures, and his placement so late in the story (as a sort of final blow to the couple’s chances at happiness), as well as in the elimination of the Chillingworth-Dimmesdale plot, it is clear that “the script is less concerned to realize Chillingworth’s complexity than his capacity for frightening the audience as he terrorizes Lillian Gish and Lars Hanson” (116). The inclusion of the Chillingworth-Dimmesdale plot would present distracting competition for the romance plot. The enlargement of Chillingworth might also draw sympathy away from Dimmesdale—after all, it is the old
doctor, not the minister, who is her husband, and he has been cuckolded. Instead, melodrama demands a crudely drawn villain. *Variety* complained that “Henry B. Walthall plays the husband with a make-up suggestive of Shylock and mannerism much the same, though the reason for this is far from explained” (15). But the reason is obvious and the effect, especially in the scene in Hester’s cottage in which he frightens and threatens the couple, is perfect melodrama. All he need do is tie Hester up and leave her bound on a railroad track! Their “unnatural relation,” as Hawthorne’s Chillingworth calls their marriage, is monstrous, although socially legitimate, and so he must be monstrous too.

While reconstructing *The Scarlet Letter* into a drama that fits melodramatic expectations, Sjostrom is also able to modify a film convention that could have distracted from the main action and instead make it provide a useful commentary on the situation. Sjostrom uses a subplot concerning a barber named Giles, meant to provide comic relief, to expose the unnaturalness of the community’s restrictions on love, and its hypocrisy. Giles is actually central to two subplots—his courtship and his feud with Mistress Hibbins. Giles’s relationship with his prudish fiancée provides a knowing comic counterpoint to the Hester-Dimmesdale relationship. After the film viewer is instructed that kissing is forbidden until marriage, Giles is shown at the home of his fiancée, not accidentally named Patience (a virtue that contradicts passion), conversing with her through the interpolation of a long speaking tube, as they sit at opposite ends of a table, and under the watchful eye of her parents. When Giles gets up to leave, he attempts to embrace Patience and is rebuffed. She runs to her parents, protesting that she cannot marry a man of such excessive “passions.” The next scene shows Hester and
Dimmesdale, unwatched and in the natural (as opposed to domestic) space of the forest, embracing. Giles chafes against the repressiveness of Puritan courtship, because he is a natural man—the counterpart of Hester. He does not understand why he should be ashamed of love either. Like Hester, he is punished early in the film for a trivial infraction—sneezing. The bond between Giles and Hester is reinforced by his defense of her when she is chided by Mistress Hibbins on several occasions, and his concern over her child’s illness. Giles is the only person to whom Hester can turn during that crisis. His feud with Mistress Hibbins, which ends in his dunking her in the pond publicly (a shrewd parallel to the scaffold punishment of Hester), proves not only his allegiance to Hester personally, but his sense of moral rightness that transcends, and at times even contradicts, the community’s morality of law, not affection. Sjostrom and Marion make of their comic relief figure a focus for the audience’s identification: “the all-American boy-next-door whose puppy-dog crush on Hester, even after her fall from grace, is used to direct the audience’s attitude toward Hester and the meaning of her story” (Estrin 104). Even Dimmesdale’s redemptive function is reflected in the sub-plot—“the death of Dimmesdale in Hester’s arms will be lightened and counterpointed by an inter-cut to the once-prudish Patience taking Giles’s hand in ‘proof’ that the intolerant townspeople are moved and humanized by the triumph of love that allows Hester to lead them in prayer for Dimmesdale” (104). While social deviance of the magnitude of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s, being a couple consecrated only by nature and passion, can never be integrated into the community, the suggestion is that natural men and women like Giles and Hester can create change in the community through their example of affection and openness, and can triumph over the heartlessness of the old order.
Lillian Gish left Hollywood soon after both Sjostrom and her co-star in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Wind*, Lars Hanson. While the debacle over *The Wind*’s ending certainly contributed to her departure, there are more complex reasons for it, and in these her role in *The Scarlet Letter* plays a part. Lillian Gish became a movie star while still a teenager in American film’s very early days. She had known Mary Pickford while both were on the stage as children, and it was while visiting Pickford at a New York studio that she met D.W. Griffith. Her association with Griffith would last into the Twenties. Through her, largely, he developed his melodramatic formula of imperiled virtue and (usually) last minute rescue, in *Birth of a Nation* (1914) and other films in the ‘Teens. Gish was the apotheosis of the Griffith heroine; “Griffith found her angelic, fragile beauty to be a perfect expression of his view of the ideal woman: strong in adversity but mostly at the mercy of men and their selfishness” (Sochen “New” 6). The romantic Southern-born director was a great technical innovator and storyteller, but his notion of women was unmistakably Victorian. After the war, audiences began to reject the outright moralizing and the often forced happy endings Griffith provided. For a while, he was able to adapt to changing tastes. *Broken Blossoms* (1919), in which Gish plays a child beaten to death by her father, and *Way Down East* (1920) in which the innocent heroine (again Gish) is tricked by an upper-class cad into a false marriage and becomes an unwed mother, were his greatest artistic and financial successes after *Birth of a Nation*. But Griffith would never have a success after *Way Down East*, and had to release Lillian Gish when he could no longer afford to pay her.

For Inspiration Pictures, Gish then made *The White Sister* (1923), and *Romola* (1924). In both films she remains very much Griffith’s Gish—the virtuous sufferer, the
Victorian true woman. In *The White Sister*, she loses her fiancé, or so she thinks, but just as she has taken her vows as a nun, he reappears. Despite her love for him, she honors her vows. He tries to kidnap her and fails, and is killed in a volcanic eruption. In *Romola*, adapted from George Eliot, she endures her husband’s affair and ends up raising his child after his death and that of his mistress. She is rewarded with a more deserving mate. When she began making *La Boheme* for MGM the next year, there is a story that she attempted to convince director King Vidor and co-star John Gilbert that the love story would play best without any physical contact between the lovers (Higashi 20). In the sex-driven Hollywood of the mid-20’s, this was a hopelessly old-fashioned idea, but very consistent with her image in Hollywood. From reports of her off-screen life and certainly her choice of roles, but even in the nature of her acting itself, one thing is clear: “whether as Lucy with her head on the Yellow Man’s pillow (*Broken Blossoms*), or the becowled nun in *The White Sister*, or Mimi in love and dying (*La Boheme*), Lillian Gish, in stasis, [had] a moral quality, a burden of sincerity and thought, a meaning, and a sense of character that [could] be articulated and translated. She is virtue” (Affron 90). In a society struggling to break free of Victorianism, especially in sexual matters, she was a symbol of a past to be escaped, even shunned. She was the antithesis of sex. Sumiko Higashi asserts that by the mid-1920’s,

although the movie audience still admired American girlhood, that girlhood was no longer synonymous with the qualities which Lillian Gish projected on the screen. Perhaps the very artistry with which she had portrayed the sentimental heroine had only succeeded in defining her limitations as a woman. She was at the height of her popularity during and shortly after the war and for a while competed successfully with more daring heroines, such as the vamp and the “New Woman.” As the Jazz Age pro-
gressed, however, the Victorian heroine became increasingly outmoded. The value structure of the world in which she functioned had begun to collapse. The popular image of women changed and with it, concepts of morality based on woman’s purity and innocence. (26)

The critics had turned harsh even before Gish left Griffith. One defined an optimist as “a person who will go to the theatre expecting to see a D.W. Griffith production in which Lillian Gish is not attacked by the villain in the fifth reel” (qtd. in Slide 95). By the mid-Twenties they were vicious. James Quirk wrote of Gish, in Photoplay, “In the last twelve years she has been saved just in the nick of time from the brutal attacks of 4,000 German soldiers, 2,000 border ruffians, and 999 conscienceless men about town. Someday I hope the American hero breaks a leg and fails to get there before the German soldier smashes in the door” (qtd. ibid). Fellow actress Louise Brooks later characterized the press’s treatment of Gish as a public execution (51).

Quirk’s comment was written in 1926, which was a watershed year for Hollywood and for Gish. Aside from being the year of The Scarlet Letter’s release, it was also the year that Greta Garbo arrived in America. Today it is hard to imagine two such different symbols of ideal womanhood as Gish and Garbo co-existing on the MGM lot. But in fact, Garbo spent many days on the set of The Scarlet Letter, in part because her countrymen Sjostrom and Hanson were there, but also because she wanted to study Gish. She once commented that she couldn’t wait to be a big star like Lillian Gish so that she could do whatever she liked, but she read that situation wrong. It was in part Garbo’s arrival that forced Lillian Gish to confront the problem of her image, and attempt to conform to public tastes. Her assumption of the role of Hester Prynne was an attempt to complicate her image, but instead her image simplified Hester, as we have seen.
Garbo arrived on the strength of her work in Maurice Stiller’s *Gosta Berlings Saga* (1924) in Sweden. She was immediately plunged into the sexy vamp roles that she was never to escape. Just as Valentino had eclipsed the popularity of Griffith hero Richard Barthelmess, Garbo would eclipse Gish. Gish was hired by MGM’s New York office, by the East Coast businessmen who liked her proven bankability, for six pictures at a salary of $800,000 for two years (Robinson 147). Greta Garbo was hired for a small fraction of that sum by the West Coast offices controlled by Mayer, whose job and talent it was to anticipate future public tastes. Unlike the passive, domineering Gish, whom Griffith had subjected to male manipulation and violence, Garbo was always more powerful than her co-stars, even physically, in films such as *Wild Orchids* and *The Single Standard* (both 1929). A Garbo character’s inevitable fall was always the result of her nature and Fate, not trickery or force. She was an individual and an outsider in her films. As a vamp she stood apart from society and its rules, and it abused her. The more sophisticated heroine was a perfect fit for the Jazz Age, especially one who rebelled against Victorian social codes in favor of a personal morality of the heart. Those actresses who could not be like Garbo could not survive long. Louise Brooks recalls that “the producers were driving actresses out of their minds—dressing Barbara LaMarr in nun’s veils to make her sympathetic and sticking a rose through the teeth of Hollywood’s most celebrated screen virgin, Lois Wilson, to make her look sexy” (15). The old virgin/whore binary was in decline. What Garbo could do was project “sexuality in a vivid way, of course, but with an underlying spirituality: the very combination that MGM, and the rest of Hollywood, had been seeking” (Alexander Walker 106). She did not enjoy her fall, and she suffered much, but she was emotionally rather than physically
vulnerable, and above all, psychologically complex. Unlike Lillian Gish, she did not reflect the dominant order's morality, and was in conflict with it, which is what made her so compelling for the Jazz Age.

Lillian Gish was aware of the changes in the film heroine, especially after she arrived at MGM following her two years abroad. The Griffith-like heroines of her films for Inspiration Pictures would no longer suffice. And it was obvious that the West Coast office had no interest in her. She reports that the studio welcomed me with great banners strung across the streets of Culver City, proclaiming that Lillian Gish was now an MGM star. Looking at them, I had said a silent prayer that they would be equally warm in farewell. Then I discovered that no preparations had been made for me, no stories (not even ideas), no directors—nothing. I had been signed in the East by Nick Schenck and the business office. As I learned later, there was a struggle going on for power across those 3,000 miles. I was drawing a big salary meantime, and that troubled me. (Gish 277)

After completing La Boheme (the film in which she was forced to kiss John Gilbert against her inclination), she made The Scarlet Letter. It was about this time that she reports having an argument with Mayer and Thalberg. Mayer wanted to take her off salary until they had a project for her (i.e., indefinitely), and when she refused, he threatened to ruin her. Thalberg had a suggestion. Gish recalls,

Irving spoke about renewing my contract. "We would like to have you with us," he said, "but there is something we think would be wise to do... You see, you are way up there on a pedestal... and nobody cares. If you were knocked off the pedestal, everyone would care... Let me arrange a scandal for you." What kind of scandal did Irving want to arrange? I wondered. A romantic scandal, I decided—but for what? To sell pictures? Had the public changed so much? ... Mr. Griffith had always maintained that one touch of scandal would finish you in pictures. What had happened to change
this? ...I told Irving my decision, knowing that my days at MGM were numbered. (294-5)

The community would no longer reject its movie idols for breaking faith with Victorian ideals of femininity—the sex rebellion, and the anti-communitarian, individualist impulse it represented, was the new ideal. Gish relates this story in her autobiography immediately after discussing her first encounter with Greta Garbo, on the set of The Scarlet Letter. The implication is clear. And when La Boheme and Garbo’s American debut, The Torrent, opened the same week in February of 1926, Gish’s problem was obvious—it became a question of numbers. Louise Brooks records that “La Boheme, a great story with a great director, King Vidor, and two great stars, Lillian Gish and John Gilbert, did average business at the Embassy Theatre [on Broadway]. Lillian Gish got $400,000 a year. The Torrent, a senseless story with a fair director and Ricardo Cortez, a comic Valentino type leading man, and an unknown actress, Garbo, did top business at the Capitol Theatre. Garbo got $16,000 a year” (17). Another mean-spirited Photoplay article, in 1925, made it clear what Gish needed to do to remain a star:

What does the future hold for Lillian Gish? Criticism has its fads and fancies and it has in the past few years become fashionable to laud her as the Duse of the screen, yet, since she left Mr. Griffith’s studios, nothing has appeared which should give her artistic preference over other actresses who have earned high places... She has always played the frail girl caught in the cruel maelstrom of life, battling helplessly for her honor or her happiness... She has the soundness of business judgement which has enabled her to capitalize on her screen personality with one of the largest salaries... Wouldn’t it be interesting to see Gish play a Barbara LaMarr [vamp] role, for Duse was a versatile actress, if there ever was one. (qtd. in Brooks 16)

And so the actress who rejected the idea of adapting an opera in 1925 because “its
subject, free love, was a touchy one” (Gish 277) portrayed one of literature’s greatest adulteresses in 1926. To respond to the new morality of personal fulfillment and lack of restraint (and remain popular), the symbol of the old code of duty and repression, the prototypical True Woman, had to rebel. If she was unsuccessful in the endeavor, both in playing the character and remaking her image, it is because the audience rejected her reversal, and could not accept her as anything other than the symbol of Victorianism.

It is tempting to think that Gish choose Sjostrom not for his Puritan-like Scandinavian temperament but for his facility with sexual themes, or even because as a Scandinavian he might be able to transfer some of the magic Garbo possessed onto her character. But as I will show in further chapters, Gish is only one of several actresses who have taken the part of Hester in an attempt at image-renovation. The irony with Gish is that, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, she used her image of purity and uprightness to convince the interest groups to allow the film to be made. A greater irony is that her image continued to have an effect on the way she played the role and how her character was received, rather than the character having an influence on the way her image was interpreted. This will also be the case with Colleen Moore, in 1934, and Demi Moore, in 1995 (we see it less with the television adaptations, where the actresses had no image to maintain or overcome). Gish was the perfect Victorian heroine, out of place in a film devoted to a critique of Victorian values. Only Gish could make the pursuit and ruination of a minister seem wholesome, which is why the film passed the censors, and why her performance is unconvincing at times. The final irony is that in a climate of unrestrained sex pictures such as DeMille’s marriage farces, Hawthorne’s adulteress is decidedly unshocking for the over-sexed Jazz Age.
Gish’s Hester, despite being an adulteress, is still the “fragile girl caught in the
cruel maelstrom of life” that *Photoplay* criticized, because Gish “undeniably modeled her
role more on her own personality that on the novel’s Hester Prynne” (Forslund 210).
This was immediately apparent to reviewers. Edward Wagenknecht’s famous tribute to
her contains this assessment: “Her Hester Prynne is not precisely Hawthorne’s Hester:
she is Lillian’s Hester. This point has sometimes been cited against her; as a matter of
fact, it is the highest praise that could be given...Is it not better to begin under
Hawthorne’s spell but to go on from there independently to work out her own conception
as he did his?” (249). The merits of this point are debatable, but his tone reveals how,
even as an adulteress, “she seemed always beyond reach and meant to be worshipped
from afar,” the Victorian ideal (Higashi 24). While the *New York Sun* approved of her
attempt to grow, commenting that “Miss Gish, for the first time...plays a mature woman,
a woman of depth, of feeling and wisdom and noble spirit,” it acknowledged that “she is
not Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, but she is yours and mine” (qtd. in Gish 290).
*Photoplay*, as usual, was unimpressed, asserting: “Lillian Gish wears the red letter of sin
with her stock virginal sweetness, failing to grasp the force of Hester Prynne’s willpower
and intelligence. She is a beaten child, not a courageous woman” (53). It is worth noting
that the *New York Sun* review is the only one from which she quotes in her discussion of
the film’s reception in her autobiography. It was the only review that got the point! Even
*Variety*, which liked the film, dismissed her character as “the little English Puritan maid”
(11). Hardly a fitting description of Hester Prynne!

Gish could not have been completely surprised that her existing image shaped her
Hester more than Hester could alter her image. Without her image the film would not
have been made, and her portrayal could not swerve too far from expectations without upsetting the special interest groups who had script approval. And to an extent, the juxtaposition of actress and character was interesting: “her screen image of purity and innocence, her impeccable off-screen life, made the casting of Miss Gish as a ‘fallen woman’ an eminently exploitable gambit” (Estrin 101). Using the embodiment of a Victorian ideal to critique that ideal was a brilliant stroke. But many failed to get the point—even Gish. Although William Everson comments that this was a “role that was a far cry from the Victorian innocents she played for Griffith” (320), Gish’s own comments about her construction of the character belie this. She explains, “My idea was to present Hester as the victim of hard circumstances, swept off her feet by love... That was what she was, but her innate innocence must be apparent” (qtd. in McFarlane 40). This reading of Hester’s character could only be made possible through the addition of an extended back-story, which traces the development of their love affair, and relies heavily, again, on the audience’s presumption of Gish’s innate innocence. How else could the film manage to present a sentimental, innocent heroine who has willingly committed adultery and corrupted the most pious man in town, having aggressively pursued and thoroughly deceived him?

After The Scarlet Letter, Gish planned an adaptation of Anna Karenina. Clearly, she had developed an interest in playing fallen women; she claims that while she wanted to follow the novel’s plot closely, Irving Thalberg, ironically, wanted Anna’s children to be adopted, not natural (Gish 293). In the end, the role was given instead to Greta Garbo, and the title changed to Love. It is interesting to imagine Love, which MGM released in 1927, with Gish instead of Garbo, since it is considered one of the latter’s classic roles
(she played Anna again in 1935). The response to *The Scarlet Letter* may have influenced the change in casting. Both *The Scarlet Letter* and Gish’s next film with Sjöstrom, *The Wind* (1929), were considered uncommercial art films, which lowered Gish’s stock at MGM, since they were very much under her artistic control. She had been allowed her own way, and failed. Both films were expensive prestige pictures, but “despite the stamp of big studio lavishness and care in production, there is a non-MGM quality about *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as... *The Wind*. Both films are deadly serious, neither is designed to appeal to the Saturday night movie audience out for a thrill or a laugh or a cry” (Affron 78). Both are very serious critiques of society’s restrictions, particularly those placed on women. Neither was the sex picture the public craved, although both dealt with sexual themes. *The Wind* is the story of a young woman who arrives a pauper in Texas, and is forced to marry a man whom she does not love, but who can support her. While he is out driving cattle in a wind storm, she is raped in her own home by another man. She kills him, and buries the body in the sand. The wind continually works to uncover the grisly sight. In the original version, she wanders into the storm, driven insane. The Gish/Sjöstrom pictures reflected an outlook and a business sense whose time had passed, and “for that reason [they] hastened the end of her reign as a star at MGM” (83). After she had fulfilled her contractual obligation, she took a short contract with UA at a greatly reduced salary, and then abandoned the movies. In Louise Brooks’s summation, “stigmatized as a grasping, silly, sexless antique, at the age of 31 the great Lillian Gish left Hollywood forever, without a head turned to mark her departure” (17). Her prophecy upon her arrival at MGM had come true.

As Lillian Gish discovered, Hollywood’s relationship with morality changed
considerably in the 1920’s. At the time of Gish’s arrival, the early ‘Teens, Hollywood film’s depiction of women reinforced the traditional binary of virgin and whore. Mary Pickford and Griffith girls like Gish and Mae Marsh portrayed innocent, sexless, child-women who inspired men to virtue and even heroism. The early vamps, Nita Naldi and especially Theda Bara, terrorized and titillated as amoral sirens who lured men away from their families and destroyed them for nothing more than sport or material gain. The virtuous heroine was usually imperiled by a lecherous villain (often arrayed similarly to Walthall’s Chillingworth, unless a German soldier), and in dire need of rescue. But the vamp was beyond rescue, and her victim was beyond hope. Both the virgin and the whore would undergo a transformation after World War One, which would result in their appearing much more alike (Higashi 80).

The first serious challenge to the binary was the flapper heroine. Popularized by Clara Bow, Colleen Moore, and Joan Crawford, the flapper possessed the self-reliance of the vamp without her sexuality. The flapper’s rebellious, independent spirit “was an ideal accessible to middle class youth” (Fishbein “Demise” 67). While the sentimental heroines of Pickford and Gish were aloof and idealized, the flapper was a real girl with the same desire for excitement as her real-life counterparts. But while she flouted convention by dancing and smoking, her morals were more conservative than they may have appeared, given her flimsy clothing. The flapper’s fun was innocent, and often directed toward her ultimate goal—conventional marriage. Her love would not be consummated until socially sanctioned.

The flapper’s good clean fun did not, however, satisfy the audience’s increasingly blatant interest in sex. In the ‘Teens, this desire to consume sexual stories was channeled
into the only ones available (apart from Bara pictures)—seduction and white slavery tales. But these overtly didactic and moralistic films were replaced after the war by sex pictures such as *The Easiest Way* (1917) and the marriage farces of Cecil B. DeMille, beginning with *The Squaw Man* (1918) (Lewis Jacobs 274). The true index of 1920’s would-be sexual anarchy is the depiction of the fallen woman in the era. The Twenties vamp was not the threatening, alien man-eater Theda Bara represented, but instead was all too human. While the ‘Teens offered vamps whose sexuality and intentions are explicitly evil and destructive, and with whom no woman would identify, the Twenties offered its fallen women “as the equals or even superiors of true women” (Fishbein “Demise” 68). Hollywood’s conception of women before the end of World War One was a Victorian one, “based on a sharp and irrevocable distinction between true women and their fallen sisters. Films that blurred the distinction threatened the moral clarity essential to the preservation of Victorian values in the modern world” (68). Hollywood’s humanization and ultimately its reconstruction of the fallen woman as society’s victim, and even as a saint martyred by love that is only *socially* unacceptable, epitomizes the Twenties’ reaction against Victorian sexual repression as much as the flapper does, if not more. But a climate in which she could be successfully reintegrated into society after a fall was slow in coming. While she could suffer cruelly and without fault, and in this way “came to resemble the virtuous heroine, ...the sensuality of such a woman dictated tragedy...for her passion could never be contained within a domestic melodrama” (Higashi 89). Her individualism and adherence to nature were threatening to the community, so she could not be absorbed. Mary Pickford attempted to change her image as early as 1914 by playing a woman who, ship-wrecked, lives as a wife to a fellow
passenger who is the only other survivor of the accident (in *Hearts Adrift*). When a rescue ship arrives over a year later, she jumps into a volcano with her baby. In 1914, it was far too early for a fate other than death to be granted even the most blameless of fallen women. Interestingly, it is a Griffith-Gish film, *Way Down East* (1920), that provides one of the earliest examples of mainstream deviation from this tragic trajectory.

*Way Down East* tells the story of Anna Moore, a country girl who travels to the city to meet her cousins. While in their company, she meets Lennox Sanderson, a playboy, who tricks her into a false marriage and then abandons her. She gives birth to his child in hiding, and the baby soon dies. Anna wanders through the countryside emotionally adrift, and arrives by chance at the Bartlett farm. The pious Bartlett family takes her in, and she begins a sweet romance, along the lines of those in Gish's earlier work, with the farmer's son, David. Soon, however, the town gossip uncovers the secret of her past, and the farmer casts her out. She wanders onto an ice floe that is about to go over the falls, and is rescued at the last moment by David. She is reintegrated into the family. While it contains a lot of his familiar formulaic elements, *Way Down East* represents a monumental change for Griffith in terms of the moral didacticism of his work, and stretches Lillian Gish's range considerably. Before it, Griffith was chief among "the bigger producers (and stars) [who] preferred not to rock the boat, to play it safe with their never-never-land morality, and to avoid controversial issues" (Everson 152). Griffith's conservatism was more than financially motivated, it was a reflection of his Victorian moral leanings and devotion to an ideal of femaleness. Casting Gish as a fallen woman, if a very innocent one, was a risk taken very seriously. Their previous film, *The Greatest Question* (1919), toed the Victorian line: "at the end, after close
association with death, an attempted rape and murder, Lillian and her boyfriend (Robert Harron) decide that they ‘don’t know enough to get married,’ and will wait a while. But that same year, in *Way Down East*, Lillian was mature enough to play a country girl betrayed into a mock marriage, to have an illegitimate child, and thus to feel herself entirely unworthy of genuine love when it finally appears in the person of Richard Barthelmess” (157). When one considers that in the film before *Question, Broken Blossoms*, Gish played a child, the relative sophistication of her character in *Way Down East* is apparent. The need for change was obvious even to Griffith, and a half-concession to the new morality prolonged his career (it was one of his most successful films) and probably saved Gish’s. It can only be termed a half-concession, of course, because Griffith is certainly not advocating free love. In the prefatory titles, he lectures that social ills are caused by the roving sex-instinct of the not-quite-evolved modern man. But the key to the film’s modernity is in Anna’s redemption and reintegration into the family despite a fall. The transition, in Hollywood, to the new morality “saw the gradual disappearance of those stars solidly locked into the innocent, almost Victorian simplicities of the pre-1920’s... By the 1920’s, many of the ‘nice girls’—Clara Bow, Colleen Moore, Marion Davies—were entering vamp territory, seldom to do more than tease, and usually for comic purposes—but nevertheless, the dividing line between good girls and bad was down” (196; 198). Gish never entered vamp territory, exactly, but these three were associated with flapperdom, and so had less far to fall, so to speak, than Gish. Her descent into sexual sin, and rebellion, is greater than theirs. Anna Moore’s essential innocence and great suffering purge her of the “sin” of her unwitting fall, and make her superior, in her humanity, to the community that rejects her. David chooses her
over the pure but soulless Kate. This gesture toward identifying her as morally superior to the community connects her to the sentimental Gish heroine of the ‘Teens, from whom she should be isolated to prevent contagion (Fishbein “Harlot’s” 421). This trend was ultimately a rejection of the binary of womanhood held so dear by previous generations. *Way Down East* was a successful play for over two decades before Griffith filmed it. In the theatre, the redemption of the fallen woman had been possible during the Victorian era. But in film, partly because of its broader audience base, and certainly because of the presence of moral watchdogs in the form of women’s and church groups, the idea of marriage and happiness for a woman who was not a virgin was risky. Although Griffith was a moral conservative, he was uncomfortable with the notion that a single lapse should seal a woman’s doom, in cases where she has been the victim of duplicity.

Casting Lillian Gish as Anna affirms the heroine’s virginal image even after her fall. Griffith judged the moral climate correctly, and created his last blockbuster. As played by Lillian Gish, “Anna Moore emerges as an admirable woman who transcends society’s view of her; she achieves an heroic stature because of her good works. The woman as survivor, despite ill fate, is an enormously appealing image of woman to women. She does not become self-pitying, spiteful or hostile” (Sochen “New” 12). However, her ordeal has given her strength that the Gish characters of the ‘Teens never possessed. By standing up for herself, in her limited way, Anna sets herself apart from previous Griffith heroines, and announces the death of the sexual double standard, and of the idea of irrevocable stigma for the fallen woman. This reward is acceptable to the audience, and surely to Griffith himself, because of the particular conditions of her fall, and her behavior following it. She is completely blameless, if a little foolish. She endures
isolation and harsh treatment during her pregnancy, and the death of the baby. Her
maternal affections and suffering are heart-wrenching, particularly in the scene in which
she baptizes her dying child. And after his death, she does not descend into prostitution
as many of her predecessors did, but wanders half-dead in search of honest hard work.

The favorable reception of Way Down East is ensured by the fact that

audiences are treated to a fallen woman who isn’t really fallen. Her innocence has not been truly tarnished. Her purity and goodness still intact, Anna marries innocent David at the film’s end. Their future will be bright and sure as they are simple and good people. The virginal Mary has not really lost her virginity; she does not descend into the role of the temptress Eve. The villain Sanderson is punished and goodness triumphs. Thus the melodrama, filled with trials and tribulations, ends happily with the ultimate fantasy being fulfilled: goodness does prevail on earth and the pure do achieve happiness. Society can forgive, overlook supposed sins, and include in the fold the mistakenly rejected. (9-10)

Gish truly became a star in her own right, not just as a “Griffith Girl,” in Way Down East.

She did only one further film for Griffith, Orphans of the Storm (1921), in which she
reverted to her innocent type. She would not play another fallen woman again until The Scarlet Letter.

Way Down East and The Scarlet Letter bear striking similarities and even more intriguing differences. The Scarlet Letter reverses the traditional expectations of the melodramatic triangle by idealizing the adulterous couple and demonizing the cuckolded husband, instead of the tempter. Arthur and Hester are presented as the legitimate couple, and Chillingworth is the blocking figure, threatening to destroy their “right” romance. The “rightness” of Anna and David’s love is never questioned, and is stressed early in the film, before they even meet, in a scene in which David awakes from a sleep disturbed by
an unknown horror—just as Anna succumbs to Sanderson’s deceit. So both films set up a triangle of the heroine, the attractive idealized youth with whom she naturally belongs, and the older male who holds a secret which could destroy the couple, and who has a claim on her body that is unnatural. Both Anna and Hester, simply by virtue of their creator, Lillian Gish, are innocent, but both are rejected by society on the basis of their sexuality, and suffer its persecution bravely. Both are mothers whose devotion to their illegitimate children is obvious, and legitimizes them naturally. But while neither heroine dies, their fates are entirely different. Hester must lose her one true love; and her absorption into the community, while hinted at, is never explicitly presented. Hester’s principal difference from Anna lies in the self-consciousness of her sexuality. She pursues Dimmesdale and displays an almost pagan incomprehension of the moral laws that decree unsanctioned love sinful. Anna, by contrast, enters into her sinful union unwittingly, believing it sanctioned, and in the boudoir scene she is modest in her negligee, and even frightened. Similarly, her romance with David involves none of the fearless aggressiveness that connects Gish’s Hester to the flapper or even the vamp. She simply falls in his path, is rescued by him, and in the end they kiss chastely. The consummation of their sanctioned love occurs outside of the world of the film. Although natural, Hester and Arthur’s love can never be ‘right,’ and so it cannot survive.

While Hester is allowed to retain her life, hers is a redemption mediated by severe punishment. Unlike Anna of Way Down East or another fallen Anna, of Anna Christie (1923), and Sadie Thompson in the film of the same name (1928), who “meet good men and, despite difficulties, create pure new lives for themselves,” Hester must carry on alone (Rosen 104). But unlike Camille (in two films of that title, in 1921 and 1927) or
Anna Karenina (Love, 1927), she is not punished with death. Of course, the last heroine is played by Garbo, who could bring to the fallen woman extraordinary pathos, but never innocence. After the Twenties, and thanks in part to Garbo, the fallen woman would not have to be innocent to be sympathetic.

In her autobiography, Lillian Gish recalls wondering, at the suggestion that only a scandal would save her career, “Had the public changed so much?” By 1926, and even earlier, it had. In discussing the moral revolution of the Jazz Age, Sumiko Higashi catalogues the “accepted explanations for the hedonistic ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ atmosphere, whether it was typical of the Twenties or discernable earlier in the ‘teens [as]…the collapse of the Protestant work ethic under the impact of accelerated industrialization and urbanization, prohibition, automobiles, movies, sex magazines, Freudianism, and postwar indulgence” (110). In the factories of the major urban centers, cultures and genders mixed (as they did, indeed, at the movie houses). Prohibition necessitated the growth of an underground culture, and automobiles promoted not only the easy movement of vast numbers of people to the urban centers, but a private escape for the youth. All of these changes promoted the development of a separate youth culture that could exist outside the purview of the older generation. This new culture developed its own manners and morals, which then spread outward to every corner of the country, and upward, influencing the dominant order. The power of the mainstream’s institutions, the church and the state, was waning. The scandals of the Harding administration gave way to the cold, impenetrable presidency of Coolidge, and with prohibition and the cynicism of the post-war era, the populace’s faith in government was shaken. Mainstream Protestantism was also being rendered out of touch in the era of the new
morality, as it failed to reach out to young people, and through the industrialization that fractured community bonds and promoted a worldly materialism. A contemporary researcher on social trends, C. Luther Fry, noted that

“church buildings now appear trivial and unimportant in contrast with the enormous skyscrapers of commerce and finance [and] might raise the question whether this development is a symbol of the recent tendency of the secular to overshadow religious interests.” Church attendance declined as did the number of clergymen and new converts; income for the missions dropped; volunteers for missionary work were scarce. The increasing competition for the congregation’s time by the automobile, radio, motion picture, and golf and tennis was palpable. Most serious, though impossible to quantify, was “a pervasive thinning out of evangelical substance, a tendency to identify religion with the business-oriented values of American life”... Beyond the challenge of commercialism, the other “isms”—scientism, behaviorism, and humanism—posed significant threats. (Brown 168)

All over America, but particularly in the growing urban areas, “the church was in ruins, and the more the churches adjusted, the less they seemed to matter. In the stable world, the traditionalist remembered, the church had been the second pillar of social order and social morality. But the young had simply ‘thrown religion overboard’ ” (Fass 42), and this, in turn, accelerated the revolution in morals, since it “greatly weakened religious sanctions. People lost their fear of Hell and at the same time had less interest in Heaven; they made more demands for material fulfillment on Earth” (Leuchtenberg 158). In an era of great economic prosperity, the worship of God was rendered irrelevant in the face of the worship of wealth, and considered an old-fashioned encumbrance. The traditional authority hit back by enacting laws like the Prohibition Act, in an attempt to stem the tide that was eroding their power. It was the staunchly Victorian older generation’s
desperate nostalgia for an old order which underlay the kind of repressive social legislation that blackened the fair face of the decade. Americans looked to law in the Twenties to provide the controls other institutions had been unable to maintain precisely because they believed that the older structures had failed and could not be reformed. The law could not correct socialization, but it could consciously punish misbehavior. Thus traditionalists hoped to deal with the effects, not the causes, of institutional misfunction. But the law was, after all, a precarious bulwark in a democratic society which extolled liberty and order based on shared ideals and individual virtue rather than on external constraint. The traditionalists were really concerned with the kind of lawlessness that came from a deterioration in a common morality and in shared values, not from law-breaking. When they turned to the law, they admitted defeat. (Fass 50)

The law was made to enforce a value system that was no longer in effect. Reports that even President Harding continued to consume alcohol secretly illustrate how out of touch Victorian morality, and as a result the state, had become. The early versions of the Hays Code, forbidding depictions of sex in the movies, were similarly motivated by influential church and women’s groups who reflected a moral conservatism that was losing its influence on the mainstream morality.

In the Twenties, as “Americans turned away from the ascetic codes of the past, they began to shed the Victorian reticence concerning sex” (May Great 92). In the absence of traditional religion, people sought truths from the rising field of psychology. Without a religion-based prohibition against immorality, or a concept of morality at all, many people turned to Freudian psychology for a rationale for human needs; in fact, “Freud’s popularity had an inevitable effect on the ‘revolution in morals.’ It was assumed that he was arguing that unless you freely expressed your libido and gave outlet to your sex energy, you would damage your health; by the distortion of his work, a scientific imprimatur was given to self-indulgence” (165). Through the popularization of
his theories, and also the writings of Twenties sexologist Havelock Ellis, concepts such as the id and the libido became commonplace, and “a new morality based on greater freedom and self-expression,” greater individualism, was urged (Woloch 397). Key to this revolution in morals, of course, was a radical redefinition of femaleness in American culture.

The changes that began before the Great War escalated after it, particularly for women. The right to vote is often cited as the catalyst for the female social revolution of the Jazz Age. In fact, this watershed event was part of a complex chain of factors occurring over the span of the ‘Teens. In some ways, it was a necessity of war that provoked the greatest change in the status of women in American society—the need for labor. Young women left their homes to work in the urban factories in record numbers, creating a new culture of unattached, unchaperoned, independent women in the cities. There they encountered young men in a very different, more socially intense environment than at home. Traditional courting rituals were rendered irrelevant by the lack of traditional social structures, and certainly by the urgency of wartime; “the war had accelerated the changing national attitude to marriage. Ideas about virginity and faithfulness had to be revised when the country was sending its young men away to battle. Adultery was treated more sympathetically by judges, divorce evoked a more tolerant response in the community. Films naturally reflected the changing morality and, in doing so, quickened its pace even more” (Alexander Walker 28). When people were fighting and dying, social proprieties and the necessity of preserving convention no longer seemed relevant. Young people were more interested in following their hearts than heeding their elders.
Hollywood was actually slow to respond to the changes in society during and after the war. While thousands of young women worked in munitions factories, cut their hair and kept house for themselves, Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish kept the myth of innocent girlhood alive for weary urban populations. While, as we have seen, in the early Twenties

the image of the fallen woman shifted dramatically...it bore little relation to reality throughout and instead reflected profound cultural ambivalence toward the shattering of Victorianism and the emergence of the “New Woman,” urbanization, the immigrant flux, the dissolution of the traditional family, the collapse of the double standard and the accompanying sexual and social emancipation of women—in short, toward the necessary results of modernization. (Fishbein “Harlot’s” 409)

It was only the sophisticated marriage comedies that could subtly reflect the widening divide between traditional and Jazz Age morality. After the war, new directors, including Europeans such as Lubitsch and Von Stroheim, imported a more sophisticated sensibility to the romance plot. One of its great innovators was an American, however: Cecil B. DeMille. After 1918, “as sex came to pervade modern life and public discourse, these sophisticated post-war directors served to articulate the new Jazz Age freedom by integrating emancipated sexuality into daily existence” (“Demise” 67). Through a focus on the married life of the upper classes, “such DeMille films as Old Wives for New (1918), Don’t Change Your Husband (1919), Male and Female (1919) and The Affairs of Anatole (1921) all suggested that adultery might be a needed stimulus to ultimate marital happiness, forcing shrewish or slovenly women to reform themselves lest their marriages be sundered” (67). The message of the films, that a makeover and a fetching new dress can save a marriage, and goodness is not enough to inspire love, was a poor one for a
generation looking for a new morality and a new definition of marriage and family. But
the films made it clear that the old rules were to be rejected, and marriage could be
redefined.

The shocking break with Victorian morality in these new films resonated with the
audiences and reflected the changing notion of sexual morality and responsibility.
Divorce had, in fact, been rising steadily since the turn of the century, but the rates
increased radically through the Twenties. The divorce rates “that had so troubled the
Progressive generation shuddered forward during the pressures of World War 1 and
continued to escalate in the 1920’s. In 1922, there were 131 divorces for each 1000
marriages; by 1928, there were 166 per 1000” (Brown 122). Marriage was no longer seen
as an unbreakable bond, a relation to be endured until death for the sake of the family;
“the increase in divorce probably meant less an increase in marital unhappiness than a
refusal to go on with marriages which would earlier have been tolerated” (Leuchtenberg
162). With the rejection of Victorian values came a new definition of marriage based on
individual desire, not the stability of society and the transfer of property.

With industrialization and urbanization, the family ceased to be a corporate work
unit, as in agrarian society, and became an association of people who possessed
individual destinies. Since the mid-nineteenth century, “the state, the factory, the school,
and even mass amusements robbed the family of functions it once had. The more that
social usefulness was taken away from the family, the more marriage came to depend on
the personalities of the individuals involved… In 1914, the number of divorces reached
100,000 for the first time; in 1929, over 205,000 couples were divorced in a single year”
People were less family-bound in general in urban settings rather than farms. The anonymous cities and factory jobs fostered the individualist ethic. Unlike on the farm, a young person’s duty was to support him or herself, not a group. With a new sense of self-reliance and empowerment after the war years and the successful suffrage struggle, and an increased desire for personal and even sexual fulfillment fuelled by popular Freudianism, women demanded more of marriage. The bulwark of community values, the institution of marriage, was under attack by the forces of individualism. In an increasingly secular America, women were unafraid to divorce if they did not gain personal fulfillment from their husbands. Certainly “many alternatives to marriage were posed in the ‘20s: open promiscuity, divorce and remarriage, or serial monogamy” (Mary P. Ryan 160). Nevertheless, Dorothy Brown reports that the 1920 census recorded that Americans did retain ‘a remarkable proneness to marriage’... Sixty percent of American women over the age of fifteen were married... Groves and Ogburn, scientifically analysing the changing functions of the family... concluded that the distinguishing factor of the modern family of the 1920s was affection. Love and sexuality provided the cohesive force. Margaret Sanger, in her *Happiness in Marriage*, insisted that “The nuptual relation must be kept romantic... Do not be afraid to take the breaks off your heart, to surrender yourself to love. Unclamp this emotion; let it have full healthy exercise.” (102-3)

The influence of Freud is clear here—love and even sex are healthy. Margaret Sanger was a key figure in this sexual revolution, in her writings on relationships certainly (she was a colleague of Havelock Ellis), but even more so in her promotion of birth control. Although most of her birth control treatises edged toward eugenics in their assertion that its availability would reduce the poor population, her work also resulted in the middle
class woman’s discovery of sex; her “sexual enjoyment was further enhanced in the
1920’s and ‘30’s by the greater availability of more reliable methods of birth control,
among them the condom, an accurate rhythm method, and the diaphragm… By the
1920’s, 70 to 80 percent of the upper- and upper-middle class women used some more or
less reliable means of birth control” (Mary P. Ryan 159). Love and sex in marriage
could, for the first time, be explored without the risk of pregnancy.

The sexual revolution of the Twenties, while it redefined marital relations, was
not confined to the married. According to studies conducted at the time (it was a great
era for studies), “there appears to have been an increase in promiscuity, especially in
sexual experience before marriage for middle-class women; there was probably an
increase in extramarital experience as well. With effective contraception techniques
widely used, the fear of pregnancy was greatly lessened” (Leuchtenberg 171). With an
increase in freedom from parents in the cities and in automobiles, and a secular morality,

significant change in the sexual activity of women
occurred around 1920. In G. I. Hamilton’s sample
of middle- and upper-class women, for example, 24
percent of those born before 1891 had sexual experience
outside of marriage, while 61 percent of the women born
after that year reported illicit sexual behavior. Kinsey’s
massive study of nearly 8,000 subjects also indicated that
the generation of women whose sexual experience began
around 1920 engaged in sexual intercourse outside of mar-
riage at about double the rate of their mothers… Another
method of gauging the sexual practices of the population at
large, encompassing more than the upper classes, is the com-
pilation of statistics on illegitimate births, which continued
to rise. (Mary P. Ryan 161)

These studies, and the Groves and Ogburn study previously mentioned, provide important
data, but were not as widely known in their own time as a landmark study conducted by
Katherine Bement Davis over several years in the early part of the decade, and published in 1929, entitled *Factors in the Sex-Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women*. Based on questionnaires circulated among married and unmarried, predominantly college-educated women, this study is particularly useful in its attempt to quantify not only sexual behavior, but sexual attitudes. A subgroup of unmarried women at least five years out of college was asked a number of opinion questions, including, "Is a young woman before marriage ever justified in having sex intercourse? If so, under what conditions?" 19.4 responded in the affirmative. In a comment section provided on the questionnaire, "various conditions are suggested by the minority group; foremost among them are temptation or the strain and stress of exceptional conditions... Some consider love sufficient justification. Others suggest that obstacles to marriage would justify engaged couples" (Katherine B. Davis 350). The influence of Freud, Havelock Ellis, and Margaret Sanger is evident in the concerns for healthful release of sexual energy. Another section of the questionnaire asked, "Is a husband ever justified in having sex intercourse with a woman or women other than his wife? If so, under what conditions?" To this, a surprising 24.1 percent answered positively. 20.1 percent also believed a wife could be similarly justified. In the comment section, "extra-marital relations for either partner are justified by the affirmative group on a number of grounds: unsatisfactory relations between husband and wife, from whatever cause; separation or divorce, or when divorce is desired but cannot be obtained. A few regard the husband’s or wife’s love for another as justification; or the unsatisfied desire for children" (352-3). These statistics reveal a revolution in attitudes as well as actions—an increased tolerance for behavior that contradicted traditional monogamy codes and the Victorian repression of sexual instincts.
It is particularly interesting to me, and apparently to Davis as well, that love could be an adequate justification for both fornication and adultery. It is clear that "one of the main tenets of youthful morality was that love made sex right... The acceptance of erotic love by the young in the Twenties made tolerance of the actions of others possible" (Fass 275). Another study, this one by Blanchard and Manasses, reported that only one third of their sample of young women would disapprove of a friend who had extramarital sex experience, "and only 13% would break their friendship on the basis of that disapproval" (275). Of course, the women in all of these studies would have been exposed to a growing media that endorsed this liberalization of opinion, including "American magazines [which] began to voice editorial approval of relaxed sexual mores. By 1918, 23 percent of the more prestigious American periodicals endorsed the doctrine that sexual release was psychologically healthy for both sexes. By 1928, 40 percent of the mass magazines concurred" (Mary P. Ryan 156). A youth culture that exalted love over law encouraged a film industry whose melodramatic formula was based on that very premise. The movie palace was not just a place to interact with the opposite sex out of the purview of parents—it was a place to see reflected on the silent screen the new social codes that encouraged interaction.

The findings of these numerous studies profoundly impact our understanding of the MGM team's interpretation of The Scarlet Letter, and the critical response to their interpretation. Obviously, the romance plot is enhanced to emphasize the love that excuses a myriad of Hester's sins. Her adultery is neither shocking nor blameworthy. When Hawthorne wrote his novel, it was a shocking affront to decency to claim that adultery was the natural, understandable consequence of an unhappy marriage, but in
1926 most people would find it an obvious conclusion. With marriage redefined as an emotional, not exclusively social, contract, a woman in Hester's situation could simply divorce. Many would identify with Hester's confusion at the idea that love is sinful, or could ever be regulated by society. The very idea!

*The Scarlet Letter* also offers a significant catalyst for discussion about community, shared values, and national identity. The position of the filmmakers is clearly announced in the prefatory title: “Here is recorded a stark episode in the lives of a stern, unforgiving people; a story of bigotry uncurbed and its train of sorrow, shame and tragedy.” Frances Marion’s biographer, Cari Beauchamp, records that “*The Scarlet Letter* was welcomed as a plea for tolerance and Lillian Gish was played up as a Daughter of the American Revolution who saw the film as a tribute to her Puritan ancestors” (178). This statement seems paradoxical. The title announces the film as an attack on Puritan values and *thus* as a moving plea for tolerance. The Puritan ancestors from whom Gish and America are descended, literally and symbolically, are explicitly rejected. That was certainly how the film was read by reviewers, who were “responding to the values of their own anti-Puritanical times—the 1920s of H. L. Mencken and *The Sun Also Rises*—rather than to the times of the Puritans or Hawthorne’s America” (Dunne “Ninety” 32). *Variety* reported that “Hester and Dimmesdale receive all the sympathy of the audience, but particularly in the toll that the little heroine is compelled to pay for loving” (15), and argued that the film “has a strong plea against intolerance, for it makes the laws of the Colonies seem highly ridiculous and laughable, as judged by our present-day standards. *Still there are fanatics enough who will say that they should still be enforced*” (15, italics mine). The *New York Times* commented that “the prudery of the ignoble bigots in
Puritanical days is adroitly put forth in the picturization of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story... It causes one to contrast those days with the present time; the fashions of the past with the feminine creations of our generation.” Regarding Chillingworth’s desire for vengeance against the adulterous couple, the same reviewer comments: “Here one thinks that he has little to say in the matter, considering his treatment of Hester.” Two themes can be seen to emerge in the criticism—the inherent moral rightness of love and the unnaturalness of the repressing regime the couple faces. The empathy Gish evokes is clear in Variety’s reference to Hester as a “little” heroine, and to the audience’s total sympathy with the couple. The filmmakers have successfully manipulated the tale and the audience. The Times reviewer identifies America’s symbolic progenitors as “ignoble bigots,” and smugly decries their fashion sense. For this writer, Mordaunt Hall, progress in America is defined by the notable differences between “them” and “us.” “Their” church and government are tyrannical, while “ours” barely exist, much less influence society. “Their” fashions are unflattering, reflecting their society’s repressiveness, whereas “ours,” do not even require corsets (although they do require breast-binding). And for “us,” a husband’s perceived ill-treatment of his wife is adequate justification for her bearing another man’s child, and he is left without even the right to complain!

The Variety reviewer makes an even stronger statement of these themes. Hester is unfairly punished, her only crime having been “loving.” This reviewer explicitly identifies one of the pleasures built into the script—the opportunity to contrast “ridiculous laws” with “present-day standards”—and one of the film’s messages—that the ghost of Puritanism still haunts Jazz Age America. While Hester’s pursuit of Dimmesdale is, arguably, more sexually aggressive than any that Clara Bow would
undertake, they amount to the same thing—the young follow instinct, not the prohibitions of the old order. In this way, Hester Prynne is made a symbol of young America, chafing against the constraints of “ignoble bigots” who are made “them,” not “us”—who are rendered un-American. If America in the Jazz Age believed itself “a democratic society which extolled liberty and order based on shared ideals and individual virtue rather than on external constraint” (Fass 50), then the Puritan order, and certain “fanatics” of the Jazz Age bent on imposing Victorian repressions, are not American. While a hegemony of values bound the Puritan and Victorian Americas, for the Jazz Age only Hester, Dimmesdale, and Giles (the “all-American boy,” as Mark Estrin called him) participate in the “right,” “American” community of shared ideals. Hester battled a church- and state-sanctioned program only possible in a theocracy. Clara Bow could never experience that situation in the secular Twenties, but she herself was in conflict with those who sought to check her enthusiasm and her ambition to marry the boss, because they were contrary to repressive codes of femaleness and class. So Clara understands.

With the church in full retreat and government overshadowed by big business, Hester’s counterparts in 1926 might not grasp the nuances of her situation, but they understand rebellion against social codes rendered irrelevant by time. When Hester protests, to Dimmesdale, her inability to understand love as sinful, she speaks for the Jazz Age, the rebellious heathen child of the Victorian era. When Dimmesdale cries out, in his Election sermon, “Purge yourselves of intolerance! Judge not, for only the eyes of God may see into the heart of a sinner!” he preaches to the Victorian parent, and perhaps to the women’s and church groups who black-list the film properties that are not lucky enough to be championed by Victorian traitor Lillian Gish. If Dimmesdale is a savior-figure in
the film, tolerance is his gospel. His final act is his greatest gesture of rebellion against the Puritan world-view, and the Victorian as well. By having him remove Hester's badge, the filmmakers reverse the assumption of the permanence of sin, and the permanence of the female fall. Without the A, Hester returns to her natural innocence, recently glimpsed in the forest scene. Like Anna of Way Down East, she is not forever blackened by her fall (Everson 158). The fact that the badge gives way so easily exposes its secret weakness: applied by a community, its power derives from the hegemony of the community's shared values. If those values are exposed as "ridiculous," or just impermanent, the badge loses its grip.

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1 I have confirmed the existence of 6 versions made prior to 1926. Little is known about most of them. The first was made in 1907, directed by Sidney Alcott. The second was released by IMP, a fairly large firm, on April 22, 1911. It was written by Herbert Brenon, directed by Joseph Smiley and George Tucker, and starred King Baggot. The third starred D.W. Griffith's wife Linda Arvidson, and was released on May 17, 1913. David Miles directed. The next one is the Fox Production mentioned in this section, released in 1917. A one-reeler was made in 1920 by Louis Selznick (David O.'s father), the first in a series of one-reelers called "Herbert Kaufman's Weekly." The last pre-1926 version is the most mysterious. The name of the director, Challis Sanderson, has survived, but nothing else is known of it. It was released in 1922.
Although overshadowed in film history by its immediate predecessor (made only eight years earlier), the first "Talkie" film adaptation of Hawthorne's novel presents an equally fascinating case study in the internal and external pressures exerted upon a film adaptation of classic fiction. *The Scarlet Letter* was released by Majestic Pictures in September 1934. Majestic was a middle-sized 'B' studio located on ‘Poverty Row,’ an area dominated by small independent companies, living in the shadow of the major studios, and producing cheap, mostly genre films. These companies tended to open and fold quickly, and Majestic was out of business within two years of the release of *The Scarlet Letter*, its best-known product. Directed by Robert Vignola and starring former silent star Colleen Moore, *The Scarlet Letter* emerged from a climate of changing notions about women's roles prompted by the Depression, and a moral revolution in Hollywood provoked by the Legion of Decency boycott which resulted in a strengthening of the censorship powers of the MPPDA Production Code. Working within these strictures, Vignola's *The Scarlet Letter* emerges from obscurity as a most fascinating rhetorical object: the film subverts its culture and the MPPDA to produce a searing indictment of Thirties repression of both women and the entertainment industry.

What is immediately striking is the film's comic subplot, the courtship of Mistress Crackstone, which collapses the two sub-plots of Sjostrom's film: the courtship of the implacable maiden by Giles the barber, and his punishment of the gossip. Sampson and Bartholemew, played by William Kent and Alan Hale as Laurel and Hardy types, provide comic relief and sometimes insightful comment in their several scenes, especially in their
romantic dealings with the gossip. The film script bends Hawthorne’s prose cleverly to tie this invented plot to the novel at several points. The most surprising example of this strategy is the comic appropriation of Hawthorne’s narrator’s speculation about the attitude of the parishioners to Dimmesdale’s “I am utterly a pollution” sermon. Hawthorne describes how townspeople might be heard to exclaim to one another, “Alas, if he discern such sinfulness in his own white soul, what horrid spectacle would he behold in thine or mine!” (Hawthorne 173). The film appropriates this moment in the text to comic ends, assigning the line to Bartholemew as far as “in thine,” directed pointedly at Sampson, who supplies the punchline by answering “or thine.”

Bartholemew also speaks a version of the dialogue delivered by the young wife (“Let her cover the mark as she will, the pain of it will always be in her heart”) during the first scaffold scene, articulating a merciful viewpoint (now not a woman’s but a man’s) that counters that of the (female) gossips. While this rearrangement connects the two plotlines, it also serves a symbolic function. Michael Dunne explains that “this change typifies the war-between-the-sexes tone of the 1934 version” (Dunne “Ninety” 32).

Female intolerance on the scaffold is balanced by more forgiving males, an inversion of gender stereotypes (especially regarding Puritan society).

Bartholemew’s defense of Hester establishes him as the only character in the film who articulates reasonableness and possesses natural affections, unperverted by dogma. He is established as a “natural” man, like Sjostrom’s Giles, motivated by innate fairness and compassion, a man with whom the audience can identify. His entrapment into marriage with Mistress Crackstone, who as an arch-Puritan without natural sympathies is his opposite, is a mismatch rife with comic potential; Dunne asserts that due in large part
to the sub-plot, “this is a Scarlet Letter for the mid-thirties, as close to a romantic comedy as the material will allow” (33). The tavern scene typifies the gender politics of the sub-plot. Bartholemew, now a groom-to-be, bemoans his fate as “the sailors who represent a wild alternative to the Puritan community in Hawthorne’s text here commiserate with a fellow male caught in the trammels of domesticity” (32). We last see the beleaguered natural man enmeshed in a family structure he chafes against with a wife he cannot love.

In this last sense, the comic sub-plot not only exploits audience tastes and comments on contemporary social issues, but also presents a foil triangle and a foil situation when set beside that involving Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. Historical peculiarities such as the courting trumpet and the prohibition against a man seeing a woman’s ‘nether-garments’ estrange the audience from history, and highlight the repressiveness and social control of the Puritan community. The film argues that if love, the most natural human habit, is alienated and legislated by society, the result can only be unhappy matches like those Bartholemew (and Hester) must endure. The natural affection of Hester and Dimmesdale, unconsecrated by social legislation, has nothing to do with courting trumpets and prudery.

The film opens with a prefatory title, followed by two comic vignettes of punishment for infractions. The first depicts the punishment of a gossip (interestingly, the film depicts such women as socially powerful in the community, not censured by it). The second vignette introduces the audience to the comic subplot, with Sampson in the stocks for laughing on the Sabbath, and being hidden unsuccessfully by Bartholemew from Mistress Crackstone, with whom Sampson is in love. She scolds him for his misdeeds and warns him to heed the teachings of Master Dimmesdale (establishing his
moral authority in the community).

After the first scaffold sequence, the scene changes to Hester’s cottage (she is not held in prison, but is instead immediately associated with the domestic hearth) where Dimmesdale visits her. This scene, which represents the film’s only significant addition to the essential plot, allows the audience to identify her lover immediately, important since the film cannot easily reproduce the novel’s enunciatory strategy which subjects the reader to a gradual recognition of Dimmesdale’s guilt. The scene also exploits melodramatic conventions and establishes the pair’s enduring love, her commitment to him, and her suffering, which are, in the novel, slowly revealed and mused over by the narrator. Melodramatic convention is short-hand. Dimmesdale is constructed as the conventional film lover; the scene opens with his pantomimic entrance after knocking at the door like a typical suitor. She wordlessly attends to the baby. This part of the scene embraces a silent film acting style, stressing gesture in place of dialogue, perhaps in deference to Moore’s (and Vignola’s) apparent discomfort with sound. The emotive music reinforces this, with its heady, romantic strings signaling a love scene, which is replaced with an exchange of melodramatic dialogue invented for the film. Dimmesdale, a strong traditional lover figure in this early scene, protests Hester’s injunction that he remain silent about his part in her shame, and pleads to be allowed to assume, or at least share, her burden. The film assigns Hester the position expressed in the novel by Dimmesdale, that to reveal his guilt would be to deprive the community of a needed spiritual leader. She implies that his duty to the community is greater than his duty to her and to himself. She says: “To destroy their faith would be a greater sin and it would only shatter the love we bear each other! No Arthur, it cannot be,” and looks away wistfully.
Moore’s highly conventional speech, delivered with melodramatic flourish (she adds: “My salvation and yours can come only from Heaven... Ours must be a living penance”), establishes Hester both as an heir to the silent film melodramatic heroine (with gesture and intertitles replaced by equally stilted dialogue) and as a 1930’s sufferer in the (degraded) mould of Garbo. Frustrated, the energetic Dimmesdale leaves her to reflect tearfully on her “trying day.”

Following a brief scene in which Chillingworth is established in town and in lodgings with Dimmesdale is an interview between Hester and her husband that stylistically parallels the previous scene in her cottage. Chillingworth, with his coonskin hat, black cape and long beard, his piercing eyes heavily browed, resembles a silent film stock villain. And well he should in this case, as Henry B. Walthall here reprises his role (and duplicates it almost exactly after eight years) from Sjostrom’s film. His entrance, set to threatening music, and his approach to the mother and child, are handled in pantomime, with Chillingworth advancing slowly across the room and Hester backing up into a gesture of protection of her baby. The dialogue here, though, almost reproduces that of the novel’s fourth chapter, although the scene is now set in her home instead of the prison to reinforce the sense of Chillingworth’s violation of the domestic order.

The next significant scene occurs after the passage of five years, and concerns the female members of the community (including the gossips from the scaffold scene), allowing an elaboration of the community’s perspective on Hester and describing its general system of values. This scene, and those relating to the comic subplot, fill out the audience’s sense of the story’s context, which is also often the function of Hawthorne’s narrator. Hester is washing clothes at the water’s edge, at a distance from the others, and
we see for the first time here visually represented her exclusion from the everyday life of the community. This is undercut somewhat in the next scene, in which a cheerful Hester is welcomed unreservedly at Bartholemew’s shop. Pearl attempts to join in playing with a group of children, who reject her and pelt her with mud, but the film fails to explicitly connect the behavior of the children with an understanding of Pearl’s position in the community. The scene becomes one of typical childhood bullying, rather than a statement about the mother and child’s ostracism. Significantly, the head of the childish gang and speaker for that ‘community’ is Mistress Crackstone’s son, so by implication she is positioned here as the source of Hester’s persecution (similar to Sjostrom’s Mistress Hibbins), as well as at the water’s edge, in the marketplace in the first scaffold scene, and later at the governor’s mansion. Crackstone always articulates community disapproval, and the implication is not so much that she stands for the wider view of Hester, but that she is a gossip herself in need of punishment.

After a domestic scene of solidarity between the persecuted mother and child, Hester is summoned to the governor’s mansion for the custody trial scene, which is represented as the catalyst for Chillingworth’s realization regarding Pearl’s parentage. The viewer is given to understand that Dimmesdale has undone himself and sealed his own fate in an attempt to help his family. It is determined in the scene that Dimmesdale, rather than Wilson, will instruct Pearl in the catechism. This unsurprising switch then allows for a touching later scene between father and daughter in which Dimmesdale answers her complaint that she wants an earthly father by encouraging her to consider him as her own. Unlike in the novel, Dimmesdale does not shrink from his child, nor does she “make strange” in his presence. This reinforces the audience’s sense of the
naturalness of their familial relation, which Hawthorne disrupts.

After a brief sequence at the meeting house, in which Dimmesdale displays his increasing sense of guilt and emotional instability, Hester watches at the bedside of the ailing Mistress Allerton, a substitution for the dying Governor Winthrop. Mistress Allerton is constructed as the voice of community reconciliation, an incarnation of the gradual shift in attitude toward Hester that Hawthorne describes in the later part of the novel. She apologizes for her condemnation of Hester (one assumes she was among the “gossip chorus”) and identifies her new role as community angel of mercy. Mistress Allerton even ascribes to Hester’s care of her the healing properties of Dimmesdale’s prayers. Hester is shown, as in the novel, as a pragmatic mystic connected to the earth, from which Dimmesdale and the Puritan patriarchy have estranged themselves through asceticism and law. This implied contrast between the two lovers continues in the next scene, the second scaffold scene, in which a composed Hester preaches reason and moderation in the face of Dimmesdale’s tormented rant.

Following the interview between Chillingworth and Hester in which she announces her intention to reveal Chillingworth’s identity (the scene occurs, once again, in Hester’s home, not among the reeds as in the novel, to again mark Chillingworth’s alienation from and intrusion into her domestic space), the forest interview between Hester and Dimmesdale occurs. In tone, this scene parallels the lovers’ first interview, with the declamatory, melodramatic delivery and string accompaniment that typifies a love scene. But this scene is also an interesting reversal of the first love scene. Dimmesdale has weakened considerably both physically and emotionally over the five years, and Hester has become strong and resolute. Whereas in the previous scene she
argued for duty and life-long expiation, she now advocates escape and freedom. “Begin life anew!” she says, “There’s happiness beyond!” While the early Dimmesdale was eager to challenge society and marry Hester openly, he now pleads weakness and incapacity. Convinced to lean on the stronger Hester for support, he agrees to go with her and the scene ends in an embrace, in contradistinction to the first scene’s ending, in which they turned away from one another and parted.

The Election Day sequence begins with a comic scene, and then following the sailor’s revelation to Hester that Chillingworth sails with them, the film concludes with the scaffold scene. Dimmesdale’s psychology is simplified in the film throughout, but particularly here. Instead of attempting to represent his gradual rejection of worldly escape due to his internalized orthodoxy, his decision to confess is seen to be explicitly motivated by Chillingworth’s revelation that he will travel with them. For the film viewer unacquainted with the novel, the timing may suggest that Dimmesdale confesses only to escape from the stock villain in the only possible way, and not as a response to the demands of his nature (as in the novel). Chillingworth can be glimpsed stalking away in the film’s concluding long shot, which depicts Hester cradling her dead lover on the scaffold, surrounded by the kneeling community (this pieta arrangement is copied from Sjostrom’s film).

Vignola adheres closely to Hawthorne’s dialogue throughout the film (the novel’s sparseness makes this possible) but makes an enormous change in this last scene. By not representing the denouement, Hester’s later life, and by excising Dimmesdale’s dying speech, Vignola blunts Hawthorne’s message significantly. This final speech in the novel must be quoted at length for an understanding of the significance of the film’s omission
to be clear. On the scaffold, Hester asks, “Shall we not spend our immortal lives
together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe! Thou lookest
far into eternity, with those bright dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest?” (312).

Dimmesdale responds:

Hush, Hester, hush... 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 hath proved his mercy, most of all,
in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear
upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old
man, to keep the torture always at red-heat! By bringing
me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before
the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had
been lost forever! Farewell! (312-313)

The film preserves most of Hester’s lines. But to her question, Vignola’s Dimmesdale
replies only “Peace, Hester, peace.” While this replicates the syntax of, and thus can be
identified with, the first line of Dimmesdale’s speech (“Hush, Hester, hush”), he seems to
be implying more than that Hester should ‘hold her peace.’ “Peace,” as a response to her
question, implies that the suffering of Dimmesdale’s life, and by implication Hester’s,
will end, and that as she suggested in the first cottage interview, their “salvation can come
only from Heaven.” Thus the film ends on a powerful image, at its climax (by ignoring
her later life), and on a hopeful note. The couple, separated in life by repressive forces,
will be united in death by God, in recognition of the naturalness of their union. This
implication is in direct opposition to Dimmesdale’s original speech, and the omission of
Hester’s life-long self-imposed exile resists Hawthorne’s meaning and even implies her
possible happy reintegration into the community. The novel’s detail regarding her later
life closes out this ambiguity and rejects hope. Hawthorne’s use of Dimmesdale’s last speech and the novel’s concluding chapter reinforces his refusal of relief for character or reader, which Hollywood then delivers. A reviewer for the *Motion Picture Herald* went even further than Vignola himself, reporting that after Dimmesdale’s confession and death, “old Boston remembers the good that is the girl’s, all the sacrifice, service and fortitude that was hers, and receives her again with honour” (42). While I have not been able to discover whether this constitutes a reviewer’s wish-fulfillment fantasy or the only record of a final scene later cut from the film, either way it demonstrates the need of the filmmakers, or of a film-goer used to a certain formula, to correct Hawthorne’s ending.

Hester’s character is reshaped more fundamentally than even Dimmesdale’s, to typify the suffering cinematic heroine of the 1930s. Colleen Moore, about whom *Variety* commented that “it would be difficult to find a more happy choice for Hester” (qtd. in Dunne “Ninety” 32), plays her as “all melting eyes and maternal instincts” (32), rather than the headstrong and sometimes ornery Hester of Hawthorne. She is certainly not, as Harold Bloom has described Hester, a primarily sexual being—she is barely sexual at all (Bloom “Intro.” 1). Moore’s acting, and the film’s construction of the character, cannot capture the wild passionate nature of the novel’s heroine, or the pride that isolates her from the reconciliatory elements in the community; Hawthorne’s Hester is beyond the scope of Moore’s silent-era pantomimic emotionality and Hollywood’s notion of a ‘heroine’. Michael Dunne notes the blunting of Hester’s nature in the film in the scene at Mistress Allerton’s bedside. As a representative of the conciliatory elements in the community, she begs forgiveness for ostracizing Hester, who replies only with an indulgent “Hush!”, reflecting the filmmaker’s rejection of Hester’s scorn for
reconciliation and the official efforts to rescind her punishment. (Moore’s Hester scoffs off-handedly at the suggestion that the authorities may remove her badge, as if it were a triviality.) The depiction of her heretical speculations, so important in the novel and centred in ‘Another View of Hester,’ are absent, not only because such discursive passages would be difficult to depict, but because they destabilize the essentially martyristic construction of Hester as a tragic film heroine in the 1930’s Hollywood mode.

In fact, while Hawthorne’s long descriptions of Hester’s mental states are uncinematic, the novel does provide a convenient symbol for the wilder, anti-social tendency of her nature, which could be used to great effect in the film: the forest. While essentially a locus of natural impulses by day, the forest in the novel is the source of strange noises and fearful speculation after dark. The novel’s Mistress Hibbins both symbolizes and articulates the community’s fear of witchcraft, which Hawthorne posits as a potential outlet for Hester’s transgressive impulses. Vignola deletes Hibbins and any suggestion of witchcraft, and thus his film, like Sjostrom’s,

shows itself more interested in the social persecution of Hester by a smug, austere community at odds with normal feelings, than in the darker repressions that such a regime may enjoin. It also reduces the resonance of the novel’s symbolic use of the forest: no longer the scene of gatherings, in the film it becomes more simply a symbol of freedom from restraint. (McFarlane 46)

However, the forest’s symbolic function is so curtailed that Hester is deprived of her moment’s relief in its shade from the burden of the letter—in the film she does not remove it, or her cap. Hawthorne’s Hester is connected to the forest through her passionate connection to Nature; for Vignola’s Hester, it is only a backdrop. Pearl’s
symbolic value is also blunted in the film. Like the forest, she is connected to lawless passion in the novel, but since the film eliminates Hester's transgressive willfulness, it is not reproduced and magnified in her child. Any suggestion of Pearl's quasi-demonic nature is effaced as Cora Sue Collins plays her as a sweet doll who cannot understand why the other children shun her society. Even her answer to the catechism test, that she was plucked from a rosebush, seems more of an honest misunderstanding than obstinacy.

*The Scarlet Letter*’s September 1934 release places the film squarely in the midst of the Hollywood censorship controversy that ended with the establishment of the Motion Picture Production Code, enforced from 1934 until the mid-1960’s. The Code, a quasi-legal document listing rules regarding the depiction of subject matter in film, was actually written in 1930. It was the culmination of the industry’s efforts to self-regulate content, organized through an arm of the Motion Picture Producers’ and Distributors’ Association that was known as the Hays Office. Headed by former Postmaster General Will Hays, the “Studio Relations” office, later called the Production Code Administration office, was formed in 1921 as a response to public outcry against Hollywood’s presumed moral laxity. The Hays Office proposed several pre-Code censor guides for the MPPDA’s members though the Twenties, including the 1924 “Formula” and the 1927 “Don’t and Be Carefuls” list. These were elaborated in the 1930 Code. Until 1934, however, the new guidelines were largely ignored and barely enforced. Filmmakers complained that the rules conflicted with audience tastes, and were thus financially undesirable; given the popularity of gangster films and Mae West pictures, containing content that the Code would disallow, their point is clearly valid. However, by 1932 public outcry, especially concerning the moral influence of movies on the young and the poor, began to exert an
influence again. A Senate investigation into Hollywood’s ability to self-regulate was proposed in February, bringing with it the threat of governmental regulation of the industry, which Hays and the MPPDA sought to avoid. In March of 1933 the industry formally renewed its commitment to the dictates of the Code, and altered its method of enforcement by introducing stiff penalties for non-compliance and refusing to release pictures into theatres controlled by the association without the new Production Code Administration’s seal of approval.

But the pace of reform was not swift enough to avoid further protest, and in November of 1933 the Legion of Decency, a mostly Catholic lobbying group, was organized to pressure the industry to conform to the censorship of the Code or risk a boycott by their membership. The movement was spurred in part by a newly released series of sociological studies, commissioned by the Payne Fund, which focused on the influence of film depictions of criminality and sexuality on young audiences and the poor, the two groups considered most susceptible to Hollywood’s moral sway. The Legion began its boycott campaign in April of 1934, and the Production Code Administration increased its pressure on producers, refusing to grant its seal of approval (without which a film could not be shown) and requiring cuts and rewrites. It was into this contentious environment that *The Scarlet Letter* was released six months after the boycott, to an audience (the public and the PCA) on guard against the slightest suggestion of sexual transgression.

The Legion of Decency, the Payne Fund, and the PCA focused their efforts primarily on two of the most popular film cycles of the early 1930’s: the gangster picture and the ‘fallen woman’ film. While public pressure eventually forced a near extinction of
the Scarface style gangster film, the sex picture cycle proved difficult to halt, although its
depiction of female sin was considered more tempting, and thus more dangerous, than the
crime and violence of Hollywood gangsters. Lea Jacobs defines the fallen woman film as
depicting

a woman who commits a sexual transgression such as adultery or pre-marital sex. In traditional versions
of the plot, she is expelled from the domestic space of the family and undergoes a protracted decline.
Alone on the streets, she becomes an outcast, often a prostitute, suffering various humiliations which usually
culminate in her death. In other variants of the story, however, the movement away from the family does not
lead to a decline in class. (Jacobs Wages x)

The PCA and its supporters soon realized that it was this crucial difference, the happy or
tragic consequences of the fall, not the fact of the fall itself, that represented the threat to
moral order among the young and impressionable. The trend toward rewarding the
sinning woman with luxury rather than suffering had been noted with alarm for years. In
1931, Variety's yearbook featured an article titled “Sinful Girls Lead in 1931.” Referring
to a popular Constance Bennett picture released that year, the reviewer commented that
“The Easiest Way was the easiest way to b.o. [box office] success in 1931. Important
ladies of the screen, those whose names mean drawing power, found smash films the
wages of cinematic sin. The Great God Public, formerly considered as a Puritan censor,
voiced its approval with admission fees that fully endorsed the heroines of easy
virtue...Public taste switched to glamorous shameful ladies, coddled by limousines,
clothed in couturier smartness” (qtd. in Shindler 22). Although Mae West is most closely
associated with the early 1930’s sex picture, the era’s list of cinematic prostitutes could
boast all of the major stars, as Variety claims, including Bennett, Joan Crawford (Rain),

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Greta Garbo (Susan Lenox), Marlene Dietrich (Dishonored, Blonde Venus, Shanghai Express), and Jean Harlow (Red Dust, Red-Headed Woman). While many of these films offered plots that conformed to Jacobs' formulation of the traditional fallen woman's trajectory, some, including West's pictures, the Bennett film discussed by Variety, Harlow's Red-Headed Woman, and most scandalously Barbara Stanwyck's Baby Face, violated the traditional pattern by rewarding their heroines with wealth and even love. In these films, (sexual) crime does pay. Because of its happy ending, Red-Headed Woman was singled out by Martin Quigley, author of Decency in Motion Pictures (1937) and a prominent Legionnaire, as "an exposition of the theory that the wages of sin are wealth, luxury, and social position, the only desiderata being physical charm and the willingness to accept the proffered prices" (qtd. in Maltby "Baby" 31). Fallen woman films that subverted the traditional fall and consequences threatened social anarchy, as parents wondered how they could keep their "daughters on the straight and narrow path they heard preached in Sunday sermons, when the rest of the week at the neighbourhood theater they could see for themselves over and over again that the wages of sin were not death but a Park Avenue penthouse" (Dooley 16). By this point everyone agreed with the Payne Studies: movies, for better or worse, influenced society. It had become not a question of whether they taught, but how to control what they taught.

The Code's regulations on sex pictures reflected the recognition that the subject matter was not dangerous itself, and could actually be morally instructive, provided that the material was handled in accordance with traditional nineteenth century patterns. So the Code did not forbid the depiction of sexual sin, but regulated it to ensure that deviations from the pattern like that of Red-Headed Woman were curtailed. To
accomplish this, the Code required the injection of "compensating moral values." Jason Joy, an executive of the PCA, explained that the strategy with sex pictures was "to leave the audience with the definite conclusion that immorality is not justifiable, that society is not wrong in demanding certain standards of its women, and that the guilty woman, through realization of her error, does not tempt other women in the audience to follow her course" (qtd. in Jacobs Wages 3). As layed out in PCA staffer Olga Martin's book, Hollywood's Movie Commandments, compensating moral values took four forms: the first was the "voice of morality," represented by a 'good' character in the world of the film, who condemns the heroine's sexual sin explicitly.6 This character's function is explicitly didactic—he or she exists to "make articulate the moral principles involved in the issue which is being dramatized on the screen" (Olga Martin 99).7 The second, third, and fourth vehicle to be used for communicating compensating moral values curb the trajectory of the narrative itself and reflect the reliance on the traditional pattern. Number Two is "Suffering." Martin explains that

wrong-doing, whether intentional or unintentional, must be shown to bring suffering to the wrong-doer to establish the fact that it is inevitably painful, unpleasant, unprofitable, and productive of unhappiness. Obviously one cannot break the taboos of society and the moral laws without incurring the penalties associated with such law-breaking. Suffering for wrong-doing may come thru [sic] many ways, ie, self-condemnation, conscience, social ostracism, physical disability, legal retribution, personal loss...(100)

The third requirement is "Reform and Regeneration," which, interestingly, can suffice in a sex picture to "cancel or pardon a sin or a wrong. Regeneration implies a desire on the part of the wrong-doer to do what is right. Not until there is evidence of repentance for the wrong which has been done, and a sincere effort is made to right the wrong, can the
wrong doer be shown to be relieved of the suffering which the wrong-doing has brought upon him [or her]” (100). Repentance is the most acceptable end for the fallen woman, since it is a “more or less natural reaction when such characters discover that they have been guilty of violating a code of morals or ethics” (101); but failing that, the story must conclude with the fourth requirement, “Punishment and Retribution.”

These guidelines confine the trajectory of the fall to the prescribed nineteenth century pattern of sin, suffering, and retribution. They were intended to close out the “debate around the fallen woman genre attached to updated variants of the plot which criticized or trivialized traditional ideals of female purity” (Jacobs Wages 10) by questioning the inevitability or moral necessity of suffering (caused by a shift in values occasioned by the rise of the New Woman). The reversion to the older pattern of the fall was a perfect solution for the PCA, due to its concerns about the film’s function as a tool for moral didacticism, since “the trajectory of the fall provided a means of extending the moral significance of a story beyond the confines of the ending to the narrative as a whole” (115). Since contemporary literary sources too often reflected the morally ambiguous sexual attitudes of the 1920s, the PCA encouraged the use of older literary sources. The nineteenth century novel was an obvious choice since it would reflect the Code-approved paradigm through its internal narrative logic, and thus the resulting film would not require extensive re-writes or cuts (9).

On the surface, Vignola’s film conforms to the rules of compensating moral values, and as a revered nineteenth century novel The Scarlet Letter would have been favored by the Code Administration, in that it indeed seems to conform to the letter. Although censors had had an unfriendly relationship with Hawthorne’s novel in the past
culminating in Lillian Gish’s difficulty getting approval for her film), the Code’s strategy of, as Hawthorne’s sexton would say, bringing iniquity out into the open, to show its effects, makes this novel a seemingly perfect fit for the PCA. Mistress Crackstone voices stern moral rebuke throughout the film, while Hester is certainly seen to suffer for her sins, demonstrates a ‘reformed’ character in her service to the community, and is initially punished with social ostracism and ultimately the loss of her lover. However, upon closer inspection, the film’s fidelity to the letter of the Code is belied by a subversion of its spirit. The most obvious example is the film’s construction of the “voice of morality”, Mistress Crackstone. Initially set up as a representative of the community, and indeed voicing the attitudes of Hawthorne’s Puritan colony, she is undercut by the film. While Hawthorne constructs our sense of the colony’s unequivocal revulsion at Hester’s sin and its total rejection of her, the film must attempt to adapt this element quickly and simply, so Crackstone must stand for all of the colonists. However, because she and her crones are presented unattractively (in contradiction to the Code), they fail to “arouse sympathy for the right conduct” (Olga Martin 99). Our sense of Crackstone is rather that she carries a personal vendetta against Hester, not a revulsion motivated by her own piety. Why else would she (and it seems like only she, not the community) conspire to separate a child from a mother so obviously gifted as Hester? Further, Crackstone’s lusty pursuit of Bartholemew undercuts her moral authority, and her railing against Hester’s mothering skills, when the film’s Pearl is an angelic figure in sharp contrast with the Crackstone brats, reveals her “hypocrisy, smugness, [and] blue-nosed severity” (99), qualities forbidden in the portrayal of the moral voice. Instead, Hester-friendly Bartholemew emerges as the true moral voice (if a hapless one in a
society with which he is out of step), contradicting the gossips and professing sympathy and understanding.

The other three vehicles of 'compensating moral values,' suffering, redemption, and punishment, are handled in the film as a negotiation between Hawthorne and Hollywood. Our sense of Hester's ostracism and the suffering engendered by the badge of shame are reduced in the film. As a 1930's melodrama heroine, Hester seems truly to suffer only as a result of her separation from Dimmesdale, first by duty at the cottage, then by death on the scaffold. She loses him there, but his death is seen not as a punishment for their sin (despite its source in his torment) so much as the consequence of the machinations of the villain, and a cruel twist of fate in that the death follows on the heels of the escape plan. The film's development of Hester's reform, although different from Hawthorne's, produces the same sense of ambiguity. The novel delineates Hawthorne's internal resistance to the community's moral strictures, and demonstrates how the letter has not done its office, even before her rejection of it and the community in the forest interview. The community's efforts at reconciliation are a response to her public service (as in the film), not her integration into their values through repentance (as the PCA demands). At the end of the novel, Hester resumes her punishment more in recognition that it is her fate than because of a belief in its justice. Vignola's Hester, in the invented cottage interview with Dimmesdale, mouths platitudes about the necessity of life-long penance, but this scene's melodramatic construction associates her comments with those of any cinematic lover forced to deny her own happiness, according to Hollywood convention, in favour of the greater good. Her complete reversal of this sentiment in the forest interview obliterates the impact of her earlier guilt-ridden speech;
Vignola's decision to excise Dimmesdale's last speech also points to his lack of interest in her reformation or concern with PCA values beyond his surface gestures to them.

The Code breaks down into specific prohibitions against specific subjects, from violent crime to miscegenation. The section on adultery is particularly elaborate. Martin comments that fully 80% of stories centred on adultery are rejected by the PCA (she is writing in 1937) because of concerns about the glamorizing or justifying of this sexual crime. The Code lists seven regulations regarding the depiction of adultery:

I. Adultery must never appear to be justified.
II. The sinful relationship must not be condoned...
III. No dialog or action should indicate any disrespect of marriage beyond the necessary portrayal of the sin.
IV. Divorce should not be shown to take place except for sound reasons, and as a last resort.
V. Bedroom scenes should be avoided; and physical contact between the principals should be reduced to the absolute minimum.
VI. Adultery must not be presented as attractive and alluring—there must be no more glamour and luxury than is consonant with the plot.
VII. Regeneration or retribution should be satisfactory to compensate for the wrong. (156)

While most of these prohibitions are self-evident, the first, that adultery must not be justified, is given a particularly elaborate explanation by Martin, presumably because it was thought to require refining:

Adultery, representing as it does, a gross violation of the marriage pact, always requires some explanation for its occurrence. The motive, in novels at least, has found justification under numerous plausible guises. The provocation, according to time-honored dramatic devices, is ordinarily attributable to the rebellion of a husband or a wife against the indifference, the neglect, the coldness, and, even, the cruelty of a spouse. The invalidism or insanity of the marriage partner in themselves constitute not unusual, though somewhat melo-
dramatic motives for the commission of adultery. The bewitchery, charm and blandishments of the third party, too, are recounted as potent factors in enchanting the reason of the intractable spouse. In a screen story there is no objection to starting out with any one of these marital and domestic conditions. But when a story, starting from any of these premises, seeks to justify adultery as an expedient, as revenge, or merely as a relief from the cares and responsibilities imposed by matrimony, then the story violates the Code provision requiring that ‘adultery never be justified.’ To avoid a justification of adultery, the adulterous mate should not be shown in too sympathetic a light; and, contrariwise, the innocent mate should not be made to appear too unsympathetic a character. If audience sympathy is too strongly aroused for the transgressor, the spectator would unconsciously tend to condone the subsequent adultery. (158)

The Code insists that like the voice of morality figure (here, Crackstone), the ‘faithful,’ ‘victimized’ partner (here, Chillingworth) not be presented unsympathetically, lest the whole notion of innocence and guilt on which the didactic impact of the Code-sanctioned sex picture depends be compromised. Further, the transgressive spouse must not be presented in such a way as to generate sympathy since that would create “antipathy for the good characters whose duty it is to halt [her] career. Exaggerated sympathy for the adulterous wife makes us hate the faithful husband” (PCA head Breen qtd. in Jacobs Wages 118). To understand how Vignola’s film problematizes the notion of couplehood, innocent victims, and sexual sin, we must first return to the novel and examine the film’s compromise between it and melodramatic cinematic expectations.

Hawthorne’s novel was certainly criticized at the time of its publication for its portrayal of an adulterous relationship, but Carol Bensick argues that it belongs to a cycle of novels, alluded to in Martin’s reference to novelistic convention above, that presented a challenge to the notion that the legally married pair must always be presented
as the ‘legitimate’ couple. She asserts that the issue of adultery in Hawthorne’s novel “makes a slow transition from the sphere of mystery to the sphere of marital sociology: no longer a fateful tragedy to be ritually suffered, adultery emerges as a practical human problem that the individuals involved have, along with their society, a common obligation to address” (Bensick 146). Marriages made for reasons other than love, especially between young women and much older men, are the unnatural unions. The wife’s love affair is comparatively a natural union and an obvious consequence of such a marriage; Hawthorne seeks to communicate “the inevitability, if not the positive justice, in her position” (149). The depiction of Hester’s meeting with Dimmesdale in the forest, a natural setting opposed to the social oppression of the town, reinforces the reader’s sense of their (if not Hawthorne’s) belief in God’s or Nature’s consecration of their pairing. Chillingworth is deprived of his position as husband and is relegated to the status of interloper and blocking agent. Chillingworth himself voices this sentiment in his first meeting with Hester, concluding that their marriage was ill-conceived and thus between them “the scales hang fairly balanced” (Hawthorne 89).

The film reproduces the dialogue between Chillingworth and Hester in this scene to reinforce Hawthorne’s point explicitly. But Vignola’s melodramatic handling of the love triangle plot is more explicit (less ambivalent) than the novel when it comes to de-legitimizing the Prynne marriage and ‘consecrating’ the Hester-Dimmesdale union. As I have already described above, this scene has been moved from the jail to the cottage, as has their final interview (moved from the reeds) to emphasize visually Chillingworth’s obvious estrangement from the domestic scene, and violation of its sanctity. By contrast, Dimmesdale fits naturally into her domestic space, to the accompaniment of string
arrangements. The first Hester-Dimmesdale interview in the film legitimizes their status as a romantic couple to a degree that Hawthorne never does, using cliché music, silent-era pantomime and dialogue that establishes their continuing identification of themselves as a couple (Dimmesdale begs her to marry him; she is fearful of shattering "the love [they] bear each other"). Hester is softened into a strong but gentle mother figure to simplify the audience’s relationship to her. Unlike in the book, in the film Hester is unquestionably good and sympathetic, while Chillingworth is her direct opposite, evil and unsympathetic. He is constructed this way visually by his villainous appearance, and as Joe Breen feared, audience sympathy for the heroine makes us hate him. The reconstruction of Pearl as a perfect child rather than a hellion reflects the serenity and ‘rightness’ of their union, rather than its lawlessness. Vignola reinforces the child’s connection to her father and the potential for ideal family harmony by assigning Dimmesdale the role of her spiritual instructor, and giving the pair a scene in which they interact warmly (whereas the novel’s father and daughter are at turns hostile and fearful of each other until the end).

While Vignola’s *The Scarlet Letter* conforms to some of the Code’s prescriptions regarding the presentation of adultery (there is no divorce, no sex depicted, and certainly no glamour beyond that of the star), the film appropriates and enlarges the justification of adultery Bensick identifies in the novel, as we have seen. However, strictly speaking, it tells the story of a tragedy resulting from adultery in which no one ends happily, so it did not challenge the PCA’s didactic program as openly as *Red-Headed Woman* or *The Easiest Way*. This question of the tragic ending is particularly important; a happy ending like that of *Blonde Venus* (PCA-imposed), concluding with a reconciliation of the marital
couple, can exist because the couple formed is “the ‘legitimate’ one, purged of the taint of adultery through the narrative logic of punishment and redemption” (Jacobs Wages 26).

Vignola’s film does, in fact, end with the formation of a couple, Bartholemew and Crackstone, resolving the subplot comically and making a comment on the possibility of natural love and happy union in their society. Having accidentally seen her undergarments, Bartholemew is coerced into marriage with the shrewish gossip according to the law, as reparation for his presumed sexual transgression. A possible implication is that the mismatched couple united according to law and not love may begin the cycle of sin again, as the earthy Batholemew may stray even further than to the tavern. Potential radicalism is contained, even though it is through a loveless union, and if it cannot be, such as in the case of the protagonists, then it must be destroyed. Having constructed the natural love of the two adulterers as ideal and legitimate, the film is compelled to frustrate audience expectations for romantic fulfillment in order to earn its PCA seal. The film dupes the audience by ending the forest interview with an embrace, swelling music, and the promise of a happy ending beyond “the confines of yonder town,” at which point the melodrama’s audience would typically expect a close-up of the kiss, and a title announcing ‘The End.’ However, this is 1934 and a happy resolution in the manner of the pre-Code sex pictures is impossible. Of course, it would also violate the source material, but this is not a major concern for Hollywood producers. Vignola’s Hester cannot subvert the moral order or the fallen woman pattern by being rewarded with happiness like the pre-Code characters played by Jean Harlow or Connie Bennett. So instead of having her conquer the social order overtly like these transgressive predecessors, the film follows the novel’s lead by placing her morally above the social
order and exposing its pretenses, while allowing it, and the PCA, to restrict her on the superficial level through prohibitions and forced repressions.

Vignola’s film is also clearly influenced by a variant of the fallen woman film, the maternal melodrama, especially in its subversion of conservative values. Christian Viviani comments that “the maternal melodrama plays—sometimes with a certain cunning, on two levels. It seems outwardly attached to the old moral code by making the mother pay for her ‘sin.’ But it implicitly condemns the old system of values” (14). Vignola plays on maternal melodramatic technique especially in the scene in which Hester pleads to be allowed to retain custody of Pearl. It follows a happy domestic scene highlighting her nurturing qualities. This sort of scene would have struck a chord with the Depression audience, when foreclosures and destitution were threatening to separate families.

By 1934, the American economy was slowly beginning to recover (having hit rock bottom in 1932), but the tremendous social effects of the Depression were still unfolding. The Depression was more than a financial crisis—it provoked a national spiritual and moral crisis as well. The popularity of the fallen woman film, as well as the gangster film, in the socially chaotic early Depression years “gives a clear indication that the crisis in national life brought on by the onset of the Depression was overturning conventional attitudes” (Shindler 22). By 1934, the culture was attempting to stabilize itself with a return to the conservatism of the previous generation.

Social values had been in flux since Victorian structures had collapsed with World War One, and the changing image of the early film heroine reflects this. As I have sketched in the previous chapter, in the decade before the Twenties, “fiction and film
shared the assumptions of the [Victorian] Cult of True Womanhood, namely that the True Woman embodied the virtues of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity and that any fall, especially that occasioned by a sexual lapse, was an irrevocable one. Ironically, these works coincided with the appearance of the ‘New Woman,’ as women…gained new freedom in manners and morals” (Fishbein “Harlot’s” 409). Eventually, the sexual liberation of the Twenties found a convenient vehicle in the Flapper (of which Colleen Moore was the leading example, especially after Flaming Youth). But the flapper’s sex rebellion was actually as stunted as her hemlines. Colleen Moore’s character in Flaming Youth, for example, “teases and wiggles her rump, she dances and mingles with swells, but a mere kiss from an admirer triggers rage. This ‘independent’ Pat, this ‘thinker,’ may rebel regarding nail polish or hemlines, but her sexual and moral leaning is violently Victorian” (Rosen 76).

After the initial shock of the Crash, social attitudes boomeranged to some extent, and “one early casualty was the carefree self-confidence that had characterized the prosperous 1920s. Never had a decade been snuffed out so quietly as the 1920s: it was almost as if people felt that the Depression was punishment for the excesses of the previous decade” (Ware xi-xii). And cinematic heroines would pay for it. Explaining the Hays Office’s position on the Twenties’ effects, Olga Martin remarks that “the screen in recent years has been reflecting the ‘morals’ of a decadent period. Obviously, the unsanctioned customs of this period were not the customs of a stable society, and, hence, did not represent an authoritative code of morals” (73). To further support her analysis, she also quotes an article in The New York Times which asserts that “the screen plunged from the unbridled ferocity and ethical imbecility of the war years into an extended orgy
of sex during the swollen and comfortable decade that preceded the historic events of September. The sick and disillusioning years since then have created, perhaps, a new American temper” (Sennwald qtd. in Olga Martin 73). The carelessly optimistic financial mismanagement of the Twenties that led to the Crash was seen as endemic to the decade’s values, or what were perceived to be its values, and the only solution seemed to be a return to the conservatism of the previous generation both fiscally and morally. In his article on Baby Face, Richard Maltby described how

Victorian patriarchy strove to reassert itself by identifying the alleged permissiveness of the Jazz Age as the scapegoat for the collapse of the economy. The demands for movie reform should thus be seen as part of a broader reaffirmation of the traditional patriarchal values at a moment of cultural crisis. This reaffirmation…focused primarily on a concern that the family unit was in danger of disintegrating. Motherhood, which had virtually disappeared from films as the main aspiration for women, underwent a strenuous revival. (28-29)

The fallen woman film sustained its popularity through the early Depression years since it expressed a sense of fateful downtroddenness that was universally identifiable, but the flapper, “suddenly sobered by the economic realities of the time, no longer danced. Most likely, she was learning how to use pork rind, bacon grease, bread scraps, and powdered milk to feed her family of four on five dollars a week” (Carolyn Johnston 145). So it is not surprising to find Colleen Moore out of work, and desperately trying to remodel herself as a domestic martyr in The Scarlet Letter. The elaboration of the maternal instinct in films like Blonde Venus connected the fallen woman to the newly revived icon, the mother. But any attempt to return to the Victorian ideal of true womanhood, that of the passive Angel in the House, was frustrated by the persistence of the New Woman icon and by the exigencies of the Depression.
Although noted for its visual style at the time of release in such papers as *Motion Picture Daily*, where it was pronounced “able to stand alone on any bill” (qtd. in Pitts 224) and *Box Office*, which commended it as “a credit to independent production” (224), *The Scarlet Letter*’s chief fascination today for film scholars is in the casting of Colleen Moore. As she had been Hollywood’s greatest box office draw as recently as 1926 and 1927, it is at first surprising to find Moore accepting work on a Poverty Row project. Majestic benefited from the downward trajectory of her career after 1929. Her phenomenal success in the Twenties had been, in large part, a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Having come out to Hollywood under contract to D.W. Griffith in the ‘Teens, and cast in supporting roles and Tom Mix westerns, she was hired to play the role of Patricia Fentress in *Flaming Youth* (1923), one of the first films to mythologize Flapper culture. She soon became completely identified with Flapperdom, and while “*Flaming Youth* made Colleen a star, it also typecast her for nearly the rest of her career. She spent most of the 1920s in flapper roles, in films such as 1924’s *The Perfect Flapper* and *Flirting with Love*” (Pringle 1). Her restlessness with this identification grew after the failure of *So Big* (1924), her one early attempt at a serious role.

After the stock market crash and the rejection of flapper culture’s careless excesses, Moore attempted to re-launch herself as a dramatic actress on the stage and in the Talkies. She made *The Power and the Glory* with Spencer Tracy in 1933 for MGM, but after that the studio was unable to find work for a celebrity so closely identified with an image of femaleness so suddenly and so irrevocably outdated. In her autobiography, Moore insists of *The Power and the Glory*:

I thought it was the best film I ever made, and the critics

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agreed with me. But the part I played in it was a heavy
dramatic one in which I went from a young girl to a woman
of sixty. The public didn’t care for me in that kind of part.
They wanted me to go on being a wide-eyed, innocent little
girl. I was too old for that—and too tired of it in any
case. So I bowed out. (Moore 250)

Louis B. Mayer tore up her contract at her request. Moore’s role as Spencer Tracy’s
suffering and sacrificing wife, a sort of icon of 1930’s femaleness, conflicted with her
image as a narcissistic but fun-loving New Woman; Moore’s comments bespeak a desire
to grow up as an actress, as the country had grown up after 1929. The role of Hester
Prynne would seem to answer that hunger for a grown-up role, and an opportunity to
headline once more. But although The Scarlet Letter was Moore’s last film, there is no
mention of it in her autobiography. The role that should have represented her long-
sought artistic fulfillment in Hollywood is edited out of her life, like a repressed memory.
One can only assume that the iniquity of working in less prestigious pictures, especially
on the ‘B’ circuit, outweighed the fulfillment found in the role of Hester. But Moore,
unlike Gish, was a creation of the industry. While she was enormously popular, she did
not merit the autonomy Gish had at MGM. Gish, as we have seen, could demand strong
roles like Hester that stretched her identity with the public, despite the risk of alienating
the fans of her innocent, passive persona. In the Nineties, Demi Moore could also do this,
and also used her power to remake herself in the image of Hester, as we shall see. But
Colleen Moore, while she yearned for grown-up parts, did not have the standing to create
her own projects, or the strength to break out of her image through the use of Hester, at
least not at MGM. Only a studio like Majestic could give her the chance to be Hester, as
it had less invested in keeping her Patricia, her famous character in Flaming Youth.12
While the average woman in 1934 was defined by sacrifice like her Victorian model, the economic conditions demanded more than a Victorian True Woman could have provided. While her mother’s duty had been to preserve her “chastity and the sanctity of the home as a moral bulwark of civilization” (Fishbein “Demise” 67), the 1930’s wife was increasingly responsible for actively providing sustenance for her family, and entered the public sphere (as opposed to the passive Victorian Angel who rarely left the House). With a full quarter of men unemployed (Carolyn Johnson 146), many women became sole breadwinners, and the family structure reflected this as women gained status in and out of the home. But the female ideal was still essentially one of self-sacrifice, not self-indulgence as in the 1920’s. Carolyn Johnston quotes a magazine article describing “how to properly combine femininity and strength:...the clear-eyed young goddess whose airplane defies an angry storm to wrest from it life and safety will tell you calmly how much she likes to cook and make her own clothes” (147). The ideal 1930’s woman combines the New Woman image of capability and autonomy in the public sphere with the True Woman self-abnegation in the private sphere; this creates a double bind, as Johnston indicates: “if the angel in the house had to work outside the home, her job must not interfere with her family duties or lessen her femininity” (148)—or threaten the revived patriarchal order. The Thirties woman’s ‘New’ power must be harnessed by her ‘True’ nature and duties.

The New/True Woman’s husband was usually under-employed if not unemployed; both Ware (15) and Carolyn Johnson (146;148;151) assert that the pressure of reversing sex roles strained the family structure in many cases. While media portrayals emphasized the necessity of stabilizing traditional feminine and masculine
identities to combat this, adjustments in the balance of domestic power were inevitable. In her study of 59 families on relief, Mirra Komarovsky recounts numerous case studies identifying the Depression-era wife’s resentment of her now-idle mate, and the husband’s frustration at his increasingly passive and powerless position in both the public and private sphere (Komarovsky 73). Out of the 59 husbands, 13 reported a loss of authority in the family which was directly attributable to a loss of employment. Increasingly unable to cope, couples lived estranged if they could not afford to divorce, and “by 1932 over a million [American] women and their children had been deserted” (Carolyn Johnston 151). While she did not include “families in which the deterioration of the husband’s status [had] led to the separation of the couple” (24), many of the men in Komarovsky’s sociological study claimed to have perceived themselves as a burden on their increasingly self-sufficient mates (41), and the New-True Woman absorbed the identity of a later twentieth-century icon: the independent single mother. Komarovsky’s study excluded families who did not go on relief because the woman supplied sufficient income, but asserted that the result of such a reconstruction of family economics would result in a “complete reversal of economic roles” (24), and the husband’s consequent loss of authority.

Vignola’s film reflects many of these Depression-era concerns. Colleen Moore embodies the transition from the independent, self-indulgent New Woman of the 1920’s to the self-sacrificing, motherly New-True Woman of 1934. Rejecting her past persona, she attempts to fit into the new/old motherly mould, but it is ultimately a very uncomfortable fit for Moore, her audience, and the women forced to do the same. The audience identifies her with pluck and the pursuit of pleasure, but the film refuses to grant those to
the 1930’s heroine. She stands between the community and her family (Pearl), literally in a few scenes and figuratively throughout, as a mother first and foremost. Her maternal qualities are extended over the entire community, in her care for the sick, and she radiates benign femininity throughout. But Vignola’s Hester is also a working mother and a single one, running her own household without the help or need of a mate, with the strength to thrive in a public sphere that is hostile to her.

The comic subplot makes clear that despite the pretense of an absolute patriarchy, women control the social order in the film’s world. Mistress Crackstone completely dominates the humbled and hiding Bartholemew, and seems even to control the government! The film represents the governor’s move to take Pearl from her mother as motivated by Crackstone’s vendetta alone, presenting two scenes in which she voices her demand for the action, and then positioning her behind the governor during the hearing. The trajectory of Hester and Dimmesdale’s relationship also reflects the changing male-female dynamic of the Depression. The relationship reverses itself in terms of power, beginning with a defiant Dimmesdale comforting a fragile but resolved Hester, moving to the forest scene in which Hester attempts to endow her lover with enough of her own strength to save him, and ending with a tableau of the dead Dimmesdale supported by Hester, who is presumed to go on, strengthening her position in the community, through her combination of selflessness and fortitude. While the casting of Colleen Moore against type symbolizes the difficulty of the new female role’s contradictions, Hardie Albright, whom Dooley identifies as “a specialist in young weaklings” (145), is a natural choice for a Dimmesdale whose decline and death reflect the fate of 1930’s masculinity. He is also consistent with the transgressive adulterer of cinematic maternal
melodrama: “between the respectable family [here the Puritan community], which represents the dying world, and the mother, who represents hope for the future, we find the man. In these films, he is usually a strange and weak-willed character, rarely played by a great star, a person who hasn’t the courage to make up his own mind and who relies on the family to make decisions” (Viviani 14). Although Vignola takes pains to establish Dimmesdale’s initial heroism by his offering to marry Hester and gesturing toward renouncing the authority of the community, which Hawthorne certainly never allows him, the result is the same. He is unable to help her, he is only a drain on her strength, and ultimately Hester as single mother must stand alone.

While Vignola’s film reflects the tension in American sexual politics, it seems as double-dealing in its message here as it was regarding the issue of Hester’s remorse. The film begins this exploration of the nature of sexual sin in a changing society with a title that reads:

This is more than the story of a woman—it is a portrait of the Puritan period in American life. Though to us, the customs seem grim and the punishments hard, they were a necessity of the times and helped shape the destiny of a nation.

The preface is a direct appeal to the Depression-era audience to identify with the hardships and privations borne by the Puritans, and connects the two periods in the history of America. A comparison with the 1926 film’s preface makes this passage seem even more obviously a justification of Puritan oppression. As we have seen in the last chapter, Sjostrom’s film begins with a similar card, but it reads,

Here is recorded a stark episode in the lives of a stern, unforgiving people; a story of bigotry uncurbed and its train of sorrow, shame and tragedy.
The Twenties explicitly rejected the Puritan past as its own, as the reviews quoted in Chapter Two make clear. Puritan morality was something to be ridiculed. The Thirties, in some sense, sought in the colony a model for social control and a stabilized national identity (see Susman pg. 38-49), as many American generations had done before, "seeking to boost the morale of a confused and anxious people by fostering a spirit of patriotism, unity and commitment to national values, a political goal that coincided with similar tendencies within the movie industry" (Sklar Movie-Made 175). Reviews of the film in 1934 are striking in that they do not display the same snide superiority that was so much a part of the attitude of the Sjostrom audience. Phillip Melling quotes Malcolm Cowley on the past-reconciling phenomenon in contemporary literature. He reports that in Cowley's estimation, "some writers that witnessed the shaking of the capitalist system were driven by the very momentum of experience to serious examination of their national roots...[and] used their fiction as instruments of rediscovering national self-belief which, as a result of economic collapse, had become dangerously weak" (Melling "American" 245). This certainly seems to be the implication of Vignola's preface: to place the audience in the lineage of Americans who have endured hardship to the nation's credit. But *The Scarlet Letter* is a problematic choice to fulfill this function, and the preface strikes an almost comically discordant note in the film. The preface aligns the Puritan community with the American national identity, but the film clearly endorses Hester, who suffers the effects of the "grim" but "necessary" customs, the oppression and punishment, that have by implication shaped the nation's destiny and its character.

The preface can only be coherent with the film's and the novel's implications if read against the grain. Like the Puritan colony, America in the Thirties was a community
suffering material deprivation and an identity crisis. The Puritans avoided social chaos through the imposition of strict regulation of social behavior under inflexible patriarchal domination. To a careful reader of Vignola’s film, the implication could be that in a similar situation, but without a rigid code of law like that of the Puritans to keep society stable, American society in the Thirties was edging toward a neo-Victorianism, and was vulnerable to the kind of social repression that characterized colonial New England. And what better evidence for this than the Production Code, lobbied for by a religiously based movement with political sway, charged with the power to limit the depiction of social and sexual behavior and, if the Payne Studies are to be believed, shape the nation’s values? In this way, the Preface sets up the film as a cautionary tale: the attempt to regulate values and social behavior (or the depiction of it in film) represents the dominant (patriarchal) order’s reaction to the threat of disruption of the status quo, but the imposition of absolutism limits freedom of expression and encourages moral despotism.

This film was released only eight years after Sjostrom’s * Scarlet Letter* but seems a lifetime away from it. Colleen Moore, the top Hollywood star only seven years previously, stands very much for her time in 1934. Both the actress herself and her Hester are stained by the past, but chastened by changed circumstances. With her identity suddenly torn away, she seeks a new one—a more enduring one. While Moore’s Hester found that new identity in her works, Moore herself found it in more maternal, less care-free roles. Like Moore, America in 1934 found its new identity by rejecting the recent past. Under the pressure of the Depression, America renounced the ideals of the Twenties—progressivism, individualism, and the cult of youth—in favor of a more conservative self-concept that focused on the family, endurance, and community
standards. It is quite appropriate that, despite the shadow of the 1926 adaptation, The Scarlet Letter would return at this time, on the eve the Production Code's domination. Vignola answers the reactionary voices in his culture by giving them what they want—to the letter. If America sought an identity based on the fundamental American values of the past—untainted by the liberal strain so connected to the Twenties—Vignola would provide a view into that past, and serve up its repressions and fears as a model for his culture. The conservative communitarian strain that pushed for moral reform at the expense of freedom for women and free expression might not see the resemblance, but the audience might.

1 See Chapter Two.

2 This notion is more problematic than is usually seen in the novel. Do the gossips speak for the community truly? The film does not support this view.


4 Perhaps this explains Moore's decision to play Hester. Hungry to move with the times and recapture her popularity, she attempted to remake herself in the image of these 1930's stars.

5 See Lea Jacob's The Wages of Sin and Richard Maltby's "'Baby Face,' or How Joe Breen..."

6 In an early draft of the script for Baby Face, an old man who functions as Stanwyck's mentor spouts Nietzsche in support of her behavior, but in the final film he deplores her behavior and warns her of the destruction that will inevitably result from it.

7 Olga Martin was a PCA employee, and her book (from which I quote in this section), Hollywood's Movie Commandments, is a sort of companion volume to the Code itself, intended to function as a guide for screenwriters. Often I quote her text rather than the Code wording as Martin elaborates on the legalistic brevity of the Code and offers some fascinating explanations for certain prohibitions.

8 Olga Martin warns that "morals laid down in the Code cannot be altered on the ground of geographical or historical incident. A wrong recorded as true in history and artistically treated in a classic may not, for that reason, be exempt from the test of the Code...Obviously these evils manifest themselves in the same form as in the past, and in their case, consequently, it is not true that 'distance and unreality' is capable of mitigating their evil effects today" (208-209).

9 Cf. the senseless separation of Garbo and John Gilbert, due to his death in a duel, just before their expected escape by sea in Queen Christina (1933).
10 Henry Chorley wrote, in The Atheneum (June 15, 1850), “We are by no means satisfied that passions and tragedies like these are legitimate subjects for fiction.” Anna Abbott wrote, in The North American Review (July 1850), that she could not “but wonder that the master of such wizard power over language as Mr. Hawthorne should not choose a less revolting subject than this of The Scarlet Letter.” The Church Review carried a piece by Episcopal cleric Arthur C. Coxe, who is amazed that Hawthorne would submit, “as the proper material for romance, the nauseous amour of a Puritan pastor, with a frail creature of his charge, whose mind is represented as far more debauched than her body” and feared that the novel had “already done not a little to degrade our literature, and to encourage social licentiousness” (boldface mine). Obviously, the fear of a damaging moral influence on the public was not confined to the film reformers of the 1930’s.

11 Christian Viviani also noted this; he asserts that the fallen woman film’s success “seems almost a sociological phenomenon and is hardly surprising in a period where rejects and marginals, gangsters and fallen women, seemed to conquer public sympathy” (11).

12 My analysis of Lillian Gish’s attempt to add sophistication to her screen image is contained in Chapter Two. My analysis of Demi Moore’s attempt to add a feminist dimension to her image, to balance so-called ‘boy-toy’ roles, through the self-produced 1995 film appears in Chapter Six.

13 That same year, in White Heat, Albright played an American who leaves his Hawaiian lover to marry but returns after his wife deserts him. The previous year he played a vain aspiring writer later revealed as a pariah and fortune hunter in Three-Cornered Moon.
Chapter Four—Exhort Her to Confess: *The Scarlet Letter* on Television in the Fifties

In the early and mid-Fifties, television was different than it is today. More than the variety shows, game shows, and fledgling sitcoms like *The Goldbergs*, the staple of the new medium’s prime time was the dramatic anthology program. Shows like *Philco Playhouse* and *The U.S. Steel Hour* began as venues for Broadway hits to reach a national audience, but soon developed their own styles as the networks began to commission original dramatic content. As in the early days of film, the new medium relied partly on adapted material to supply the demand for new stories. *The Scarlet Letter* was adapted for dramatic anthologies twice in this period, in 1950 and 1954. The first production, broadcast on April 3rd 1950, appeared on CBS’s *Westinghouse Studio One*, and the second, on May 24th 1954, was seen on NBC’s *Kraft Television Theater*. What is striking about these two adaptations is first, their appearance at all in a political climate hostile to the novel’s theme of tyrannical social conformism, and second, the amazing differences between them. Separated by only four years, the two programs illustrate the ideological gulf between the early and middle Fifties. While CBS’s production takes the risk of confronting the important issues of mass hysteria, public power, and the position of women after World War Two, NBC’s *The Scarlet Letter* evades these issues and embraces the strained consensus of the Eisenhower years.

These adaptations are little studied by academics today. Many live TV dramas of the Fifties are available, however—despite the fact that they played live, they were recorded on Kinescope. But apart from *Marty*, few are considered worthy of study by cinema scholars. The productions under consideration were not reviewed by any of the
media of their day, which is not surprising since they were only two of many dramatic 
antology offerings on any given night. And apart from a passing mention of the first 
version in a recent article by Bruce Daniels (who dismissed it as “a short vignette”), they 
have been completely ignored, perhaps even undiscovered, by commentators on 
adaptations of The Scarlet Letter. I argue that they deserve attention equal to the films, 
both as part of the tradition of The Scarlet Letter on screen and as objects of historical 
study. They are an essential link in the chain of cinematic interpretations of Hawthorne’s 
novel.

In 1950, Hollywood was ignoring the upstart television, and few established stars 
would make the trip to New York City to endure long hours of rehearsal for little reward. 
Westinghouse Studio One was among the first and most honored of the anthologies. 
Overseen by Worthington Miner, it set the standard for television drama. Miner had risen 
through the ranks of the Broadway scene, directing hit shows from the mid-Twenties 
until 1939. On Broadway, he was known as the “Red Director of New York” (Schaffner 
29) after producing the controversial Bury the Dead (a benefit for Loyalist Spain) and 
coming close to debuting The Cradle Will Rock (taken out of his hands by Orson Welles). 
Miner left for television, beginning with RCA in 1939. In 1948 he was made Director of 
Programming Development at CBS. Studio One debuted on November 7th, 1948. 
Miner’s adaptation of The Scarlet Letter was aired on April 3rd, 1950. I refer to it as 
Miner’s, representing the producer’s vision rather than the director’s (Franklin Schaffner) 
in part because of the nature of commercial television—where directors are more often 
journeymen than auteurs—but also because Miner in particular was possessed of an 
extraordinary amount of control of the material he commissioned and produced.
This production features a little known actress as Hester, and is thus exempt from the conclusions I will draw about the effect of the star persona on the role. Mary Sinclair became a regular player on live television, but never a star. But although she did not bring the baggage of an established public identity to the role, the way she played Hester was singular, so it would be a mistake to say that she had no impact on audience reception of the production. Although only 16 years apart, Mary Sinclair’s Hester, in the Studio One adaptation (1950), is as far from Colleen Moore’s cheery heroine as post-World War Two America was from the Depression. Strident and severe, this Hester’s agony is never lightened by comedic intervention. Mary Sinclair is never girlish—with her pronounced cheekbones and black hair, she resembles Joan Crawford. And like Crawford in this period, she exudes a steely strength in the face of torment. In the first scaffold scene, Hester is not only subject to the taunts and official scolding familiar from the novel, but is pilloried, her hands and head confined throughout the scene. At one point, one of the bold gossips slaps her face. But these extra humiliations seem a necessary balance, given the pride with which she carries herself and her obvious superiority to her community, and they add to the emotional potency of her defiant monologue, delivered in voice-over:

The sun is warm upon my face, as my heart is warm. I will wear the letter proudly. Though it be a symbol of shame, it is also a memory of a moment of beauty that has brought a living child upon this Earth. Stone me. Hang me. Crush my bones in the stocks, you good and righteous people of the colony of the Massachusetts. You cannot deprive me of the memory. You cannot deprive the Earth of its fruit. You cannot make me speak his name. I shall wear the scarlet letter for both of us.

The Reverend Wilson and the rowdy crowd exhort her strenuously to confess, and she
almost seethes when she refuses even Dimmesdale. Upon his assertion of the generosity of her heart, Wilson counters, "Generosity? No, she's been generous only to the Devil himself. Strength? No, she has given strength only to the cause of sin." But in the wake of Hester's monologue from the pillory, this is not convincing. Although she often matches the gossips in the shrillness of her outward demeanor, the audience's sympathy is commanded by the monologue, and her strength in refusing to abandon her conscience and name her fellow sinner is unmistakably validated by the production.

The rest of Miner's *Scarlet Letter* sharpens the validation of Hester's position and criticism of the coercive public forces that oppose her. Of course her direct antagonist, Chillingworth, coerces her more privately, but the threat he wields is exposure. A subtle touch of characterization is evident in Chillingworth's British accent, which like that of the magistrates, conveys both class privilege and cold precision, contrasted with the American twang of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl. In her first confrontation with her husband, his position as villain of the piece is confirmed through melodramatic convention. In contrast to the wild appearance of his predecessor Henry Walthall, this Chillingworth is an effete and cultivated villain. His entrance into Hester's cell is accompanied by an intrusion of the orchestra, holding a panicked note upon a crouching Hester's recognition of him. The music signals his role as clearly as it does her fear. Like Walthall, he wears a cape, but what adds most to his vampiric quality is his bloodlessness. Hester's fire is balanced by his icy presence. His nasal voice coldly intones his admission of a misstep in marrying her, and his assertion that his heart was welcoming is hard to believe. Later, in his one short voice-over monologue in which he analyses Dimmesdale's character clinically, he is hunched over test tubes, positioned and
lit like a mad scientist. Dimmesdale identifies "something ugly and evil in his face."

Chillingworth is more evil, more villainous than the society that persecuted Hester
because he does his work covertly and with a hidden personal motive—vengeance. And
so he is destroyed by his zeal to persecute. This production is too early for
Chillingworth's characterization to be an attack on Joe McCarthy, but it is prescient. The
spiritual ruination caused by a promise made against the conscience is also frequently
emphasized. It is for this, if anything, that Hester and Dimmesdale are to be blamed.

The child Pearl, nine years old in this version, is a miniature version of her mother
in her temperament. When confronted in her cabin by Reverend Wilson, she confidently
answers his questions with a considerable share of pique, which prompts him to note that
she has not learned respect for her elders. However, her bravado dissolves when he
presses her on the meaning of the A. His ferocious zeal in pursuit of the truth unleashes
itself on the cowering child. He asks Pearl if Hester is alone in the field, still hoping,
after all these years, to catch her. When Hester enters, he wisely senses that he is out-
matched and relents. Hester, we learn, has been planting corn by herself, displaying a
self-sufficiency one could not imagine of her cinematic predecessors. Her relationship
with her daughter is a conventional parent-child love, evincing none of the antagonism
and torture that characterizes it in the novel. The implication seems to be that, unlike
Dimmesdale, Hester has not earned the torture of a constant tormentor. Since she
deserves to feel no guilt, she is not saddled with a companion to provoke it.

The custody scene that follows displays her now familiar iron will and flashes of
anger. As she enters the mansion, she is defended from the crowds by one of the former
gossips from the first scaffold scene, who, along with a woman who pleaded for tolerance
in that scene, argues that the mother and child have suffered enough. She presents the possibility of forgiveness and communal reintegration, but it is not her choice to make. Hester’s fate is in the hands of the iron men. Chief among them is Governor Bellingham, who is presented as foppish and ineffectual, reliant on the opinions of the two ministers and easily distracted by his reminiscences. He is a pawn of the ideologue Wilson and the vengeful Chillingworth. But this scene principally functions as a transition to the focus on Dimmesdale, following his stirring defense of Hester’s custody rights and Chillingworth’s keen attention to it.

Miner’s Dimmesdale is a curious counterpart to his Hester. His voice-over monologues are extensive, and delineate his spiritual decline. Where Chillingworth is hunched and pinched, Dimmesdale is tall and languid with a strong, resonant voice. But the large scale of his physical presence only underscores his emotional weakness. While he seems to summon up preternatural force in the latter two scaffold scenes, he sleepwalks through the others. Particularly in his forest interview with Hester, this weakness is notable in contrast to her strength. As with Chillingworth, she reveals him by being his direct opposite. Where she embodies energy, he characterizes its absence. He towers over her as she holds him up, and she spits out her lines while his roll out slowly.

Dimmesdale’s four monologues illustrate his state of mind exhaustively up until the forest interview, but the agonized transition from his resolution to run away from Boston to his renunciation of that plan in favor of expiation is curiously absent. Instead, Miner cuts from the forest directly to the scaffold. Dimmesdale enters the Election Day scene, and with a glance at Hester and Pearl, immediately ascends the scaffold. While a
sailor has told Hester of Chillingworth’s discovery of their escape plan, Dimmesdale never knows it, so this is dismissed as a catalyst for his confession. To Hester he offers only the explanation that he is a dying man, so they could never do what they planned. While his dying speech is well delivered, it leads to an unsatisfying ending in this version, because his rejection of the possibility of a new life away from the coercive community remains insufficiently explained. And Hester’s assertion to Pearl at the last moment that Dimmesdale has fulfilled his promise to stand with his family in the public square further confuses the issue. It seems evident that Miner and his team were uncomfortable with Dimmesdale’s position within their larger scheme. If the representatives of the persecuting society were to be demonized, what could be the status of their victim when he rejects the obvious solution, escape, in favor of a death that seems to validate the moral necessity of public confession? His earlier monologues walk a fine line between self-loathing as a sinner and pity of himself as a victim of Chillingworth’s torture. And in Dimmesdale’s last voiceover monologue, presented in an invented scene in which he receives a letter from Hester summoning him to the forest interview, Miner presents Dimmesdale’s continued passion for her more explicitly than Hawthorne ever does. So the impact of the climactic scene is hampered by an ambivalence toward his decision. He has internalized the values of his society and become his own persecutor, thus blurring the line between victim (the individual of conscience) and victimizer (the zealous public inquisitor) that the production constructs. The result is an ambivalent last scaffold scene that does not resemble the first in clarity of ideological purpose.

April 3rd, 1950 was a special day for Worthington Miner. The producer of numerous CBS programs and a true pioneer of television appeared that day on one of his
own programs, *Studio One*. The hour began, atypically, with Miner addressing the viewing audience directly, first to introduce the evening’s drama, *The Scarlet Letter*, but also to introduce the Hawthorne scholar Mark Van Doren as well as the novelist’s granddaughter, Hildegard. Van Doren presents the nervous elderly woman with a plaque commemorating the centenary of *The Scarlet Letter*’s publication. The simple ceremony is a curious and quaint moment in TV history, but it takes on a special significance when read in concert with the production that follows it. The ceremony tutors the unlettered TV viewer in the pedigree of the drama about to unfold. It *authorizes* the story, signaling its status in the culture as the greatest novel of, as Van Doren reminds us, “one of America’s greatest novelists.” The viewer is assured of the story’s cultural currency, and its acceptance by the culture’s arbiters. It also asserts the novel's historicity—this is a story of *those people then*. This adaptation is, in many ways, the most faithful to the novel of any under consideration in this study. It restores Dimmesdale’s story to its proper balance, as an equal to Hester’s both in terms of length and emotional impact, and it reveals a more complex picture of their psychological states through extensive voice-over monologues. What this indicates is not so much the reverence for Hawthorne’s novel that the ceremony bespeaks, as the overwhelming appropriateness of the story to the producer’s needs. Miner’s *The Scarlet Letter* is an exploration of the poisoning of a community by righteous hysteria, and its effects on the individual dissenter. Especially in the first scaffold scene but indeed throughout, it anatomizes the social and personal consequences of public persecution. The plaque ceremony, in a sense, offers a ‘cover’ to deflect criticism from what is a clear statement of opposition to the political terrorism of *us now*, the Red Scare era, and its social effects, especially on women. Despite a
mishandling of Dimmesdale’s psychology that results in an ambivalent ending, there is no doubt that Miner is arguing for the individual’s right to resist the will of the public and act in accord with his or her conscience. Representatives of the community are simple caricatures of evil or folly, while Hester and Dimmesdale are delineated with psychological complexity and sympathy. Playing up the story’s historicity and its cultural status may have helped this production stay under the radar of CBS and Westinghouse. And by appearing personally, Miner shoulders responsibility for its appearance—and gives responsibility for its content to American high culture.

Although NBC’s 1954 production of *The Scarlet Letter* for Kraft Television Theater is in many ways very different from Miner’s, both begin the same way: with an invocation of the novel’s status. Specifically, this version features a first shot of a closed book, over which the announcer pronounces what follows to be an adaptation of “the greatest book ever written in the Western Hemisphere.” But from this moment, nothing will be familiar to a viewer of the earlier program. The Kraft production appropriates the novel’s status, but then attempts to evade its themes and even invert the logic of its characters in order to obscure its message.

The first scene presents the audience with a blonde Hester (Kim Stanley) before the magistrates, being reprimanded not on the scaffold but in the relatively benign environment of an office. Hester is the only blonde in town—the Kraft team seems to be exploiting the well-worn American literary convention equating blonde hair with goodness and dark hair with evil or sinfulness in women. While Hester was a brunette for Hawthorne, this interpretation casts her as a sinless and simplified waif, more like Hawthorne’s Hilda (of *The Marble Faun*) or Priscilla (of *The Blithedale Romance*) than
Hester. While the long table of judges seen here would be familiar to a viewer of the HUAC hearings on ABC or most recently the Army-McCarthy hearings, this inquisition pales in comparison and has no grand inquisitor at its center. But the stakes are high—the judges have just heard a speech in her defense from Dimmesdale, which has apparently saved her from immediate execution. But since that punishment is raised only after we are assured she will not suffer it, the audience never faces the possibility and there is no suspense that could generate sympathy for Hester and antipathy toward the judges. Kim Stanley’s Hester does inspire pathos, but of a very different sort than Mary Sinclair. Without a voice-over, we have only her outward show by which to judge her, and she appears shaky and insubstantial. She speaks softly and rarely meets the eyes of her accusers. It is an unseen mob that hollers for her death at this point. She will be brought before them in the next scene, but she could never be pilloried. While it was a necessary balance for Sinclair’s innate sense of superiority and will, it would be overkill here. To Stanley’s general look of weakness is added a much softer appearance than Sinclair’s: her blonde hair falls around her face rather than being pulled back, and she is fleshy rather than strong boned. While Mary Sinclair’s Hester never wept, Stanley’s never seems to stop. Kim Stanley was of the first class of The Actor’s Studio, and her “method” performance emphasizes passivity and a stillness that inspires pity, but not admiration. In 1954 her stardom, reached with her film debut in *The Goddess* in 1958, was still ahead of her, but she was well known in New York as a result of her connection with the Studio and its more famous students. Today she is remembered for suffering a debilitating mental breakdown in the Sixties and disappearing from the public eye. The fragility that may have hampered her life is obvious in the way she plays Hester.
The magistrate reminds Hester, over the shouting of the unseen crowd, “Thou art spared the gallows tree, which thou hast deserved, under our law,” and pleads with her to “match unto our leniency a measure of truth—who is the man?” But when she bleats out a refusal, little more is made of the matter. She is not badgered. The men of iron in this production are surprisingly pliant. A second refusal to name the father is highlighted more dramatically in the next scene, in which Dimmesdale implores her before the crowd. The music rises as she again refuses. Now seen, the crowd is boisterous, and as usual, the women are the more zealous and vociferous of its constituents. But unlike in Miner’s version (and Hawthorne’s), it is here a man who argues for charity and is shouted down by the gossips. In the previous scene, an unseen woman shouted that Hester should be handed over to the women for judgment and an unnamed punishment. The women of Kraft’s production are constructed as explicitly less sympathetic to Hester than the men.

Hester does have one female ally, however: Mistress Hibbins. But her assistance is of questionable benefit in the beginning. Hibbins, appearing here for the first time in her original capacity as a lunatic witch, gives her a gift on the scaffold “from the dark man of the forest.” Hester thanks her fearfully. We later learn that baby Pearl has been placed in the old woman’s care, as Hester is not competent to care for her while incarcerated, due to her ill health. Later in the production (years later, as Pearl is now a child), Mistress Hibbins arrives to deliver seamstress work for Hester (she procures work for her to help her survive) and a gift of an Indian bracelet for Pearl. Pearl runs to her with pleasure—she is obviously an intimate of the small family. The appropriately named Margaret Wycherley plays Hibbins as a mostly benign old lady who acts as Hester’s advocate and advisor. But when Hester asks why she is so kind, Hibbins is
frank. Her friendship is a favor to “a friend in common...the old man of the forest.” She then leaves Hester to protest impotently and weakly at the door, “But I made no bargain with the Devil!” (music swells). Hibbins is an invaluable help to Hester. Stanley’s Hester could never plant corn by herself as Sinclair’s does, and one doubts whether she could manage her child and her business alone. Hibbins seems a more capable mother to Pearl than Hester, who cannot care for her in the beginning due to her mental state, and even years later must admit that she does not know whether her child loves God, and knows “not what to do” about Pearl in general. But Hibbins’s devotion is not motherly care or even sympathy, but devotion to her dark master. The possibility of female support is a sham.

Compared to Mary Sinclair’s, Kim Stanley’s Hester has a relatively easy job in mothering her Pearl. The Kraft Pearl’s behavior is far from that of 1950’s feisty pre-pubescent, or Hawthorne’s imp. This Pearl is as soft and passive as her mother. Rather than being ostracized and tormented by the other children (and scornful of them), she is their plaything. It is the Puritan children who play at witchcraft and brand her with a mock “A,” not Pearl herself. And she accepts their treatment unquestioningly. Pearl is in need of protection, and is in a sense mothered by the community, as the governor himself has promised to punish any who bother her. The government cares! Even Chillingworth feels a tenderness for her in the custody scene. And while she (calmly, not spitefully) asserts that she was picked from a rosebush when Chillingworth asks her who made her, she willingly recants and sweetly delivers the correct answer immediately. Again, as in 1950, the relationship between mother and daughter is purged of antagonism. This Hester would not survive an unkind word from her daughter, let alone viciousness.
Roger Chillingworth is, like Hibbins, a docile, grandparently figure with a hidden agenda. At a far remove from Miner’s icy, effete doctor, this Chillingworth is more emotional and even tender in his early dealings with Hester (although he does share with his predecessor an upper-class accent). Kim Stanley’s Hester does not require a strong, evil counter to her character as Mary Sinclair does—such an antagonist as would match Sinclair would overwhelm the whimpering Stanley. While in Miner’s version the two men in Hester’s life are defined by their opposition to her dynamically (fire vs. ice, energy vs. its lack), here all the principal characters are alike in their softness.

Chillingworth enters the jail to tend to Hester’s medical needs during her breakdown. He immediately distinguishes himself from the community and presents himself as a possible ally when he calls the Puritans “godly barbarians” for imprisoning her. There is a tenderness in his care of Hester that appears to be reciprocated. He explains that he has been making his way to her since his ship landed too far south; he holds her hand gently as she repeats, “I have wronged thee,” and concedes heartfeltly that they have wronged each other. Both agree that their marriage was once a blessing—marriage is not on trial in 1954. Chillingworth seems genuinely concerned for Hester’s welfare. His questioning regarding her lover’s identity betrays no desperation, and his vow to solve the mystery is distinctly un-menacing. Instead of stoically warning him not to poison her, she tearfully asks only “Is this death?” when he offers her the cup. She surrenders to him completely and unreservedly (and very apologetically) and easily acquiesces to his request that she keep his identity secret.

Chillingworth only reveals his true nature after the custody scene. Even at its start he is friendly, expressing sympathy over the upset that Pearl’s inquisition by the “godly
barbarians” has caused her. It is clear that their cause, public order, is not his. After Dimmesdale defends Hester’s right to custody, Chillingworth smiles somewhat less benignly and remarks to himself, “How he must love little children.” His joy in discovery is obvious. His true purpose is soon made explicit. When he discovers Dimmesdale’s secret “A” he says, solemnly, “Great is guilt and great is fear.” Then looking up, he asks, “Oh Master, have I not done well?” (music swells). Like Hibbins, Chillingworth is explicitly in the service of Satan. But there is little sense of what he has done in that service, since we have seen him only once administer medicine to the Reverend (following his collapse at the end of the custody scene) and briefly discourse with him about the nature of guilt.

It is only in the next scene, an exchange with Hester, that we learn that Chillingworth has lived with Dimmesdale for a year or more. Hester comes to her former husband “to plead for three human souls.” He easily manipulates her with his show of gentle reasonableness, asking her again if he was a good husband, to which she readily assents. Having already demonstrated that she is no match for his mental strength, Hester is incapable of dissuading him from his purpose. He does not, however, reveal to her his true purpose, the service of Satan, but rather explains that the “new love” he has “embraced” is his research into the connection between the flesh and the spirit. He is merely engaged in the pursuit of truth. The issue of whether the single-minded pursuit of truth in another person is corrupt (which could reflect on McCarthyism) is never raised, because we know his true ambition.

Pastor Dimmesdale, as played by Leslie Nielson, is a much less tortured soul than his immediate predecessor. Under the care of Chillingworth, he goes through a period of
feverish ravings identical to Hester’s in the jail, complete with the identical sleepy refrain, “Roses, roses all around me.” Chillingworth diagnoses him with a “seizure of the heart” after his collapse during the custody scene. But despite his affliction, this Dimmesdale is stronger, and certainly less gothic than Miner’s. The romantic nature of his relationship with Hester is enhanced in the second scaffold scene and the forest interview, since he is strong enough to shoulder the burdens of the conventional romantic hero, strong-willed to the end.

The second scaffold scene, Dimmesdale’s night vigil, is curious because it fulfills none of that scene’s normal functions. There is no red light in the sky, no sense of fear and exposure because there is no Wilson to pass by (he is eliminated from the story), and Chillingworth does not arrive to draw him back into his clutches. Satan’s other emissary, Hibbins, does observe, however. Instead the scene is used as a straight-forwardly romantic exchange between Dimmesdale and Hester. Pearl is not with her, so this is not a venue for his presentation of his family to God as an electrified human chain.

Dimmesdale asks Hester to join him on the scaffold, but she reminds him that they “must not be seen together.” When he acknowledges this but qualifies it with “Not yet,” she counters, “Never! Why thinkest thou I have kept the secret so long?” He says he thinks he knows, and she replies, “Yes, because I love thee.” The scene establishes them as a romantic pair and lets those viewers in on the secret who had not guessed it yet.

The forest meeting is a set-up by the obliging Mistress Hibbins. Once again, Pearl’s role is reduced here—she is not part of the meeting, but only stumbles on the discarded letter while playing in the woods later. She is terrified by the sight of the letter without its owner, and runs off with it, screaming for her mother. But this set-up is left to
dangle, as Pearl's deep connection to the A is unexplored, since it is unresolvable in the
context of this interpretation. Dimmesdale begins the interview by presenting Hester with
a flower that apparently holds some sentimental value, and asks her if she remembers.
This is a reversal of their usual roles. He is now the keeper of their romantic past and
instigator of its renewal. It is, further, Dimmesdale who first asks Hester if she has found
peace. He does not blame her for her deceit regarding Chillingworth, and is quick to
identify his sin as greater than theirs. Hester suggests the escape plan, urging him to
"make a banner of our guilt and put an end to fear." She can have no real fear of earthly
punishment, as her society is represented as essentially benign. She assures him that they
will take Pearl away "and she will learn to love thee, as I have loved thee every moment
of every hour all these years," placing the harmonious image of the nuclear family at the
center of her vision of the future. Her love strengthens him visibly. She comments that
his spirit has returned, and he credits her, acknowledging, "Aye, it draws new strength
from thy lips as it once did, and as it shall again." She gives strength to her partner, but
cannot use it herself. Dimmesdale's control of Hester, the plan, and the scene becomes
total from this point. He excitedly asks her when the Spaniard will sail, and announces
that his final sermon "will be the greatest sermon of my life. I'll speak on freedom... On
freedom!" He kisses Hester and rips off her badge, leading her out of the shot with
"Come, my love!" (music swells).

Dimmesdale is very much in control from this point until the end. When Hester
comes to him with the devastating news that their escape plan has been foiled, and
impotently asks "What are we to do?," he is calm and manfully resolved. But the terms
of his resolution defy the logic of his character. He says, "I know now what's to be done.
This running away, this flight to the Indies, it was never the answer. Not to a guilt like mine. Farewell, Hester.” Panicked, she asks, “Where are you going?” Like a hero, he responds, “To the people. To the scaffold. To the Throne of Grace.” Music swells. As he gains strength, she progressively loses what little she had and begins to unravel, but she compliantly ascends the scaffold steps. He claims her arm sustains him, but it appears the opposite. Again, Pearl's role is minimized here—this is the story of a couple, not a family. As Dimmesdale dies, Hester lets loose an anguished cry after the fade to black.

Dimmesdale's decision can only leave the audience mystified. Without the sense of his torture in the refocused night vigil scene, or much indication of his suffering during the forest interview, his renunciation of the doctrine of freedom and reassumption of Puritan values are as surprising as his sudden death. The assurance of Hester's love seemed to restore him to health. And with his attitude of manly defiance, the revelation that Chillingworth has foiled their plan seems an inadequate reason to abandon his dream of a free life. When he explains to Hester why he has decided to abandon his speech on freedom, he claims he struggled with the decision the previous night. But since we are given no insight into this process, and are in fact only ever shown Dimmesdale the ardent lover and rebel, his decision to suddenly abandon his doctrine of liberty and instead exemplify God's judgment of a sinner is totally outside the logic of the character.

The victims and the persecutors in Kraft's *Scarlet Letter* are more difficult to identify than in its predecessor. The only true villain, Chillingworth, is a gentle man whom everyone acknowledges was kindly. Satan has caught him, as He has caught Mistress Hibbins. But society is not to blame for that. Nor is it to blame for Hester's
misery. While the government has imposed its will on Hester according to the law and the pressure of the (female) mob, it has not done so without mercy. It even extends protection to Pearl! And the government is not responsible for the mean-spiritedness of its women and children—it has acted disinterestedly. Since the state is more a gentle caretaker than a repressive regime of iron men, its opponent need not be the iron-willed superfemale of Miner's production. She is sympathetic in that she is pitiable, but she is not truly at war with her society, and if she were she would be easily defeated. Chillingworth manipulates her like a toy, and Dimmesdale controls her destiny and her energy.

By 1954, as we shall see, America was weary of suspicion and secrets. A critique of mass-hysteria and the corrupting nature of public power was never so needed as then, as McCarthy would soon be censured by the Senate. But it was never less wanted than then—America could see the results of these social evils on ABC, it didn't need to see them on Kraft Theater. The Kraft production prefers to de-emphasize the messages of the novel, in favor of a melodrama about Satan working to poison individuals, and a romance that reveals American's new preoccupation with private morality, not public justice. This is the story of the struggle between God and the Devil for one man's heart, not between freedom and tyranny in a society.

The Red Scare coincided with the birth of television in the United States, so it is hardly surprising that they would have a strong impact on one another. The first House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings into Communist infiltration of the media, in 1947, resulted in the conviction of the famous Hollywood Ten. The publication of Red Channels, a supposed listing of all Communists in the entertainment industry,
occurred a month before the Korean War broke out and "Line of Duty," the first story to engage with the Red Menace, appeared on NBC's Cameo Theater. HUAC resumed in 1951 after a four-year hiatus, now under the direction of Joe McCarthy. It helped create the hysteria that inspired several very polemical anti-Communist movies, the most successful of which was My Son John (1952). John is an all-American boy who becomes ensnared in Communism at college, and is later gunned down gangland-style when he switches sides. But 1952 is also the year of High Noon, in which a sheriff (Gary Cooper) is abandoned by the community he has sworn to protect and is forced to face his enemy alone. It was, for many, a searing indictment of those in the entertainment industry who sold out their friends and cooperated with HUAC to ensure the continuation of their own careers. But aside from High Noon, rebellion against HUAC in dramatic form was rare and extremely dangerous. That would change in 1954, when McCarthy self-destructed by attempting to widen his investigation to focus on the US Army. The Senate condemned him in December of that year. But by this point, a complacent American public had mostly turned the channel, to enjoy the peace and prosperity of the Eisenhower domestic idyll.

The two versions of The Scarlet Letter are compellingly placed within this timeline. Miner's production, in April of 1950, occurs at a point when HUAC was temporarily suspended, but it seems haunted by the memory of public inquisition. Perhaps this is because even during this pre-McCarthy era (he gave his first major speech in February), the paranoia of the Red Scare was beginning to impact the television industry directly. Red Channels had just been published. Sponsors were extremely nervous. As Franklin Schaffner, who directed this production for Miner, remembers,
[i]t was assumed that before you commissioned a screenplay, you would submit a synopsis to the [advertising] agency. It was standard practice to make the synopsis look as acceptable to them as you could. Then, once you got the okay on the synopsis, you’d go back to what the script’s original intent was. Later, when you submitted the script, you hoped that while reading it they weren’t as alert as they might be. (Skutch 159)

But it was not only reputation-cautious sponsors who fueled the Red Scare in television. In 1950, CBS made a remarkable move. Schaffner explains, “The blacklist functioned for the most part while I was doing Studio One. It was during this time that CBS circulated that now-famous document they wanted everybody on staff to sign, saying you were a ‘loyal’ American, or whatever the phrasing” (175). The CBS loyalty oath was an unprecedented step for a private corporation (though government employees had been signing one for years.) The employees were asked, among other things, if they had ever belonged to the Communist Party, and “the network fired anyone who did not cooperate in the completion of this questionnaire or did not resign” (Whitfield 167). CBS’s hysteria was driven by the fear that it might be compromised. Martin Ritt, a blacklisted director, recalls, “The Block Drug Company was producing my show. They knew about the accusation and didn’t care! It was CBS that insisted I be fired! They were known as the liberal network, consequently, they were even more frightened of the communists” (Skutch 179).

Dramatic anthologies were a particular focus for concern. Red Channels (1950) asserted that “dramatic programs are occasionally used for Communist propaganda purposes... Several commercially sponsored dramatic series are used as sounding boards, particularly with reference to current issues on which the party is critically interested”
(qtd. in Boddy 99) such as civil rights. But such attempts to use television were, despite what the conservative authors thought, very rare in 1950:

[s]ince dissent seemed to slide so uncomfortably close to disloyalty, since controversy has become a code word for trouble (rather than an inevitable feature of democratic dialogue), official views were rarely and insufficiently challenged on television. When disagreements were presented, the framework of analysis was so narrowly circumscribed that television became a custodian of the cultural Cold War. (Whitfield 155)

Anthology programming, often drawn from Broadway, might not always have been as narrowly conservative as spy series or Westerns, but neither was it as propagandistic.

The spy series was among the most popular genres of the Fifties, with titles such as Passport to Danger and Dangerous Assignment (both 1951) and I Led Three Lives (1953). The popularity of feature films like I Was a Communist for the FBI (1951) trickled down so that “whether in feature films, live dramas, or half-hour anthologies, the political clash between Communism and anti-Communism was incorporated into America’s electronic entertainment” (MacDonald 130). But while America rooted for the hero in his quest to expose and foil Communist plots, little attention was paid to what society does with the dissenter after capture (except of course on the news, which carried the Rosenberg and Hiss trials). The erosion of freedoms was largely ignored by television, even though, and partly because, it was happening within the studio buildings themselves.

But there are occasional exceptions, among which Miner’s Scarlet Letter can be counted. Director Franklin Schaffner, who has called the blacklist “an enormously obscene and inhibitive instrument” (Skutch 175), found an enthusiastic fellow dissenter
in Worthington Miner, who tirelessly spoke out against what he called its “cruel and senseless character assassinations” (Schaffner 209). Miner hired people listed in Red Channels (209) and used his almost unassailable position as the producer of CBS’s most popular shows (Studio One and The Goldbergs) to challenge the silence. While Studio One’s adaptation stands as a remarkable achievement, most remarkable for having been achieved in that climate, perhaps Miner’s most daring rebellion is remembered as a moment from The Goldbergs in 1952. Occurring after Phillip Loeb (who played the husband) had been blacklisted and forced to resign, this episode features a heated exchange between two of the family’s uncles. Uncle Berish brings his goldfish when he comes to visit his niece, and introduces them as “Schopenhauer, Shakespeare, and Julius Caesar. I used to have Karl Marx, but I had to give him away.” Uncle David later attempts to silence Berish’s intellectual ramblings, shouting, “Don’t have opinions!,” to which Berish responds “Where am I? America, USA. Free speech is free opinions, don’t take my opinions away from me.” Horace Newcomb, who describes this episode in an article on the show, asserts “I do not cite this episode as an example of the sort of ideological debate occurring regularly in this or other television programs. In fact, I cite it because of its distinction, because in 1952 it might have stood out” (116). I am making a similar argument for Miner’s earlier cry in the dark, the 1950 adaptation of The Scarlet Letter. It stands out as a challenge to its viewers and the industry that produced it, and would produce the 1954 version, which tries so desperately not to stand out.

While Miner's Scarlet Letter aired two months after the beginning of Joe McCarthy’s rise at a luncheon club in West Virginia, Kraft Television Theater’s adaptation appeared on NBC two months after his fall, when the results of an
investigation by Edward R. Murrow into McCarthy’s activities premiered on CBS’s See It Now. What is most remarkable about that timing is how little it seems to impact the production. This is rendered slightly less amazing when one examines the changing nature of television in 1954, and how it reflected and promoted the de-politicization of America under Eisenhower, even as the Army-McCarthy hearings raged on over at ABC. Kraft Television Theater dropped out of the top 25 shows for the first time in 1954 (Heldenfels 4). As a response to the dramatic anthologies’ decline, their creators “began to move away from the psychological naturalism championed by defenders of live television drama in favor of melodrama and spectacle” (Boddy 189). This move was largely instigated by the nervous sponsors, who by this time had up to “four people reading scripts on each show” (197) for fear of “being typed as a sponsor that showed mainly studies in abnormalities” (189). The money in television was getting more serious by 1954, as television ownership grew exponentially. And so while prominent TV writer Rod Serling would still argue in 1956 that “TV lends itself most beautifully to presenting a controversy” (qtd. in Boddy 89), his colleague Paddy Cheyefsky complained the year before about sponsors’ concerns limiting the topics that could be investigated dramatically. He lamented, “You cannot write about adultery, abortion, the social values of our times, or almost anything that relates to adult reality… Downbeat type drama is almost as taboo as politically controversial stories” (qtd. in Boddy 100).

Sponsors were completely right in their assessment of the public’s mood. By the mid-Fifties, the viewing public was tired of the politics of paranoia, too bored even to watch one of the most powerful men in America publicly fall from grace. This is amazing, but somehow unsurprising, since “by 1954 the nation had sustained some eight
years of intense witch-hunting. It could not confront and sustain the high pitch of fear indefinitely. Millions of Americans wanted a time to rest, to forget the bomb and the internal subversion. The fatherly general was in the White House; the terror and urgency of the past seemed gone” (Miller 37). Game shows were on the rise, as were soap operas. The Eisenhower era rejected any image of itself on television that did not resemble the Cleavers. The popular mood was reflected and sustained by “a new critical antipathy toward psychological drama in television” (Boddy 190). The reaction against controversy encompassed everything ‘political,’ including social issues. A prominent study revealed that while 28% of films in 1947 (the first year of HUAC) dealt with social and psychological themes, by the 1953-4 season the percentage had dropped to 9.2; the study concluded that as far as its investigation of the entertainment industry was concerned, “the HUAC attack was based less on real concern with a communist threat than on a fear ‘of movies getting serious about social and political problems’” (Christensen 88; see also Douglas T. Miller 319). NBC may have hoped to enhance the dwindling prestige of Kraft Television Theater by presenting “the greatest book ever written in the Western Hemisphere,” but it did not seek to rock the boat. The result is a production that resembles a gun that no one will admit is loaded. A society that refused to be self-critical would never accept an indictment of its own coercive conformity and potential cruelty, so the producers pinned the crime on the one villain everyone could agree on—Satan. The scapegoat is supernatural evil, not the entirely Earth-bound corruption of power and ideological zeal.

Of course, Hester is more than just the representation of individual defiance in a simple morality play about the nature of society—she is a woman, and this makes her
rebellion particularly dangerous in not only 1650, but 1950. The growing self-sufficiency and autonomy women had developed during the Depression (see previous chapter) was tested even more strenuously during World War Two. An even larger number of women became heads of their households, at least temporarily. We have seen how

the Great Depression of the 1930s brought about widespread challenges to traditional gender roles that could have led to a restructured home. The war intensified these challenges and pointed the way toward radical alterations in the institutions of work and family life. Wartime brought thousands of women into the paid labor force when men left to enter the armed forces. After the war, expanding job and educational opportunities, as well as the increasing availability of birth control devices, might well have led young people to delay marriage or not marry at all, and to have fewer children if they did marry. Indeed, many scholars and observers at the time feared that these changes seriously threatened the continuation of the American family. Yet, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that post-war American society experienced a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men. (May Homeward 8-9)

But it was a precarious new arrangement. While the economic prosperity of the post-war years encouraged a domestic order in which a male bread-winner provided adequately for his family without his wife’s assistance, “a Woman’s Bureau study conducted in 1944 indicated that 80 percent of the women who were employed during World War Two wanted to continue [working] after the war ended” (French xvii). Instead they were fired or moved into low-paying ‘pink collar’ jobs, and taught to accept a domestic arrangement that many had never experienced as young people in the Thirties. Many women had mothers who worked during the Depression, and they wanted the independence they had seen employment bring. Michael Rogin asserts that

for a society anxious about maternal power [in the Thirties], World War Two created a crisis. As the Depression deprived
men of confident public lives, women came to play more important nurturing roles. Then the men went off to war. Encouraged to replace their men on the job, women were promised significant work, independence, and even sexual autonomy. Resurgent post-war domestic ideology attacked mothers who abandoned their children to work; it also attacked female sexual aggression. Women were driven back to domestic subordination in response not only to their husbands’ return from the war, but also to their own new-found independence. (6)

Economics and ideology worked hand in hand to ease women back into the home, although more personal, emotional factors like “battle fatigue, the emotional strain of wartime separation and denial, accounted for both sexes eagerly embracing traditional social roles” (Rosen 260) to a certain extent. Any deviation from the new definition of family, breadwinner husband-father and house-bound wife-mother, was suspicious. At its fever-pitch, the anti-feminist backlash after the war pervaded all elements of the media and even the government. A United Nations statement supporting women’s equality in 1948 was signed by 22 American nations, but not the United States (Faludi 52). But the pace of the economy required the labor of women, by the early Fifties, in equal number to their wartime participation. By mid-decade women made up a third of the workforce. Half of America’s married women, the standard-bearers of the family, were working outside the home (Oakley 291). Susan Faludi explains that the fact of society’s reluctant admission of the working woman was vigilantly denied by the myth of the feminine mystique, “and it was precisely women’s unrelenting influx into the job market, not a retreat to the home, that provoked and sustained the anti-feminist furor. It was the reality of the nine-to-five working woman that heightened cultural fantasies of the compliant home body and playmate” (53). The independent woman, an economic necessity,
“presented a direct challenge to traditional constructions of gender and family” (Byars 86). This is reflected in the Miner *Scarlet Letter*, as an implied comparison is drawn between anti-feminism in 1650 and 1950. The implication is that woman’s status has not advanced at all. And the seeds of her rebellion existed even in the heart of the myth of the feminine mystique: the suburbs. Even the woman who had returned home after the war “had changed in her view of her capabilities, her strength and ability to manage alone” (Carolyn Johnston 195), and this led to the ambivalence and malaise that Betty Freidan would chronicle in 1963.

The backlash was led by the experts, doctors and psychologists “whose messages filtered into magazines, movies, and marriage manuals” (Woloch 497). Respected scholars saw far-reaching consequences for female insubordination: “independent-minded women had gotten ‘out of hand’ during the war, Barnard sociologist William Waller decreed. The rise in female autonomy and aggressiveness, scholars and government officials agreed, was causing a rise in juvenile delinquency and divorce rates—and would only lead to a collapse of the family” (52). Among them, none was so prominent as the team of Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, who published the pop-psychological study *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* in 1947. No book of its kind was more often quoted or excerpted. Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak argue that so powerful was this book that one can compare it “to other rallying points of popular culture: to McCarthy...to Sputnik...to the film *Rebel Without a Cause* and the singer Elvis Presley” (153). Farnham and Lundberg diagnosed their society with discontent, and “the way they focused this discontent...helped shape the Fifties. True, people already felt women’s strength and independence were responsible for a lot of
unhappiness. And similarly, they already believed in the Freudian dichotomy of sexual personality. But Modern Woman directly blamed females” (153). Women’s fault was in trying to be like men, defying the natural dichotomous relationship between the sexes.

This relationship figures men as

naturally strong, aggressive, independent, rational, and competitive, so they are the natural breadwinners, protectors, and leaders of society. Women, by contrast, are naturally soft, passive, emotional, obedient, gentle, and maternal, so they are the natural wives, mothers and home-makers. Society functions best [the authors argue] if each sex follows the role nature predetermined for it. If individuals try to deny their natural instincts and perform functions relegated to the opposite sex, they will become unhappy, perhaps even neurotic, their marriages will suffer, and society will suffer. (Oakley 294)

Where men were active, women were passive, or else they became neurotic. Kim Stanley’s Hester is clearly neurotic and crumbles under the stress of social stigma and the lack of a male co-parent. By contrast, Hester as played by Mary Sinclair (and certainly, as Hawthorne conceived her) retains control of herself at every moment, and it is Dimmesdale who crumbles. Modern Woman “employs an almost obsessive repetition of the term ‘neurotic’ to describe all women who struggled to define themselves outside of contented motherhood… Mirroring other messages from the popular culture of the 1950s, it attempted to make independent women suddenly appear sick” (Kaledin 182). Modern Woman was highly influential especially because it was excerpted by so many popular women’s magazines, and thus disseminated so widely. Its originally complex (and deeply flawed) argument was streamlined in the magazines to one clear warning: your health, your marriage, and your country depend on your performance of this role.

Conventional film melodrama, since before Lillian Gish, had supported this
binary relation, active/passive, between the genders. But as we have seen, in the Thirties and especially the Forties (as I will discuss next), this convention was disrupted, the binary reversed. The Hesters of Colleen Moore and particularly Mary Sinclair (existing on the cusp of the reversion to tradition) are examples of the strong, independent, very active heroine that existed for a time. While Miner’s *Scarlet Letter* is certainly melodramatic in style, this reversal of roles in relation to strength (consistent of course with the novel) distinguishes the 1950 adaptation from its 1954 counterpart, with its more traditional distribution of gender characteristics.

Of course, both men and women were confronted with the prescriptions of Farnham and Lundberg, and while many women could not see themselves reflected in the dichotomy, neither could many men. After the humiliations of the Depression, men returned from the war with a renewed sense of their purpose and masculinity, but returned to even stronger women than the ones they had left. In addition, they had to fit themselves into a new, alienating work life that David Reisman chronicles in his classic study of the period, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). The pronouncements of ‘experts’ that he was still the king of his castle was little comfort to the American man. He could not prove his masculinity in the public space “as political and economic centralization made the traditional masculine role unworkable” (Gatlin 9), and now he had to share that space with women. But at home things were hardly more reassuring. There he “ran the risk of being ‘feminized’ or ‘domesticated’ ” (9). While the experts, and as we will see next, the entertainment industry, supported his claim to dominance, perhaps the lowly comic strip best reflected the reality or at least the fears of the American man. Carolyn Johnston argues that in the comic strip “Blondie,” her husband Dagwood “is a caricature of the
husband in the 1950s. However, underlying the humor is a portrayal of female domestic power. Dagwood is kind, dutiful, well-meaning. But he is a bungler, and he completely gives up any claim to authority. Blondie is an efficient, sexy, shrewd boss. She keeps the family running smoothly, while Dagwood is overwhelmed” (202). The changes men could see at work and at home, the entrenchment of female domestic and economic power, may have been obvious when he read his comic strip, but the rest of popular culture continued to argue for the feminine mystique.

In feature films of the Fifties, “the overwhelming message was that fulfillment comes through marriage and children... [F]ailure to conform to these expectations brought unhappiness, isolation, and social ostracism” (206). The confinement of the heroine to the feminine mystique-inspired role was a sharp retrenchment from her position in the Forties. As female audiences went to work and expanded their horizons during the war years, “popular culture in the 1940s expressed and confirmed women’s new experiences... Especially in the early years of the decade, media images of women were expansive, widening the range of acceptable female behavior, providing positive examples of unconventional women, and blurring traditional gender distinctions” (Hartmann 189). Mary Sinclair’s Hester reflects the Forties—she is opinionated and emotionally and financially independent. In some ways this trend was just an extension of the Thirties’ “working girl” like Rosalind Russell in His Girl Friday. But by portraying contemporary situations in which women assumed traditional male roles in the public and private sphere, movies not only provided “models of women in professional careers and examples of women’s patriotic contributions through military service and war work...[but] also communicated the ability of women to get along without men and
sustain one another” (191). Susan M. Hartmann offers the example of David O. Selznick’s *Since You Went Away* (1944), in which Claudette Colbert parents her daughters and supports them as a shipyard welder while her husband is at war (192), but portrayals of single women were even more radical. Joan Crawford was a successful businesswoman in *Mildred Pierce* (1945), Katherine Hepburn was a journalist in *Woman of the Year* (1941) and a lawyer in *Adam’s Rib* (1949), Ginger Rogers was a magazine editor in *Lady in the Dark* (1944) and Ingrid Bergman was a psychiatrist in *Spellbound* (1945). It is important to note that, with the exception of Katherine Hepburn’s characters, these single women “were implicitly criticized for their coldness and ambition, while their fates suggested the incompatibility of professional success with marriage” (201).

But while a woman might not be complete without marriage, she could *survive* without a husband quite capably in wartime films (as Mary Sinclair’s Hester does). In the absence of men, “the cinema for the first time spoke as a priest whose ministrations were sought by millions of movie-going women” (Rosen 205). Wartime heroines emerge from their trials “not as hysterical, embittered martyrs, but as womanly, capable models of human adaptability…A Hollywood screen first” (205). But after the war, when, as Marjorie Rosen charges, “movies regarded everything short of obliging, weak-willed femininity as a contagious social disease,” the independent woman “was massacred” (269). Susan Hartmann can determine “no specific year [that] demarcated a shift from affirmative to hostile imagery of women…yet by the late 1940s, women found significantly fewer screen models for female strength, self-sufficiency, and satisfying experiences beyond domestic and romantic life” (202). As career prospects shrank (temporarily) for American women, their screen counterparts were, like them, sent back to the home, to be
defined by service to a family. But unlike real women, the Hollywood heroine would not emerge from the house in the Fifties. Or if she did, it was at her own peril. While some career woman heroines were implicitly criticized during the war for coldness, as we have seen, criticism was now explicit. Those “who did step outside of their conventional feminine roles were less frequently depicted as positive models but instead carried cautionary, even threatening messages” (189). An unmarried woman, looked upon with suspicion or pity as a neurotic in life, was often loathed and demonized in the films of the Fifties. The Woman Alone, as Marjorie Rosen called her, “came to embody the threat of female emancipation... The Wife, the Mother, and the Daughter—in their many manifestations—became the only truly viable female alternatives in the film melodrama of the 1950s” (Byars 77). Films like All About Eve (1950) “punished ambitious women for their independence, to such an extent that Friedan argued that the career woman had replaced the vamp as the femme fatale of the Fifties; the scarlet letter stood for ambition, not adultery” (Biskind 261). In other cases, she could become literally monstrous and deadly, like Norma Desmond in Sunset Boulevard (1950). But most typically the Woman Alone after the war needed to be reigned in, relieved of her delusions of independence, and “instructed in her proper maternal function” (Leibman 177). And because she had been removed entirely from the public sphere, this education was usually carried out in the private world, and usually involved the single woman’s radical sexuality. In films like Written on the Wind (1956) and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958), “the conflict of the women stems from the difficulty of subjugating and channeling feminine sexuality according to the passive functions which patriarchy has defined for it; that is, heterosexual monogamy and maternity. In this manner, feminine sexuality is always in
excess of the social system which seeks to contain it” (178). And the Fifties saw the return of the ultimate punishment for women who would not be contained. The heroine of *A Place in the Sun* (1951) lives and works alone, “which makes her an inherently sinful woman” (Byars 101). Alice (Shelley Winters) earns death for her failure to remain chaste, and failing that, to remain quiet. The fallen woman has returned to her Victorian roots, thirty years after D. W. Griffiths spared her life.

Of course, the above discussion has centered on melodrama, one of the most popular genres of the Fifties, but not the only one. It had its counterpart in television’s daytime soap operas. While such dramatic fare was aired in the afternoons for a primarily female audience, “evening ‘prime time’ programmes catered to male interests and were filled with male characters. On drama and adventure shows, especially crime programmes and Westerns, women were either victims or supporting players peripheral to the action” (Gatlin 15). Once the dramatic anthologies faded from view, television was populated with evening serials that adopted the male-centered film genres like Westerns, spy thrillers and crime stories. They taught organizational man the myth of his dominance and toughness, just like soap operas taught the feminine mystique. The only real cross-over dramatic shows were the situation comedies, which featured as many women as men, on average, and were viewed by both. Situation comedies taught men how to control the domestic environment in the face of female power. Some, like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*, presented serene patriarchs whose dominance was unchallenged by wives who were paragons of the feminine mystique. By assuming their proper roles, the members of these families ensured their success. Others taught through negative example. Jackie Gleason’s character on *The
*Honeymooners* comes closer to “Blondie” husband Dagwood than most of his TV peers. Beaten down by a dead end job as a bus driver, he returns home to a wife who consistently contests his control of the domestic space, and usually wins. He can only respond with empty threats—he is impotent to change the situation, having ceded his natural control to a wife who is undoubtedly neurotic. Somewhere in the middle of these extremes there is *I Love Lucy*, one of the most popular shows of the Fifties with both male and female viewers. Lucy and Ricky conceded that the path to Nelson-like family bliss was rocky, but as long as husband and wife could sort out their proper roles in the end, stability could be maintained. Lucille Ball “portrayed the tough and intelligent woman as fool, as clown, as a being so mixed up she couldn’t even cheat successfully. In Ricky, one saw the husband able to forgive out of his superior strength… [S]uch shows simply disarmed the potential of the strong woman” (Douglas T. Miller 366). Ultimately, the woman was eliminated from the family entirely with *My Three Sons*. Women were seen less and less on prime-time by the mid-Fifties, and those who were presented were cardboard figures, without the psychological complexity of the male hero. The complex woman would not appear again on prime-time until the late Sixties, and the Woman Alone would have to wait even longer.

We have seen how the Cold War and the television revolution developed together and became mutually supportive. The doctrine of the feminine mystique, already seen to influence television, was itself entangled in that same mutually supportive relationship with the Cold War. That interaction quickly revealed itself as “the feminine mystique came to dominate American culture and society at the same time that the Cold War took over politics. Cold War cinema emerged from that conjunction” (Rogin 6). Molly
Haskell argues that the cinematic zeitgeist was in equal measure a product of the paranoia of the postwar anti-Communist furor, and, from the standpoint of sexual politics, the influx of women into the job market (and their obvious success). The latter surely contributed to that sense of instability, of dis-ease and even impotence that lurked beneath the surface and charged the atmosphere with a tension not entirely accounted for by plot. (194)

Films centered around foreign intrigue had always featured the femme fatale, but now she was a part of a highly organized plot to seduce the hero, with a combination of ideology and sex, away from mother and country. Sexuality, in the single woman, becomes identified with political subversion. The femme fatale in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) is more dangerous than the atomic spies, and in *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), "the party sends a seductive schoolteacher to spy on [the hero] Cvetic, whose son is in her class. Cvetic rejects the schoolteacher's advances in their first private encounter. Once she learns to mistrust the Communists and chooses the FBI over the party, she is no longer a threat to him... When she leaves the party she leaves her sexuality behind" (Rogin 12-13). Even *My Son John* features such a femme fatale, John's contact in the city whose apartment his mother investigates after she finds a mysterious key amongst his things. She has led him to ruin and eventual death. Most important, in both these last cases she is allied with Communism and sexuality against the family and America. Once the schoolteacher rejects Communism, she becomes sexually inert. John's flight from the family and into Communism is figured as a rejection of his mother in favor of the sexualized female party member. This important opposition was fundamental to the interaction of the feminine mystique and the Red Scare both in the media and popular thought.
The association of American democracy with a traditional family structure was made most explicit in the Nixon-Khruschev ‘Kitchen Debate’ of 1959. Khruschev could not understand the desirability of a lifestyle for women that Nixon described as achievable through consumer goods, because in his society women were not so confined to a domestic role. The rejection of that role in America gradually became an act tantamount to treason. In the literature of the day, “anti-communism became a means to control sexuality. Government officials equated sexual non-conformity, particularly homosexuality, with political subversion. Women were told that communist ideology, under the guide of feminism, was advocating the destruction of the family” (Gatlin 8). Of course, chief among the experts to associate communism with an attack on the family were Farnham and Lundberg. They report, in the opening chapter of Modern Woman, that the ‘sexual revolution’ of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “in Europe, excluding England and Scandinavia...has been virtually snuffed out although vast organizational efforts are currently being made by the Communists and their friends to revive it (outside Russia) for divisive purposes” (6). With the end of World War Two producing both a new suspicion of foreign threats and women, “Cold War tensions reinforced the heavily gendered themes of the experts. Some claimed the family must stay strong for the battle against Communism. FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover praised homemakers and mothers in 1956 for the unique role they played in fighting ‘the twin enemies—crime and Communism.’ Sexuality must be contained, discipline enforced” (Rosalind Rosenberg 152).

Big business in America saw female emancipation and Communism as a dual threat to the American ideal of prosperous family life that was fundamental to the
expanding economy. The builder of the first planned suburb, Levittown, is famous for asserting that “no man who owns his own house and lot [and thus has a family] can be a Communist. He has too much to do” (qtd. in Marling 253). But the double threat of feminism and socialism was more directly linked, according to Elaine Taylor May, than just a potential for distraction from the business of prosperity. Women had to be contained by the traditional patriarchal structures advocated by the feminine mystique because their sexuality, unrestrained, could lead directly to Communism. May quotes a wartime textbook that warns,

the greater social freedom of women has more or less led
to a greater degree of sexual laxity, a freedom which strikes
at the heart of family stability… When women work, earn,
and spend as much as men do, they are going to ask for equal
rights with men. But the right to behave like a man [means]
also the right to misbehave as he does. The decay of
established moralities [comes] about as a by-product
(qtd. in May Homeward 69)

The nation had to be on moral alert, as Hoover seemed to imply, because it is America’s morality, the way it contains sexuality, that is its strongest bulwark against Communism. Only a patriarchal ideological structure, rigidly enforced, can protect a capitalist economic structure. They are mutually dependent—to subvert one is to destroy the other. So it was not, according to this reasoning, the power of woman’s infiltration into the job market and disinclination to marry and move to the suburbs that threatened America’s stability, but the power of her sexuality. The popular culture fed this anxiety, so that “from the Senate to the FBI, from the anti-Communists in Hollywood to Mickey Spillane, moral weakness was associated with sexual degeneracy, which allegedly led to Communism. To avoid dire consequences, men as well as women had to contain their
sexuality in marriage where masculine men would be in control with sexually submissive, competent homemakers at their side” (99). The Red Scare can be seen from this perspective as almost completely a ‘red herring’ used to control the population through fear. But what did the Red-baiters truly fear? Anti-Communism served the new focus on the family, which supported economic development and the preservation of the social status quo. It urged men to build their families as bulwarks against the subversion of American values more than the penetration of its borders.

It is no wonder that Arthur Miller saw the Puritan past all around him in early Fifties America, when he wrote The Crucible. But the psychology that inspired the witch hunts he uses as an analogy for the Red Scare is also fundamental to The Scarlet Letter. Hester Prynne’s independence, defiance of traditional authority, and self-sufficiency are a challenge to her deeply insecure community. She represents the contamination of new ideas, which is why the community fears her. It is not that she has broken the law by committing adultery, but that she will not bend her will to the magistrates in telling them the name of the father. She demonstrates to them and the whole community (publicly, to the magistrates’ horror) the limits of public power. In the words of Miner’s Hester, “Crush my bones in the stocks... You cannot make me speak his name.” Her sexuality, embodied in Pearl, is only the most public manifestation of her radicalism. They use it as a scapegoat, when what they truly fear is her dissent. While the ‘experts’ three hundred years later were insistent on the connection between uncontained female sexuality and the overthrow of society, it was the potential for the subversion of an entire ideology that they saw in any subversion of the feminine mystique. Dissent in any form was intolerable in the insecure Fifties. Political dissent was punished by blacklisting, total
social and professional excommunication, not unlike that symbolized by a badge of a
different color. Sexual radicalism was contained by similar threats. Female
independence in the real world was punished by unfair pay scales and a new letter, N for
neurotic, while in the movies and on TV it was simply erased.

Miner’s 1950 adaptation confronts this issue directly. His Hester is a renegade
who embodies all the strength and independence of a wartime heroine and is equally
sympathetic and noble. She threatens the authorities, and will not bend to their will, even
in the pillory. But the difference between Miner’s triumph and Kraft’s failure cannot be
attributed solely to one producer’s defiance and another’s acquiescence. Although they
are separated by only four years, the two programs speak, in important ways, to different
Americas. It is common in historical scholarship on the Fifties to divide the decade into 3
distinct periods. Oakley calls them “The Age of Fear and Suspicion” (1950-2), “The
Good Years” (1953-6), and “Trouble in God’s Country” (1957-61). Brandon French uses
the same divisions in her book on the films of the period. She argues that in 1950-1952
one can still find evidence of women who “openly assert their equality, even their
superiority, in relation to the men” (xxii) of the films. But they are seldom rewarded with
marriage and end unhappily (as in Sunset Boulevard, All About Eve). This is the
transitional phase from the Forties to the true Fifties, which begin in 1953. French asserts
that “in films made from 1953 to 1956, the most politically reactionary and socially
conformist phase of the Fifties, women’s unhappiness is treated not as a measure of
enforced inequality or relegation to an oppressed role, but of loneliness and sexual
starvation” (xxii) caused by a failure to accept their domestic destiny (From Here to
Eternity, All That Heaven Allows). By this point, the psychologically complex era of the
dramatic anthology was almost over and the most famous of the few women on TV was Lucy. And so Hester becomes neurotic, and the authorities who oppose her in the 1954 Kraft production are well-meaning (unless possessed by the Devil), and why not, when she does not challenge their power? She is neither independent nor self-sufficient; she can hardly stand upright, much less raise a child unaided. She embodies not the spirit of individual dissent but the feminine mystique: soft, passive, obedient. What the iron men of New England could never achieve was finally accomplished by Eisenhower and Ozzie Nelson.
Chapter Five—“What Does it Mean to be a Woman?”: The Scarlet Letter in The Seventies

In the last chapter, I examined two adaptations that emerged from the same location, New York in the early years of television, but from different ideological climates (although separated by only four years). While the 1950s were hardly flush times for progressive gender politics, the 1970s were. The decade that expanded and entrenched the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and witnessed a profound redefinition of women’s roles in the public and private spheres of American life also saw two new versions of The Scarlet Letter. These two adaptations emerged from very different contexts and reflected different aims. In fact, they represent the furthest reaches of the spectrum of adaptations under study herein, but they are also the two, arguably, in which gender politics are the least compromised. Wim Wenders produced Der Scharlachrote Buchstabe in 1972 for German feature distribution. It was not seen in America until 1978, the year before PBS’s four-hour miniseries version. On the surface, these two Scarlet Letters could hardly be more different—one is an impressionistic musing on the theme of state-enforced patriarchal oppression by an art house auteur, the other an earnest dramatization of the book made primarily as an educational vehicle and supervised by a team of historians. Significantly, neither was made in Hollywood. The mainstream entertainment industry chose not to respond to this sexual revolution. But both adaptations, in their disparate ways, try to connect with their generation’s cultural conversation about gender with a radical vision never before seen in adaptations of Hawthorne’s novel.

Wim Wenders, perhaps because he is not American, was not intimidated by the
cultural status of the novel, and “kicked it around,” in Neil Sinyard’s phrasing, freely (117). As Rita Gollin reported to the Nathaniel Hawthorne Society in a review in its journal,

even an abbreviated list of what Wenders omitted is astounding. There are no scaffold scenes, no midnight meteor, no forest meeting, no removal of Hester’s cap or her ‘A,’ and no claim that “What we did had a consecration of its own.” Chillingworth does not die, Hester does not return to America, there is no gravestone, no probing of psychological motives, no entry into Hester’s mind or Dimmesdale’s. (21)

This is only a preliminary list of the film’s deviations from the novel, and Gollin’s comments regarding the psychological complexity of the principal characters is questionable, as I will show. And yet while Wenders presents a very different Scarlet Letter from Hawthorne’s on the surface, critics have almost unanimously agreed that the filmmaker does capture the spirit of the novel—a claim that has been made for no other adaptation before or since, with the exception of one directed by another foreign observer of the American scene, Victor Sjostrom. Kathe Geist asserts that the film “reflects Hawthorne in spirit if not in detail” (32), and Bruce Daniels argues that “Wenders’s film captures the essence of Hawthorne’s classic as no other movie has” (43, see also Dunne “Ninety” 33). On what could these remarkable claims rest regarding an adaptation in which Dimmesdale is actually murdered?

To start, Wenders, shooting on the Spanish coast, effectively uses the landscape to symbolically represent Hester’s situation. As the movie opens, Pearl is already seven years old, and she and Hester (Senta Berger) live on a rocky, isolated island encircled by rough waters and guarded by a sentry. She is summoned to town (something that
apparently happens yearly as a sort of ritual), with the expectation that she will reveal to
the magistrates and crowd the name of her child's father. She refuses, and an already-
disintegrating Dimmesdale (Lou Castel) collapses. Into this scene is added a frantic and
disturbed young woman (Yelina Samarina) who calls out for Hester to hide herself,
before being dragged away. Chillingworth also appears at that time, and becomes a close
associate of both Dimmesdale and the town fathers, but his role is greatly reduced here.

While Chillingworth proves less of a source of torture here than in other versions,
the townsfolk are more menacing. Wenders emphasizes how they chide and even assault
Hester, and subject Pearl to cruel taunts. This is not a drama of a woman's connection to
two men, as earlier versions made it, but very firmly that of an individual unfairly
persecuted by her society. This is, of course, consistent with a director who dwells on
"themes of escape...in every film. In particular his characters are trying to break free of
cultural and social restrictions imposed on them by a repressive society" (Daniels 41).

While they represent a repressive social machinery, the magistrates themselves are
primarily an ineffectual and petty bunch, convening a meeting at one point to discuss the
theological question of whether it is wise to allow women, predisposed as they are to err
and lead men into error, to express themselves through singing in church. But one of the
town fathers is menacing—Mister Fuller, who repeatedly urges Hester's execution. In
the end, Fuller becomes governor and strangles Dimmesdale to prevent his embarrassing
the colony. Community control is enforced with deadly force.

Hester's connection to both her husband and her lover are coldly rendered by
Wenders. Since Chillingworth is never more than a pest, his wife is not afraid of him,
nor does she seem particularly shocked when he appears. It is the dispassionate
relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale that is most surprising. Wenders’s Dimmesdale is a puzzling creation—although he clearly feels enough profound guilt to manifest, or self-inflict, a scarlet letter on his chest, he leaves the pulpit, after his confession, weakened but eager to join Hester and escape the colony. His red letter is “clearly visible when Dimmesdale himself bares his chest—in the church, after he delivers a city on the hill sermon and confesses his sin. His obligations concluded, he now feels free to return to England with Hester and Pearl” (Gollin 22). The nature of those perceived obligations, which apparently do not transcend the bounds of the colony, is opaque—since his role in the story is reduced generally, the opportunities for development of his character and the sense of his psychology are, as Gollin has noted, limited.

The viewer’s sense of the love that ostensibly binds the lovers together is underdeveloped. Hester seems to lose patience with Dimmesdale when he explains that he must conduct the sermon before he boards the boat that will take them to freedom. When he collapses at the end of the sermon, others rush to his aid but Hester simply exits the meetinghouse and seemingly never looks back (in an inversion of the novel’s scene and that of previous films). This inability, or unwillingness, to make sense of Hester’s psychology may spring from Wenders’s relationship to his heroine. Kathe Geist reports that in the years following the production Wenders dwelt “on his failure to develop Hester properly” (32), and even admitted that she was “the only lead character in any of my films for whom I did not...have any feelings” (qtd. in Geist 32).

While Hester’s psychology is mysterious and her character remains aloof from the audience, her lover, and her creator, it soon becomes apparent that Harriet Hibbins, the
unstable young woman calling out to her in the first sequence, is the psychological heart of the film and represents a unique attempt to reveal the novel’s perceived feminist radicalism. By expanding and mutating the role of Hawthorne’s witch-figure, “Wenders adds a twentieth-century emphasis to this feminism...Wenders’s Hibbins is a young, attractive, rebellious woman, daughter to the governor. She becomes an alter ego for Hester and is used to show Puritan repression of women—even attractive ones—who dare to challenge their designated roles” (Daniels 44). It is in the development of Hibbins that Geist locates the strong feminist statement attributed to the film (32). While Michael Dunne rightly asserts that “Wenders’s Hester is a young, sexy, independent woman opposed by the old, repressed male authority figures” (“Ninety” 33), it is Hibbins who carries the ideological burden by representing the tortured internal life that Hester’s mask never reveals.

In her first appearance, as described above, she becomes enraged at the community’s voyeuristic display of Hester and urges her to hide—perhaps voicing Hester’s own hidden feelings of shame and exposure. At the end of the film, Hibbins appears at the meetinghouse to hear Dimmesdale’s sermon wearing her own ‘A,’ a bright yellow one, and becomes unruly at his confession and collapse, as Hester exits dispassionately. Hibbins is all that Hester refuses to concede to the magistrates—she is the outlet for the collective rage and pain of women under patriarchy, according to the film’s schema. In her most provocative scene, Hibbins marches, in broad daylight, across the square in her father’s gubernatorial robes and periwig. She ascends the scaffold and sets herself on fire. She is self-destructing under the weight of her society’s prescribed roles, telling her father simply, “I can’t live with you any longer.” Strikingly, she makes
her journey through the square in her bizarre costume and then lights her clothing without anyone even noticing her. That is her plight—she is invisible. When Dimmesdale falls in the same square, all rush to his aid. In the scene immediately following her ascent of the scaffold, Hibbins rambles about the Bible and female biology—specifically combining Jonah’s trials and the (menstrual) cloths she is not permitted to wash. Religion and patriarchy have driven her mad—which, for Wenders, is a perfectly reasonable reaction.

Hibbins is more than a symbol of the repressed feminine Other pushed over the brink—she is also Hester’s ally. She joins Hester in her escape and, along with her slave, contributes to Pearl’s care. Through Hibbins, “Wenders creates opportunities to show at least some form of female solidarity by filming Hester, Hibbins, and Sarah [the slave] together in scenes cut contrastingly against shots of the joyless, sexless, Puritan male elders” (Dunne “Ninety” 33). A feminine Other (and love itself), which the society ultimately represses to the point of madness or escape, is the only thing that could save the society, and it has been driven out (or murdered).

Bruce Daniels has argued that the reason this rather unorthodox rendering of The Scarlet Letter is considered by so many critics to uniquely capture the novel’s essence is that “Hawthorne wrote a feminist novel and Wenders made a feminist movie—both in clear but subtle ways” (43). But the things that make this movie such a powerful feminist statement are, in fact, Wenders’s inventions—his departures from the text—in response to his culture in 1972. Through Wenders’s eyes in 1972, “Hester’s situation takes on gender-inflected counter-cultural resonances” (Dunne “Ninety” 33). Hibbins is refocused to express female rage, “Dimmesdale’s duplicity and weakness are more emphasized
because they are more apparent to a culture that explicitly endorses women’s equality of rights” (Daniels 44), and even Pearl is invested with a particularly contemporary problem: she “is still troubled but she also has less of the devil in her; her unhappiness flows more from a broken home than from her parents’ sin against God” (44). Pearl’s unhappiness thus stems from the social codes that keep her family broken and urge the populace to isolate and persecute her. The sin of Hester and Dimmesdale is unexplored by the film or, except superficially, by the sinners. The only crime committed in Der Scharlachrote Buchstabe is the sin of oppression that drives women to madness (well, that and the murder of Dimmesdale). The murder of Dimmesdale, shocking as it is to Hawthorne purists (and as it would undoubtedly be to the novelist himself), neatly symbolizes what Wenders is doing in this film. Because Wenders does not recognize Hester and Dimmesdale’s act as sin, and neither do they (Hester and Dimmesdale) nor would the audience, Dimmesdale (despite the letter on his chest and his general illness) must believe in the possibility of escape and a happy life with his love. But in order to emphasize the sinister nature of a repressive society, the story must end unhappily. So Wenders solves the problem of the ending by having Dimmesdale, just as he is about to join Hester in a life of freedom, murdered by the governor of the colony, the ultimate embodiment of its principles of oppression and coercion. Wenders’s statement is, in this sense, a pessimistic one, but the open question of Hester’s future and that of the other escaping women reveals the possibility of hope.

While Wenders obviously rearranged the novel’s incidents freely to suit his ideological program, PBS’s production of The Scarlet Letter, aired in 1979, was conceived as a very orthodox dramatization of the novel that would, according to the
producers’ NEH grant application, “represent the novel as faithfully as a drama can represent a work of fiction” (Hauser et al., Proposal 1). In the main, the PBS miniseries, directed by Rick Hauser, was successful in this regard. If Wenders’s adaptation diverges most substantially from the novel, Hauser’s does so the least. The characters, and a voice-over narrator meant to be Hawthorne himself, speak Hawthorne’s lines and play out the events of the novel faithfully. But this concern with textual fidelity does not preclude a subtle reshaping of character and incident aimed at addressing the contemporary cultural conversation surrounding gender of the Women’s Lib era.

In his review of the production for Newsweek, David Gelman explains that “to shape the story to small-screen parameters, director Rick Hauser has trimmed its ambiguities” (94). Given the stated intention to produce a faithful dramatization, Hauser’s only means for strengthening the novel’s emphasis on the female experience under patriarchy, and eliding the evasions of feminism, the ambiguities, that Hawthorne built into the text, is through precise line cuts and one crucial added scene. Principally, Hawthorne’s ambivalence toward Hester and condemnation of her opinions are removed surgically (from the screenplay’s otherwise accurate transcript of the novel) through a combination of re-assigning authorized narratorial comments to Hester herself, and simply deleting Hawthorne’s trademark equivocations. A most cunning example is the reassignment of the narrator’s famous description of the letter’s failure to do its office. In the adaptation Hester exclaims, in response to Dimmesdale's complaint that he lacks her strength and thus cannot think to flee the colony: "This is my strength [gesturing to the badge]. It is my passport to the wild, free, lawless regions where others dare not tread. My teachers have been Shame, Despair, Solitude. They have made me strong." While
these lines are taken directly from the text, they are originally spoken by the narrator, not Hester. The problem with this re-assignment is obvious from the omission, in the adaptation, of the second half of the last sentence. In the novel, the narrator reports, "These had been her teachers, - stern and wild ones, - and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss" (244, italics mine). This deletion is identified by Larry Baker as an example of the adaptors' diminution of language, defined as the "deletion of phrases or sentences vital to establish Hawthorne's authorial intent" (221). But it is not merely this significant deletion that represents what Baker calls the adaptation's "insensitivity to context," for what is operating in the novel here is the editorializing of Hester's behavior from an outside viewpoint that is not always sympathetic, and certainly is not interchangeable with Hester's view of herself. Michael Davitt Bell, a Hawthorne scholar and advisor to the producers, has noted that

a popular reading of The Scarlet Letter sees it as a tragedy of true love crushed by an unfeeling society. This line of criticism, in a curious way, turns Hester completely into a conventional natural heroine, unjustly persecuted by an intolerant society. But it falsifies the reality of the book. Hawthorne may pity Hester, he may sympathize with her, but he does not accept her values as his own. She is not his spokesman in the book. Hawthorne's position is made quite clear, not only in his frequent criticisms of Hester, and in the seriousness of her crime, but also in Hester's return to Boston at the close...[W]hat Hawthorne approves in his heroine is not her rebelliousness...but rather her ability to overcome that rebelliousness and assume the feminine qualities of domesticity. ("Another View" 89-90)

The superficially faithful PBS adaptation does exactly what Bell describes, reproducing this popular reading. Any attempt to transfer the narrator's thoughts to Hester violates their essential separation of identity and point of view—but it does trim the ambiguities.
Like the "much amiss" deletion, the deletion of lines from voice-over passages may be small, but speaks volumes. Two examples will suffice to show this. After it is established that the newly-released prisoner will continue to reside in Boston, Hauser's narrator (Hawthorne) explains in voice-over: "Here dwelt, here trod the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgement, and make that their marriage altar." The novel's narrator ends the sentence with another clause: "for a joint futurity of endless retribution" (95). Another deletion seems to have been made at the level of editing. The voice-over narrator intones the tale's moral, "Be True! Be True!" but while the shooting script adds the rest of the novel's line, "Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait by which the worst may be inferred!" (316; Sapinsley 176), in the final edit this equivocation is deleted. Together these deletions, and the deletion of "much amiss" mentioned before (along with many others), point to a subtle reshaping of the story along the melodramatic lines suggested by Bell's quote. Hauser, like the critics to whom Bell alludes, reshapes the novel into a story of unjust persecution of lovers to avoid alienating his modern audience by criticizing them.

In an invented exchange between Hester and Pearl in Part Three, meant to dramatize Hester's speculations that are detailed by the narrator at the end of the chapter "Another View of Hester," the adaptors most directly draw a connection between contemporary feminist rhetoric and the heroine. This scene clearly resonated for one critic, Michael Arlen; of it he asserts, "Meg Foster seemed to catch for a few seconds some of the transfigured bitterness of Hester Prynne" (129). In the novel, the narrator describes her questioning of the nature of
the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?...She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated...At times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide. (200-1)

The miniseries adapts this passage into a dialogue that begins with Pearl reading the Biblical story of Bathsheba. She turns and asks her mother, “Mother, what does it mean to be a virtuous woman? Mother, what does it mean to be a woman?” Hester answers, “It means that there are many truths, Pearl. But of all truths, this one—that if a woman swerves one hair’s breadth out of the beaten track then the whole universe will make common cause against her.” The scene then changes but the dialogue continues, with Pearl asking, “Are women not meant to be happy, Mother?” Hester answers, “Meant, Pearl? Nay, they are commanded to be happy. True happiness lies only in our obedience. For it to be different, then all about must be torn down and built up anew. It is a task a thousand Anne Hutchinsons could not accomplish.” Pearl inquires, “Who is she, Mother?” Hester responds, “A woman who set her spirit above the law. A woman brave enough to make men fear her.” Finally, Pearl asks, “What do men do when they fear women, Mother?” Hester replies, “They make us doubt whether it were not better to send the children we bear to heaven at once.” A further exchange follows in the script,
but was edited out of the final print: Pearl protests that she doesn’t understand, and Hester replies, “And it were well. For did you, child, and were asked in school what I have told you, I would surely feel anew the stern displeasure of the magistrates” (Sapinsley 126). This last assertion of Hester’s points to the real radicalism of presenting her opinions in dialogue with her daughter. She is preaching her legacy to her inheritor, and risks punishment by the patriarchal authority structure for spreading an alternative dogma. In doing so, she assumes a role similar to that of dissident Anne Hutchinson, which Hawthorne denies her, but with which she (and Hawthorne) will flirt in the last chapter, at the end of her life. In his much-anthologized article on Hester and Anne Hutchinson, Michael Colacurcio identifies the common source of radicalism in Hester and Hutchinson. He explains,

female sexuality seems, in its concentration and power, both a source for and a type of individualistic nullification of social restraint. Obviously Hawthorne’s feelings about this are not without ambivalence... But his clear recognition of the antisocial meaning of self-conscious female sexuality, first formulated in the theological context of Puritan heresy, goes a long way toward explaining the power and the pathos of Hester Prynne. (“Footsteps” 472)

While Robert Sklar has argued that the PBS Scarlet Letter’s subject matter is inaccessible to the 1970’s viewing audience, the position of Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson as transgressive women challenging patriarchal oppression (as the adaptors and Colacurcio, an advisor on the project, read them) would have been readily appreciated by the American feminist of the Seventies. Wenders also invokes Hutchinson in a similar scene between Hester and her daughter, in which Hester describes the antinomian as a “wise woman” who escaped the colony for Providence—as she will do. Anne Hutchinson owes
her modern historical fame to the feminist academics of this period, who resurrected her as a feminist predecessor as part of their project to rewrite American history. The PBS program and Wenders's film, like these feminist-historical efforts, lead the viewer to link Hester's and Mrs. Hutchinson's struggle with the one evolving all around them. Hester becomes the literary equivalent of Anne Hutchinson as feminist ancestor and martyr. Our last image of Hester is of the prophetess surrounded by her followers, like Hutchinson in her famous portrait, or like a speaker at a Seventies feminist consciousness-raising group.

In general, it is obvious how this scene reworks, and even contradicts, the passage in "Another View of Hester." Hester's transgression is explicitly identified as an acknowledged threat to the social order, not an overstepping of her natural role as an 'ethereal' female. Hester's resignation to the permanence of the social order has nothing to do with her, or the narrator's, belief in her unsuitability to the task of reform, or in the impossibility of change due to natural states. Change is simply too difficult at that time, the implication being that in another era, it may be possible. In the novel, "Hester, we learn, is on the verge of falling into feminism, into an open defiance of tradition and authority...Hester envisions a change in the role of women, a change Hawthorne regards with horror" (Bell "Another View" 90), but the adaptors applaud.

Hester's comments in this sequence include many phrases from the passage in the novel, but the message overall is more directly anti-patriarchal and feminist, in the modern sense. In 1977 (the year the production was planned), Adrienne Rich wrote that when women act in ways that challenge the patriarchal structure, as Hester and Anne Hutchinson do, they meet a prevailing reflex of dread. It is not simply, I
think, the dread of seeing a familiar model of the world thrown into question, though this—the fear of potential change—is powerful enough. When we describe sexuality, motherhood, so-called instinctual or natural behavior, as part of the public world “out there,” that is, as affected by power politics, rights, property, the institutionalized ownership by men of women and children—we encounter acute anxiety on the part of most men and many women. (216)

For the adaptors, this is the central issue in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester, Anne Hutchinson, and even Mistress Hibbins, threaten the structure of society by denying its rule (Schwab 199; Colacurcio “Footsteps” 462), by being “antinomian.” The narrator says of Hester: “The world’s law was no law for her mind” (Hawthorne 198). This is the socially dangerous, anti-patriarchal stance that Rich advocates in 1977, that Wenders enlarges, and that Hauser manages to convey, constrained as he is (unlike Wenders) by the mandate of textual fidelity.

Wim Wenders has always been fascinated by America, and was drawn to *The Scarlet Letter* out of a desire to examine the roots of its struggle with the competing demands of individual freedom and community control (Daniels 41). His Dimmesdale delivers a City on a Hill sermon, and Wenders recognizes that America still fulfills an exemplary function—he watches America from afar and interprets it. PBS’s adaptation also has at its heart an examination of the essential national paradox, the contrary pulls between community and individuality, as is appropriate for the publicly-funded broadcaster in the immediate aftermath of the Bicentennial—the novel so fundamentally expresses the American identity crisis. PBS invested four years and over two million dollars of public funds in the creation of a truly Hawthornian *Scarlet Letter* (47). But more than an exercise in (for the first time) faithfully dramatizing the novel, the PBS
Scarlet Letter was indisputably figured as a contribution to America’s turbulent cultural conversation about itself. A WGBH (PBS affiliate) staff member was quoted in Newsweek asserting that the production’s relevance rested in its source’s status as “the earliest story about us” (Gelman 94).

The issue of the story’s relevance to a 1970s audience, the relevance of its message in the context of Second Wave feminism, was hotly debated in the wake of the miniseries. Robert Sklar commented that “the very idea of a scarlet ‘A’ on Hester Prynne’s breast may appear anomalous to today’s permissive society” (“Scarlet” 181). In one of the 945 letters WGBH received in the month following the miniseries, one viewer wrote: “The production of this work, the choice of which might be questioned in the first place as so out of date as to be almost incomprehensible to the average listener [sic], is so pompous as to make what might be a sensitive study of the human soul into a travesty” (qtd. in Karen Johnson/WGBH 4). But in the same review of viewer response, another quoted letter asks: “Whatever possessed you to put on a thing like that when we are subjected daily in the press to the hideous consequences of neurotic religious fanaticism” (4). This viewer goes on to state, “I could not feel involved in it in any way except to all the time wish you had done something different” (4), suggesting that the contemporary relevance of the story’s themes were too close for comfort.

It is at least clear from interviews conducted with women involved in the PBS production that the intent of it was to connect with the contemporary Women’s Movement. Meg Foster, who played the role of Hester, expressed in an interview with Photoplay that Hester is “a survivor…she’s also a very contemporary woman. Instead of bemoaning her fate, she takes things into her own hands” (10). A promotional video for
the miniseries, “Making the Scene,” features interviews with several of the PBS miniseries’ producers and cast members. Among the women interviewed, two
highlighted what could be called “women’s issues” in the novel, and its relevance to their own society in the late Seventies. Interestingly, the two women, actress Sasha Von Scherler, who played one of the gossips, and producer Dian Collins, differ in their assessment of the novel’s accessibility. Von Scherler praised the adaptation for its ability to encompass issues other that the infidelity that is central to the plot, as she observes, “If this had been done just like a little story of adultery, I don’t think it would have been very important. In this day and age, who would care?” Collins focused on the depiction of single parenthood to find contemporary relevance in the project: “I think The Scarlet Letter is as meaningful today as it was before. I think it’s meaningful because the problem of a woman, alone, with an illegitimate child, is certainly not a problem that has disappeared.” The statistics, as we will see, support her assessment, although whether a PBS audience would have been composed of the disenfranchised women she is describing is doubtful.

The Women’s Movement of the 1970’s is generally considered to have its most direct roots in the 1960’s civil rights movement, and to have been furthered by both small radical groups and larger national bodies like the National Organization for Women. By 1977, when the PBS project was first planned, the movement was maturing and beginning to suffer from backlash. Roe v. Wade became law in 1973, but opposition to it was gaining strength. The Equal Rights Amendment cleared both the House and the Senate in 1970, and was ratified by 33 states between 1972 and 1975, but the anti-ERA conservative lobby had stopped its ratification in New York and New Jersey in 1975, and
more states were poised to reject the amendment. While minor gains were made in the late 1970’s, Women’s Lib’s large-scale victories were behind it. But even in the more conservative latter part of the decade, the revolution in consciousness had already been so pervasive that no amount of retrenchment could return relations between the sexes to their pre-feminist norms.

The real social power gained by women in the 1970’s had its roots in the same situation I noted in the 1930’s: an increase in the number of women in the work force (over 50% of women according to Winifred Wandersee 129). And like in the 1930’s, many of those women were working, not to express their independence, but to support children. By 1974, 42% of working women were single, widowed, divorced, or separated (129), and many had children to raise alone—by March 1977, 7.7 million families in America were headed by women (the highest number ever) and one in three of these families lived below the poverty line (133). This figure is staggering, but the rate of growth of the percentage of families headed by women is even more so: for whites, in 1970, 7.8% of families were headed by women, but by 1980, that number had almost doubled to 14.7% (135). Half of these single mothers were divorced, with 31% separated and 18% unwed in 1977 (133). While never married mothers formed only a small percentage in total, it is significant to note that they represent one fifth of the growth rate of single mothers from 1970 to 1980. Wandersee comments that “this tendency reflected the changing social climate and sexual values that created a much more tolerant attitude toward illegitimacy” (134).

Hollywood was slow to react to the Women’s Movement, and remained cautious when it finally did. Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore, directed by Martin Scorcese and
released in 1975, is lauded by many critics as the apotheosis of popular feminism in
Hollywood film. A story of a widow struggling to raise her child alone, it is considered
the best Hollywood could reasonably do to reflect the cultural shift in America that
resulted from the Women’s Movement. By the time Alice was released, in 1975,
“Women’s Liberation” was a household word, and had been for years. In her book, The
Casting Couch, Marsha McCreadie identifies Alice as the first in a succession of
feminist-inflected Hollywood films, followed by Network (1976), Annie Hall (1977), and
1978’s Coming Home (3). McCreadie quotes a Time article written in 1978, which
proclames that “after long neglect, Hollywood is fascinated with women—their careers,
their individual destinies, their relationships with each other, and of course (but no longer
exclusively) their relationships with men” (146). Television followed suit with such
female-focused series as The Mary Tyler Moore Show (premiered 1970) and Mary
Hartman, Mary Hartman (premiered 1976). All feature female protagonists who are
single (or in the case of Ellen Burstyn’s character in Alice and Jane Fonda’s character in
Coming Home, become single.) But interestingly, Alice is the only mother of the group.
For Hollywood, the issue of the single parent family was still difficult, despite the
statistics.

One film that McCreadie does not mention is Paul Mazursky’s An Unmarried
Woman (1978). Robin Wood posits an interesting connection between this film about the
struggles of a divorced mother and Alice’s title character, who not insignificantly is a
widow, not a divorcee. Wood asserts that it is these two films that are most identified
with the feminist-inflected late Seventies film. Since the two films were made
independently of each other at about the same time, the striking similarities between them
are evidence that “their common structure defines the limits of the ideologically acceptable, the limits that rendered feminism safe” (202) for a nervous Hollywood.

Wood lists the seven key elements shared by the two films:

1. At the outset, the heroine is married.
2. She has a child...the dominant characteristic being precocity. In both films the child is young enough to still be dependent; mature enough to be a semi-confidant, engaging with the mother in arguments and intimate exchanges; independent enough to demand his/her own rights. Hence, the child functions in both films as a problem...
3. The marriage ends...and the woman has to make a new life for herself and the child.
4. The heroine is already or becomes involved in a group of women who provide emotional support...
5. The heroine has an unsuccessful and transitory relationship with an unsatisfactory lover...
6. The heroine meanwhile pursues, or attempts to pursue, a career that satisfies her need for self-respect...
7. In the course of her work, she meets a non-oppressive male to whom she can relate on equal terms and with whom she develops a satisfying, if troubled, relationship. (203)

Rick Hauser’s *Scarlet Letter* (and to some extent, Wim Wenders’s) shares some striking similarities with the films exhibiting this pattern, and some equally important differences. While the order of events is slightly different, the basic pattern is the same up to a point.

Hester begins her story, if not the novel, an unhappily married woman, and she begins the novel embarking on a single life with a child. While her society is obviously more hostile to her than America in the 1970’s, at least on the surface, a pervasive stigmatization and marginalization marks both Hester’s life and that of the modern single mother. Hester’s work as a seamstress sustains her family, and as both the novel’s narrator and the voice-over note, it is the means by which Hester “came to have a part to perform in the world” (Hawthorne 99). Her work and later her service to the community as a nurse come to
define her for society, and serve an important function in her self-concept in relation to
her persecutors. Arthur Dimmesdale (played by John Heard in the Hauser adaptation) is a
problematic fit for Wood’s fifth point, in that the relationship, while “unsuccessful” and
“transitory” in some senses, does endure emotionally and shape her destiny. But Arthur
certainly cannot answer the description of the man in point 7 (although their relationship
is more emotionally satisfying than her marriage, and is also certainly “troubled”). Wood
explains that point 7, the fortuitous meeting with the ideal sensitive man, is the end point
of the heroine’s trajectory. The male leads of An Unmarried Woman and Alice, played by
Alan Bates and Kris Kristofferson respectively, “are strikingly similar in type: burly,
bearded, emphatically masculine, physically strong, and emotionally stable: reassuring,
not only for the woman in the film, but for women in the audience and—perhaps most
important of all—for the men in the audience” (Wood 204). Arthur Dimmesdale can
provide none of this reassurance, and it is in this area that PBS’s Scarlet Letter may be
seen to push the limits Wood has set up as the furthest a Hollywood feminist film could
go. This is not surprising, since non-commercial television does not confront the same
pressures to appeal to a mass audience as does a feature film.

In the forest scene, Dimmesdale is subtly reshaped, however, as the couple is
reconstructed. Again, a passage from the novel, reproduced in the script, has been cut, so
as not to emasculate him completely. In response to Hester’s comment that he must stop
residing with his enemy, Arthur exclaims: “It were far worse than death! But how to
avoid it? What choice remains to me? Must I sink down here and die at once?” Hester
replies, “Alas, what a ruin has befallen you! Will you die for very weakness? There is no
other cause.” Dimmesdale answers, “The judgement of God is on me! It is too mighty
for me to struggle with” (239; Sapinsley 126). What is left in the final print is merely
Dimmesdale’s request that Hester think for him. While Hauser does not actively
strengthen Dimmesdale through extra-textual means, as other adaptors do, he does reduce
the extent of his weakness. Throughout the miniseries, the adaptors expand on the novel
to emphasize Hester’s strength, while they also, it must be allowed, diminish our sense of
Dimmesdale’s weakness. The overall effect, despite the deletions of lines that emphasize
the minister’s “unmanly” lack of force, is to present a romantic couple driven by the
strength of the woman, which the man cannot equal, much less best. In the birthing scene
in Part Three, Goody Ingles begs to touch the badge, explaining, “I want my baby to be
strong.” Chillingworth asserts of Arthur, also in Part Three, “He does not have the will to
survive as you do, Hester. You have worn the scarlet letter on your breast and it has
made you strong.” While this line is based on his assertion in the novel, “his spirit lacked
the strength that could have borne up, as thine has, beneath a burden like the scarlet
letter” (207), the language has been strengthened for emphasis in the script. But more
than anything it is John Heard’s effective portrayal of a complete lack of energy,
bordering on somnambulence, that communicates their dissimilarity. Although the
producers edited out much of his “Hester I have not your strength” speech from the script,
his body language throughout the program, in contrast to hers, renders that speech
superfluous. Hauser’s strategy involves a rather extensive “trimming of ambiguities,”
although it must be stated that Hauser’s Scarlet Letter devotes less energy to the problem
of the couple than any other adaptation. He does not add a prequel that idealizes the
romantic couple (as Sjostrom and Joffe do), or extra melodramatic scenes (as Vignola
does), nor does he indulge in invented voice-over monologues in which the lovers
proclaim their devotion (as the Westinghouse production does). Hauser’s commitment to textual fidelity prevents him from going this far.

Wood continues, explaining that *Alice* and *An Unmarried Woman* “share a certain deviousness. On the explicit level, both preserve a determined ambiguity, refusing to guarantee the permanence of the happy ending. Yet the final effect is of a huge communal sigh of relief: the women don’t have to be independent after all; there are strong, protective males to look after them” (204). The PBS *Scarlet Letter*, of course, denies this relief in favor of a permanent unhappy ending. This is due in part to the pressures of the text, but also to the freedom of public television to preserve a fidelity to the novel’s ending, and thus its meaning, even if it is not “bankable.” Mazursky, Scorcese, and Roland Joffè, the director of the next *Scarlet Letter* to be considered, cannot exercise such freedom in a commercial Hollywood film. The PBS adaptation is also the only one to include the material in the novel’s last chapter, detailing Hester’s fate after she last ascends the scaffold. Thus it is unique in, like Hawthorne, refusing to grant the possibility of freedom and happiness for Hester after Dimmesdale’s death. Ending the drama at the moment of Dimmesdale’s death allows that hope.

What the PBS adaptation and the Wenders film do allow is a gesture toward Wood’s fourth criterion, the heroine’s involvement in a mutually supportive feminine world. While Wenders’s (and, as we shall see in the next chapter, Joffè’s) film grants Hester a supportive network of female confidantes throughout her story, Hauser’s miniseries is unique among the adaptations, as noted, in featuring her fate as a counselor to other women. The final sequence shows an aged Hester surrounded by followers in her cottage, while the Hawthorne character explains in voice-over her new role in the
community. Two deletions in this scene, one from the novel and one from the script, simplify the viewer’s perception of Hester as the ancestor of late-Seventies female consciousness gurus. First, the adaptors, in alluding to her role as prophetess, deproblematize it by excising the novel’s assertion of the “impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow” (321). Obviously, in the era of NOW, such limitations placed on female leaders are quite impossible. But more interestingly, the final print of the program cuts the lines given to Hester in this scene in the script. Surrounded by admirers, she tells them in the script, “One day, a new truth will be revealed. The whole relation between men and women will be set aright. A prophetess will come—a woman, lofty, pure and beautiful—Yes, she will be a woman, as we are women—and she will show how sacred love should make us happy” (Sapinsley 177). This speech is drawn from the novel, but would also have had a particularly strong resonance for the program’s audience. In editing it out, the producers have seemingly lost an opportunity to connect Hester directly to the Women’s Movement. It may have been cut because it seemed gratuitous, but this is doubtful, given the inclusion of the “What does it mean to be a woman?” scene. My only theory is that these words were thought to be too slight, too weak, for a feminist prophetess. By leaving it to the audience to speculate as to how Hester might answer the question “what the remedy?”, producers allow each viewer to imagine, according to his or her sympathies, what that answer might be.

Hester’s position as a marginalized woman and stigmatized mother is highlighted by the increased emphasis on her custody of Pearl, constituted by this scene and the
meetinghouse discussion that precedes it. She reacts strongly to the suggestion that Pearl will be taken from her by governmental decree, nearly screaming at Mistress Bellingham, who only calmly replies that the magistrates will decide Pearl’s fate. It is within their power. As Hester walks determinedly to the Bellingham mansion, the voice-over explains (from Hawthorne 119), “Full of concern therefore, but so conscious of her own right, that it seemed scarcely an unequal match between the public on one side, and a solitary woman backed by the sympathy of Nature on the other.” In a decade in which, as mentioned, one in three single parent families lived below the poverty line, this issue of the custody of Pearl (and governmental interference with it), one of the most dramatic issues in the first half of the novel, could not fail to resonate with the audience.

As Bruce Daniels has suggested, “PBS’s *The Scarlet Letter*, begun two years after Wenders finished his version, is the mirror image to *Der Scharlachrote Buchstabe*” (45). The German film is an audacious but contemplative take on the story, while the miniseries makes a religion of its fidelity to the source material. How could such different interpretations of Hawthorne’s novel possibly have appeared at almost the same moment, and how can they possibly address the same cultural conversation? Of course their origins, while contemporaneous, are enormously different. The film reflects a European perspective on the American experience and a lack of intimidation with reference to its cultural status, whereas the PBS version is an orthodox and reverent reading produced on behalf of a government body mandated to reflect and explore the meaning of American culture and chronicle its conversations. Produced at a time of unparalleled reassessment of the status of women in the West, the dialogue to which both of these seemingly dissimilar interpretations of the novel contribute centers, of course, on
the new status of women. And so it is the consistency of the two projects, in their
e exploration and magnification of the novel’s presumed radical feminism (symbolized by
their similar introduction of Anne Hutchinson but extending throughout), that commands
our attention. Of course, the very different circumstances of production of the two
projects do share something in common too—their location outside the Hollywood
mainstream. At the height of the Woman’s Liberation Movement, Hollywood was
uninterested in American literature’s original transgressive and liberated woman.
Mainstream filmmakers were remarkably timid about entering the cultural conversation
of gender in the 1970s (Carolyn Johnston 276). Interviewed by Playboy about Alice
Doesn’t Live Here Anymore, Martin Scorcese argued, “I was trying to do something
radical in terms of women. But ultimately, we all came to the conclusion that it was okay
if she wanted to live with somebody. I felt bad about it and thought maybe it wasn’t a
radical enough statement for that time of feminism” (qtd. in Powers and Rothman 48).²
In this climate of caution and compromise in Hollywood, the very prescient perspective
on gender issues that The Scarlet Letter could offer to the Seventies could only appear
through non-mainstream channels like public television and a European auteur producing
for a European audience. Unrestrained by fidelity issues or American history, the
European is able to leave Hester’s future an open question, as she sails away a woman
completed not by a man but by her child and her new female community. PBS’s Hester
ends with an assertion of female community and solidarity too—but the American Hester
is doomed by Hawthorne and Hauser to a spiritual rebellion only, and a freedom from
patriarchy found only in death—not the ERA.
Foster capitalized on her feminist credentials from her turn as Hester to become the original Cagney in the pilot of the early 80s policewoman drama *Cagney and Lacey*—until she was replaced following criticisms that she appeared too stridently feminist.

The television version, called simply *Alice*, preserved its heroine as a single, independent mother.
Chapter Six—Who Can Say What Is a Sin?: The 1995 Scarlet Letter

To say that the 1995 film adaptation of The Scarlet Letter was unsuccessful would be a colossal understatement. That it was a financial disaster, losing nearly fifty million dollars, is bad enough (Daniels 52). But the critical reception of the film was almost unparalleled in its viciousness. Bruce Daniels recently commented that “it is hard to imagine any movie receiving more hostile reviews. Critics did not just think it was bad, they despised it. It offended them for its vulgarity, pretense, and outright stupidity and they attacked it on every front” (48). While Daniels argues that the unprecedented critical revulsion was in defense of poor Hawthorne (49), this was really a secondary consideration. Many well-received films have taken enormous liberties with literary sources, and failed to earn a spot in Michael Sauter’s The Worst Movies of All Time. While critics did focus on the changes made to the story and characters, it was the use to which these changes were put that really stoked the fires. What they found most objectionable was that the filmmakers would “flagrantly cheapen the story to serve narrow, self-congratulatory Hollywood agendas” (Keough 1) including “their own shallow musings on such late twentieth century issues as feminism, individualism, ecology, race, and religious dogmatism” (Matthews B2). Of course, the mid-Nineties were a time of lively cultural conversation about these issues in the United States. The year after the Republican Revolution in the House of Representatives, new Conservative voices (and some old ones) were contesting the liberalism of Clinton-era American culture, and particularly Hollywood. Joffe’s The Scarlet Letter strains to answer the charge that America needed to return to its original “family values.” While, as we have seen, the story of Hester Prynne has functioned as a cipher for these issues for filmmakers
since 1926, in this case the message is undermined simultaneously by its overzealousness and its disingenuousness. While director Roland Joffe seeks to construct the ultimate feminist heroine to battle the forces of conservatism in the Nineties' culture war, his heroine only reinscribes a curiously non-threatening romanticism. And while he ultimately hopes to discredit the entire concept of prescribed morality, his film ultimately seeks only to be heard over the crowd of contributors to the cultural conversation about gender and values, and assert its own prescription.

The film begins with a funeral. Messasoit, the chief of the Wampanoag, has died, and two Puritans observe his cremation. They negotiate with his son, Metacomet, who remarks that the whites have murdered his father “with their lies.” Joffe sets up the opposition between the Puritan and Native community here, and the threat of an attack lingers in the first few scenes in Boston. A paranoia is built around the Natives for the audience, reminiscent of a Western. Metacomet also singles out Dimmesdale, according him the distinction of “the only one who comes to us with an open heart.” This characterization will be central to the viewer’s perception of Dimmesdale both in this political subplot and the main romance plot.

In the next scene, the voice-over of an adult Pearl introduces her mother, Hester Prynne, as a woman who came to the New World seeking freedom from religious persecution. Hester disembarks and is met on the docks by the governor and Minister Stonehall. She immediately distinguishes herself as a rather uncommon woman, able to quote scripture by heart and unafraid of hard work. But she distinguishes herself most in her reaction to the natural world; rather than fearing and attempting to subdue it, Hester embraces Nature, commenting that she wishes she could have seen her new environment
“when it was wild and untouched.” Her free-spiritedness inspires resentment from that first scene onwards, when the Reverend advises her to use less lace in her dress-making. Difference will not be tolerated here. At dinner, the governor explains to Hester the importance of order to a community on the edge of the world, but it is clear to both Puritans and audience that she will reject these community concerns. She insists on living alone although it is not the custom, and smiles at Brewster Stonehall’s suggestion that she arrived with the intention of “scandalizing the town.” Hester’s unconventional attitude is further articulated in the next few scenes. Brewster relates that he has heard she was made the payment of her father’s debts to Roger Prynne. She has been commodified by the patriarchal order. But she resists her gender destiny actively. Like Mary Sinclair’s Hester of 1950, Demi Moore’s Hester farms her land instead of adopting the more feminine profession of seamstress. She even hires her own laborers, bartering in the male preserve of the slave market despite the objections of the dealer.

It is while working her land that Hester first encounters the red bird that will lead her into conflict with her society. In a nod to the 1926 film, Hester follows the bird into the woods where, like Lillian Gish, Demi Moore lets down her hair. The bird leads her to an opening in the trees where she is astonished and intrigued by the sight of a man swimming naked in a pond. She is called back to her farm and faces the stern visage of Reverend Stonehall and his wife, bidding her to church. Implicit is the notion that she is pulled from a natural cathedral where she has been worshipping to the cold, lifeless and repressive institution of the Puritan church.

But it soon becomes clear that religion does not have to repress her natural instincts. As Dimmesdale preaches about the redemptive power of love, a model of true
Christianity emerges, melded with a sort of transcendentalism. The sermon affects her deeply, and love blooms. In a later meeting, Dimmesdale chides Hester for the possession of a tongue that “knows no rules,” to which she replies, “And if it did, what purpose would it serve?” Her outspoken reverence for freedom inspires him to break from the law because as she says, no man should take too easily “to the bridle and bit.”

The other principal influence on Hester’s future, Mistress Hibbins, is introduced next. Harriet Hibbins, bedecked with feathers, runs a sort of feminist commune on the edge of town. Among her charges are a prostitute and an outcast who is a former Indian captive. Hibbins expresses her longing for a past in which the community was not so rigidly controlled and dogmatic. She plays at the role of witch, but confesses that her only power is an instinctive knowledge of “the hearts of men.” She knows instinctively that Hester and Dimmesdale will be tempted by one another, because they are a natural match, unlike the economic pairing of the Prynnes. She sees that Hester’s husband “possesses not the full measure of her heart.”

Hester’s bathing tub, which of course inspires titters in the town, is featured in two of the most controversial scenes in the film. In the first, Hester, after convincing her slave not to fear the tub because it is “not a tool of Satan,” takes a conspicuously careful look at herself while bathing. The soft focus and lingering camera work are reminiscent of soft core pornography, as are the intercuts that reveal she is thinking of Dimmesdale’s naked form while we watch hers. Having nodded to pornographic convention, the film reverts to melodrama. Dimmesdale declares his love on the rocky cliff. This scene very explicitly polarizes love and the law. Although he cries out, “Oh God, have we lost our way?,” he is concerned not for his eternal soul but for his life—they could be hanged, he
explains. Dimmesdale departs; love is thwarted for now.

The community’s law continues to suppress the expression of human feeling after Hester’s husband is reported dead. A seven year period of mourning is mandated when there is no absolute proof of death, so Hester cannot legally express her love for Dimmesdale even as a widow. When she confesses her fear that she has caused Roger’s death by wishing for it, Dimmesdale concedes that God may have intervened and struck down the impediment to their love. Dimmesdale’s God is allied with the lovers, supporting their natural union even against the laws made in His name. The laws still forbid their passion, but confident of God’s approval, they defy man’s law.

The sex scene in the barn, played out on a bed of grain (for fertility), is sexually explicit. Against a soundscape of moans and a soaring musical score, Hester and Dimmesdale make love in soft focus, captured with the same lingering camera technique used in the bath scene. The bathing tub is featured again, this time being used by the slave girl Mituba, who takes a sensual bath presided over by the red bird while her mistress is in the barn. The two scenes are suggestively intercut.

Having defied the community’s law in the act of adultery, for which she will nominally be punished, Hester proceeds to commit the infringement for which, the film argues, she is really punished by the town fathers. She attends Hibbins’s women’s meeting, and voices her objection to certain elements of Puritan doctrine. Hibbins’s meeting is comprised of a strange assembly. Most of the town’s women seem to be in attendance, both pious worthies and prostitutes. There is even a Quaker woman on hand to explain that group’s dissent. The suggestion is made later that the women meet regularly, although this is the only occasion we witness. The conversation ranges, or
rather contorts, from lascivious gossip (Hibbins's specialty) to Puritan law (Hester's). Hester characterizes the law as not a true representation of God's will (as we already know) but merely "the imagination of mortals." She is soon locked up by the magistrates.

Joffe makes it abundantly clear that the magistrates harbor political motives behind their godly rhetoric when they prosecute Hester. They interrogate her on the subject of the women's meetings, lamenting the danger of women engaged in "untutored chattering" when there is no "qualified man present" to guide them. Joffe conflates Hester with Anne Hutchinson throughout this sequence, leading ultimately to her defense of the meetings with a quotation from the Bible that "women shall be the teachers of women." It is only when she has bested their rhetoric, outplayed them at their own game, that the magistrates reveal their ultimate weapon against her: biology. The interrogation turns to Hester's physical condition. Two women have witnessed her vomiting and she is forced to admit her pregnancy. She is jailed—a cunning solution to her refusal to stop the meetings, as the film is at pains to show.

Of course, Hester does not reveal her child's paternity, because she knows that Dimmesdale would be hanged. But this straightforward motive is obscured by her rhetoric. She asserts that this is her opportunity to oppose the repressive forces of Puritan patriarchy. This establishes two important character points: first, Hester is a fighter who will put her principles ahead of her own happiness—she is a feisty American heroine. More importantly, this motive of Hester's allows Dimmesdale to play his part as a brave American hero, too. To hide from his responsibility, "add hypocrisy to sin," would be inconsistent with his character in the film, the natural match for the feminist super-
heroine. It is instead a testament to his love and strength that he resists his natural desire to reveal himself. Dimmesdale's character has been reversed entirely for the purposes of the film. He has been relieved of his weakness. His only torture is that he cannot convince Hester to allow him to share in her punishment.

The political motivation for the magistrates' imprisonment of Hester continues to be foregrounded during her time in jail. Despite public opinion, they cannot yield and release her when she shows no contrition, no submission to their authority. They understand that unless she shows deference to the law and their enforcement of it, one lone woman will appear more powerful, in the public's view, than an entire patriarchy coming to her "cap in hand" only to have their authority rebuked week after week. Her exceptional endurance frightens them, as well it should. Their authority has never been so successfully challenged. Mistress Hibbins, female rebel that she herself is, tells Hester, "You must have a will of iron. When you take on the men, it leads to death."

Hester refers to the magistrates frequently as "those iron men," and the point here is that she is equal to their strength. The iron men's awareness of the political implications is made explicit. Freeing her, they agree, would send a message that their law is not supreme, that order is not total in the city on a hill. The ramifications would be unending. While Stonehall the patriarch cannot think past his potential loss of power, it is his wife who understands her society well enough to devise the punishment of the scarlet letter.

In the first scaffold scene, occurring well over an hour into the movie, Hester again suggests a distinction between God's will and the laws her society has made in His name. When asked if she believes she has sinned, and thus accepts the authority of conventional morality, she responds, "I believe I have sinned in your eyes, but who is to
say if God shares your views?" Of course, this is the cornerstone of the film's point about religious dogmatism—everything is relative. Isolated from the town with her child, she may still count the marginal women among her friends, but most will shun her. She has been silenced—the magistrates are content.

Chillingworth's arrival changes that. His revenge takes a different form from that of his predecessors, owing to the refashioning of Dimmesdale. Chillingworth here must still play the detective, but Hester makes no bargain with him to hide his identity from her lover. She tells Dimmesdale immediately. Since he is not sick, he affords Chillingworth no opportunity to observe him closely, although they reside in the same house. Chillingworth devotes his time instead to intimidating Hester's slave, and convincing the gullible magistrates that their colony is plagued with witches. The witch hunt plot is a device to facilitate the film's ending, and to connect the story to more familiar popular images of the Puritan past, but it is also the apotheosis of the film's messages surrounding the oppression of women and the abuse of power in the name of God and community standards. Chillingworth convinces the magistrates to prosecute Mistress Hibbins as a witch and bring down the women he insists are responsible for recent reversals of fortune in the colony, lest God himself punish all. He calls upon the iron men to reassert their dominance decisively. Pearl is made the ultimate piece of evidence in the courtroom scene, as her birthmark is interpreted by master showman Chillingworth as a witch's mark. Hysteria more than a little reminiscent of scenes from Arthur Miller's The Crucible erupts, and a feeling of panic pervades the town.

Of course, Hester sees this development as her ultimate opportunity to challenge the community. Dimmesdale objects—he is no coward, to be sure, but he is more
pragmatic than Hester. He puts their private happiness ahead of public justice. But
Hester is unbending: if Harriet is to hang, she says, “then I must hang with her.”
Dimmesdale can only acquiesce and put his faith in his God, whose protection and favor
he has relied upon up to this point. He embraces his family, and in a moment reminiscent
of the night vigil scene in the novel, presents them to God in His natural cathedral of the
forest as a natural family. He exclaims, “We stood before Thee naked once and now we
stand before Thee naked again, as a family. Thou hast given me this as a gift and I will
not give it up. Not while I have the strength!” The God-given consecration of this family
is once again asserted. Unfortunately, it is asserted loudly enough that Chillingworth,
who has been observing them, learns the truth.

Unable to torture Dimmesdale, because he is not sick or guilt-ridden, and without
the threat of exposure to effectively wield, since that is exactly what Dimmesdale yearns
for, Chillingworth’s revenge is exacted more conventionally, with brutal murder. But he
miscalculates, and scalps Brewster Bellingham instead of Dimmesdale. When word of
the murder spreads in Boston, the town’s Native population is confined (since Brewster
was scalped, presumable, by one of them). At the same point, the rest of the marginal
women, including Hester, are taken to be hanged without trial. The tension provoked by
the constant fear of an Indian attack and the recent witchcraft hysteria explodes into a full
panic. The threats from outside (the Indians) and within (the women) are equated and
mutually reinforced. Dimmesdale is the sole voice of reason.

As the women are led to their nooses, Dimmesdale ascends the scaffold, not to
announce that he has solved the murder case (which he has) but to restate the film’s key
points: that man cannot legislate morality in the name of God (he asks: “Who are we to
condemn on God’s behalf?”), and that his relationship with Hester is consecrated by God (“In God’s eyes, I am her husband.”) He finishes by offering himself up as a sacrifice to the community’s anger and fear. As Roger Ebert commented in his review, “It is obviously not acceptable for Dimmesdale to believe he has sinned, and so the movie cleverly transforms his big speech into a stirring cry for sexual freedom and religious tolerance” (C3). But the community accepts the offer of his life instead.

The connection between the Natives and the women as dual threats to the community order is solidified, and the tension created as far back as the opening scene is paid off, in the Indian attack that follows Dimmesdale’s speech and saves his life. Hester and Arthur race to safety with Pearl as the town is decimated. Political animals to the end, the remaining patriarchs offer a public apology to Hester after the attack in the hope that she will remain in town and not spread the truth about Boston’s failure. The political expediency and flexibility of their moral agenda is made explicit once again—as Dimmesdale reports, the governor is trying to orchestrate a cover-up of the recent crisis, and Hester is apparently perceived as a loose end. But Hester has no interest in staying “to be accepted by them, tamed by them.” The tattered patriarchs can only stand in the ruins of their defeated realm and watch Hester and Dimmesdale ride off into the sunset—Hester at the reins. The adult Pearl provides the epilogue in voice-over: her parents settle in the Carolinas, but Arthur dies only a few years later. Hester carries on alone. Pearl reports that there were those who considered her father’s early death and her mother’s loneliness as a punishment for their sins but, she asks, “Who can say what is a sin in God’s eyes?”

Critics agreed that Demi Moore’s performance was sinful, and that she was
“ridiculously miscast” as Hester (Matthews B2). This was the second film produced by her company, Moving Pictures. Kenneth Turan commented that this film was “envisioned as an old fashioned Joan Crawford-type star vehicle for Demi Moore” (1), and the evidence seems to confirm it. Hester Prynne was a stretch for the actress, but a surprisingly consistent choice when one examines the image she was building for herself through her roles in the Nineties. Whether a ruthless software executive (Disclosure), a put-upon stripper (Striptease), or a trail-blazing Navy SEAL, Demi Moore’s role choices were directed squarely at the gender divide. Throughout the Nineties, she built her image on characters who are outsiders punished for their sexuality. Hester Prynne is the Demi Moore character par excellence.

In an interview conducted at the time of The Scarlet Letter’s release, Sally Kline commented on the “female-friendly bent” of Moore’s recent roles, and asked her whether she took the role of Hester (or more accurately, developed it for herself) as part of an attempt to cement her credibility as a feminist. While Moore replied that she tried not to seek validation too ardently, she added, “I’m not gonna say I don’t look for any, because I would be lying.” The interviewer pursued a contrast between the feminist dimension in Moore’s roles and her overtly sexual image. Moore acknowledged both a feminist and a “boy-toy side,” and asserted of her characters, “what they’re all doing is removing the self-imposed limitations that I may place and that others may place on me and in their perceptions of women in general.” Indeed, her Nineties roles are remarkably consistent in this emphasis on pushing boundaries surrounding female sexuality and behavior, so it is natural that she would seek to identify herself with “the original feminist martyr in American literature” (Gleiberman 44).
Demi Moore’s first major part following her break-out performance in *Ghost* (1990) was a supporting part as a Navy lawyer in *A Few Good Men* (1992), opposite Tom Cruise. Despite her professional success, Joanne Galloway is an outsider in the workplace, the military, because of her gender. She camouflages her sexuality, keeping her hair symbolically bunned even when off duty, but is never accepted as a team player. Joanne is a strident professional, and the film seems to imply that her insistence on living “by the book” has deprived her of a social and sexual life, and even threatens her career success, until she is balanced by the unruly and self-indulgent Cruise character, another outsider.

Omitting for the moment Moore’s controversial role as a wife who sells herself for a million dollars in *Indecent Proposal* (1993), her next major part was that of Meredith Johnson, the ruthless businesswoman who sexually harasses Michael Douglas in *Disclosure* (1994). *Disclosure* is a film about corporate America, a male preserve, under attack from women breaking through the glass ceiling. One character famously laments, “You used to have fun with a girl—now she probably wants your job,” and the next shot fixes on Demi Moore’s legs as she climbs a staircase (to success). Women pose a threat to male dominance when they renounce their passivity and enter the public domain, but ultimately, we are reassured, they are destined to lose, as men close ranks. Meredith wields power for a while, but is ultimately only a pawn in a larger game of corporate intrigue played between men. Both *Disclosure* and *Indecent Proposal* were criticized for their confused and ultimately anti-feminist messages. But they can also be read as stories of women punished for asserting control over their lives. Meredith, in any case, is never a passive player in the gender wars, and although she ultimately loses, she
does strain the defenses of the male-dominated public sphere.

After Hester, in 1996, Demi played two modern beleaguered single mothers, Annie Laird in *The Juror* and Erin Grant in *Striptease*. Like Meredith, Annie and Erin take on an entrenched patriarchy, but this time they win. Annie foils an evil mastermind and the entire Mafia who are threatening her child. She even chases her nemesis to the jungles of South America to protect her daughter. Erin’s daughter has been assigned to the custody of her deadbeat husband by a corrupt judge impressed by the husband’s former status as a high school football star. The patriarchy is aligned against her. Erin turns to stripping, and as a result, her attempts to regain her daughter are undermined by her new sexual status. But Erin, like Annie, is a devoted mother and, along with her stripping cohorts, is the only virtuous character in the film. Ultimately she outwits a crooked congressman, who runs on a family values ticket despite his passion for strippers, and regains her daughter. The ultimate victim of patriarchal oppression, a sex worker, emerges triumphant over the judicial and political system that seeks to contain her.

Next, Moore sought to reemphasize her image as a female warrior in the most literal sense—as a Navy SEAL in *G. I. Jane* (1997). To become the apotheosis of her ideal, she turned to Ridley Scott, who had already established himself as the creator of feminist cinematic icons with *Thelma and Louise* and the *Alien* series. While Linda Williams admits that “*G. I. Jane* is no *Thelma and Louise*,” she insists that it “-touches on crucial debates about how women deal with male-minted power” (19). Unlike Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley in Scott’s *Alien*, Moore’s muscular and bald superwoman, Lieutenant Jordan O’Neil, battles an insidious monster here on Earth—male dominance and gender
prejudice. But like Ripley, she triumphs, eventually earning the respect of her formerly dismissive fellow soldiers and even appropriating their language (and biology) in her famous retort, “Suck my dick.”

Roger Ebert notes the overlap in identity between character and actress in his *G.I. Jane* review:

> 'I'm not interested in being some poster girl for women's rights,' says Lt. Jordan O'Neil... She just wants to prove a woman can survive Navy SEAL training so rigorous that 60 percent of men don’t make it. Her protest loses a little of its ring if you drive down Sunset Blvd. in Los Angeles, as I did the other night, and see Demi Moore in a crew cut, glaring out fiercely from the side of an entire office building on one of the largest movie posters in history. Well, the lieutenant is talking for herself, not Moore. (Ebert C1)

Moore becomes, here literally, the 'poster girl' for fearless womanhood under attack from the system it threatens. She uses her very physicality to defeat that system. Like Erin Grant, Meredith Johnson, and Hester Prynne, Jordan threatens the status quo and community order. Through each role beginning with Hester, Moore progressively defeats the system more decisively—first escaping it, then exposing it, and then earning a place in it. Moore cunningly shaped a public image for herself through this progression, encouraging an identification between herself and these characters. Linda Williams asserts that "Moore’s consummate stardom is partly rooted in the way she has manipulated the boundary between screen and private selves. Her approach here is reminiscent of the old studio system’s exploitation of the ‘real’ self as commodity, placed adjacent to the film persona, the two to be modeled, marketed, and advertised as one” (19). Of course, she most famously courted controversy and notoriety in her nude *Vanity*
Fair magazine covers (August 1992 and 1994), promoting herself as a sexually frank embodiment of female power. In the first, she is very pregnant, and in the second, she wears a painted-on men’s suit. Moore has been very successful in appropriating an image and guiding public perception of herself. Fact and film had melded so completely by 1997 that G. I. Jane’s writer, Danielle Alexandra, could assert, in the film’s production notes, “There was never any question in my mind that anyone other than Demi Moore would play the role [of Jordan]... As I wrote the screenplay, I thought of the personal and physical strength that Demi Moore has as an individual, a survivor, a woman, an achiever and an actress.” Demi Moore, the real person, came to Hollywood as a teenager with her mother, and rose through the daytime TV and B-movie ranks to stardom and celebrity marriage. But Demi Moore the icon is a heroine.

The Scarlet Letter’s screenwriter, Douglas Day Stewart, attests to this when he asserts that “there are Hester Prynnes in every era...and Demi Moore is absolutely the lady of ours. If Hester Prynne were alive today, she’d be appearing naked on the cover of Vanity Fair” (qtd. in Webster 40). Roland Joffé agrees, explaining that there are “real similarities” between Moore and Hawthorne’s scarlet woman. He asserts that his belief in the similarity of the two women’s oppression at the hands of patriarchy stems, in Moore’s case, from “a feeling that Demi has not been treated seriously as an actress because she’s not been afraid to show her sexuality. She related to the dual standard [Hester]’s been subjected to on a gut level” (qtd. in Webster 40). Public image and fictional role have not been so entwined since Lillian Gish used her Griffith-created image to convince church officials to support her turn as Hester. In Demi Moore’s case, her turn as Hester can be seen as the turning point in her career plan, an attempt to build
on her image as a strong, in-control woman to finally do what Meredith Johnson could not—win. Her roles since, as victorious citizen/mother, stripper/mother and soldier, are only variations on a theme first decisively courted when Moore chose to adapt The Scarlet Letter. As it was with Gish, it is impossible to tell where Hester ends and Moore begins in the film. And again, Hester is changed to suit a public image and career plan. Hester is reshaped this time not as an innocent but strong-willed waif, but as a “feisty feminist rebel” (Ansen 87) out of Moore’s necessity. Hawthorne, as Kenneth Turan notes wryly, “failed to turn Hester into the kind of take charge, watch-my-dust individual strong enough to attract the attention of an actress like Demi Moore” (1). And so Moore’s image overpowers her performance—Hester becomes Moore, Moore does not become Hester.

An image like Moore’s could only be built in the context of the early and mid-Nineties. Gestures like her Vanity Fair covers, as well as her choice of roles, were aimed straight at the culture wars and the family values debate. Although debate had been developing through the Eighties as a conservative backlash against the presumed anti-family agenda of the Seventies, it was really not until 1992, the election year, that the family values campaign became newsworthy. In the minds of most people, the debate began on May 19th, 1992, when Republican vice-presidential candidate Dan Quayle (verbally) attacked an unwed mother named Murphy Brown. The L.A. Times reported that “in a stern admonition on behalf of traditional mores, Quayle said the ‘lawless social anarchy’ that erupted in Los Angeles emerged from a broader breakdown that has fostered a ‘poverty of values,’ ” and that “the plight of urban America has not been helped by the portrayal this week on TV’s Murphy Brown of the title character mocking
the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice’” (A1). Like the iron men Hester battles, Quayle placed the responsibility for widespread criminality (sin) and anarchy on women’s renunciation of traditional sexual codes, their ‘poverty of values.’ He went even further than Reverend Stonehall does in Joffe’s film, blaming unwed mothers for the breakdown of society, citing the L.A. riots, which were “directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and the social order in too many areas of our society” (A14). Quayle offered as proof “statistics showing sharp increases in illegitimacy and crime rates among black Americans to suggest that within the nation’s underclass, the most troublesome poverty is ‘fundamentally a poverty of values’” (A14).

The Right Wing’s attacks on single-parent families and the entertainment industry, connected in Quayle’s speech, continued apace in the Nineties. Quayle’s rhetoric was initially successful with the public until the leadership convention of 1992 in Houston, in which the morality platform began to overshadow all other issues and alienate moderate Republicans. After 1992, “the Republicans sought ways to bring a family values agenda back to life” (Weintraub B10). By 1994, the year of congressional by-elections, the rhetoric had been mainstreamed, largely due to the efforts of a plethora of conservative citizens’ groups, most prominently The Christian Coalition and The American Family Association. Congress was flooded with new conservative members elected on the family values platform. By 1994, “the family became the moral center for political and cultural rhetoric; a family which was held as metonymic, explicable and responsible for the social formation in toto” (Harwood 3). But by this time the real policy makers for the movement were not the fledgling congressmen, but the leaders of the
conservative lobby groups. The American Family Association, under the leadership of Reverend Daniel Wildmon, began assaulting corporate America, organizing enormous boycotts of companies that he pronounced “anti-family.” One of the most successful campaigns was aimed at K-Mart for being purveyors of pornography (178).

The Christian Coalition, directed by Ralph Reed, concentrated on influencing government policy in the name of the family. In May 1995, Reed began trying to legislate directly, when he released the “Contract With the American Family,” a list of reforms modeled on the Republican Congress’s “Contract With America” (concerning economic matters) of 1994. The Coalition’s association with the 1994 Congress is made explicit in the 1995 Contract’s preamble, which states, “The message of the election was clear. The American people want lower taxes, less government, strong families, protection of innocent life, and traditional values” (qtd. in Griggs 4). To that end, the Contract suggests ten reforms: restoring religious equality, returning control of education to the local level, promoting school choice, granting restitution to crime victims, ending tax penalties for homemakers, protecting parental rights, restoring respect for human life (i.e., limiting abortion), restricting pornography, privatizing the arts, and encouraging support for private charities (2). In the fine print, the Coalition urges not only an encouragement of privatized philanthropy but a full-scale retreat from federal social programs like Welfare. Some civil groups on the Left, like the American Humanist Association, lamented the Contract as an assault on the separation of church and state. Indeed, the politicizing of the family did lead to a reintroduction of religion as a political tool. Just before the 1994 by-election, Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House, declared in a speech to another conservative lobby group, The Heritage Foundation, “I do have a
vision of America in which a belief in the Creator is once again at the center of defining being an American... That is a radically different vision of America that the secular anti-religious view of the Left” (qtd. in Carr 26).

The Contract’s stance on Welfare was particularly controversial, given the explicit claims to familism of the Coalition. Obviously, those to be hit hardest by a roll-back of Welfare would be impoverished single mothers who could not work due to a lack of child care. The Coalition’s familism only applied to two-parent families. *The Village Voice* painted a clear picture of the message behind the rhetoric: “There, knee-deep in welfare, stands she whom right-wing Republicans see as public enemy number one: the unwed mother. And they really want to teach her a lesson” (Carr 30). Joseph Natoli asserts that “the bedrock premise of Ralph Reed’s Contract With the American Family is that family values do not emerge from the single parent family. Or from homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual families. What they need to grow is a proper patriarchal family—mother in the kitchen, father at work and kids in school” (102). Democratic Congresswoman Pat Schroeder argued that this narrow definition of the American family was ridiculous, since “only about 7 percent of all American families fit the Ozzie and Harriet model” (qtd. in James Q. Wilson 25). But this was the very reason for the poverty of values that plagued modern America, answered conservative social critics like Quayle and Charles Murray, who called for a restigmatization of unwed motherhood in 1994. The noted libertarian and author of *The Bell Curve* (1994) claimed in an article on “What To Do About Welfare” (and elsewhere) that his social research into the spread of crime convinced him that “illegitimacy is the central social problem of our time, and that its spread threatens the underpinning of a free society” (26). Murray and others hoped that unwed
motherhood could be eliminated by a withdrawal of welfare aid, without which women would presumably turn to men for financial support and form families for the sake of survival. Murray’s argument is that children cannot be properly socialized without fathers, so he suggests the re-establishment of “the authority of fathers by eliminating government support for mothers. Murray would like to see the total abolition of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and (ideally) all other forms of aid” (Carr 30). The Village Voice reported, “Indeed, Murray wonders whether economic threats could possibly be punishing enough to stop single motherhood. ‘Or do we need a contemporaneous revival of the moral sanctions against illegitimacy to make the economic penalties work?’ [he said]. He doesn’t say what those sanctions might be. Scarlet letters?’” (Carr 30). While economic conservatives rallied around these proposed cuts to costly social programs, money was never the point for reformers like Murray and the Christian Coalition. Welfare was instead a symbol of the family values crusade’s frustration and gall at the permissiveness of mainstream society and an ‘anti-family’ Clinton White House. Conservative UCLA professor James Q. Wilson made the terms of the political debate over sexual morality plain in April 1993 when he wrote,

[T]his raging cultural war... is far more consequential than any of the other cleavages that divide us. Many Americans hope that President Clinton will stand up for ‘traditional family values,’ by which they mean, not male supremacy, spousal abuse, or docile wives, but the over-riding importance of two-parent families that make child care their central responsibility... Let him say that it is wrong—not just imprudent, but wrong—to bear children out of wedlock. (31)

That same month, April 1993, The Atlantic Monthly published Barbara Defoe Whitehead’s landmark article, “Dan Quayle Was Right,” that offered evidence, similar to
Murray’s, of the innate superiority of the two-parent family. This article was heralded by Murray and others as one of the events that catalyzed the mainstreaming of the conservative position on family values. It was in *The Atlantic Monthly*—the moral agenda had arrived. The White House soon answered Wilson’s challenge. The government’s embrace of the Right’s social policy was first signaled by Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, who told *Newsweek*, “I don’t like to put this in moral terms, but I do believe that having children out of wedlock is just wrong” (qtd. in Stacey “New” 120). And finally in December of that year, 1993, sensing the political winds that would influence the 1994 election, Bill Clinton told the same magazine, “Remember the Dan Quayle speech? There were a lot of very good things in that speech… Would we be a better-off society if babies were born to married couples? You bet we would” (Stacey “Scents” 54). While not the moral condemnation Wilson sought, Clinton’s comment was a sort of vindication for Dan Quayle, almost elevating him to the status of social policy prophet.

The rightward swing on social issues of the Clinton administration ensured its re-election in 1996, and understandably frightened women’s rights and poverty advocacy groups. Even James Wilson recognized that there existed in the new familism the seeds of a backlash against feminism. He identified that the family values debate had definite implications for the status of women, since “to defend the two-parent family is to defend, the critics worry, an institution in which woman is subordinated to her husband, confined to domestic chores with no opportunity to pursue a career, and taught to indoctrinate her children with a belief in the rightness of this arrangement” (25). The family values crusade of the Nineties threatened a return to Fifties’ style New Traditionalism. As in the
Fifties, the movement was authorized by experts—this time sociologists with doomsday prophecies rather than Freudian psychologists threatening Communist infiltration. And like in the Twenties, the movement was pursued by conservative, largely religious, lobby groups, which wielded as much power in creating social policy as the government.

One is reminded of the Twenties when evaluating contemporary conservative groups like The American Family Association and The Christian Coalition, but also of the Thirties, considering their interest in the entertainment industry. Decades after the end of the Production Code and the disappearance of the Legion of Decency, these groups used their influence within the Republican party and their grassroots support to attempt to censor the film, television and music industries. While the anti-family messages of certain television shows, movies, and music groups were often decried by the Right, the most headline-grabbing stab at Hollywood in the Nineties was, of course, Dan Quayle’s *Murphy Brown* speech. It initiated considerable debate, and rebuttal both on the show itself and in the media in general. It was a shrewder political move than most thought at the time (or than most would believe of Quayle); Bob Dole, the Republican presidential candidate in 1996, attempted to adopt the tactic to attract far-Right votes. *The New York Times* reported on June 1st, 1995, that

in his quest to gather support from conservative Republicans for his presidential bid, Senator Bob Dole made a withering attack tonight on the entertainment industry for what he said was a barrage of movies and recordings that are slashing the social fabric of the nation. [Dole] has never been known to strongly espouse the party’s moral agenda and concluded that he had to add some punch. (Weintraub A1)

Traditionally more an economic than social conservative, Dole waded into the family
values debate out of political expediency, sounding the same doomsday predictions as the conservative experts: “We have reached the point where our popular culture threatens to undermine our character as a nation” (qtd. in Weintraub A1). While Democrats would largely shy away from implicating Hollywood in the poverty of values crisis, by 1996 it was undeniable that, influenced by the debate, Americans “increasingly searched for a moral framework within the forms of popular culture” (Harwood 3) and many did not like what they saw.

Among all of the pundits who identified Hollywood as the source or at least a perpetuator of the poverty of values, only Dan Quayle was more reviled by the industry than one of its own, New York Post film reviewer Michael Medved. In the same year as Quayle’s speech, 1992, Medved published Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values. The staunchly conservative columnist had been waging war on immorality in the movies for years, but systematized his conspiracy theories and bolstered them with figures and statistics in this popular treatise. Using the same language as Charles Murray and Bob Dole, Medved lamented that few of us view the show business capital as a magical source of uplifting entertainment, romantic inspiration, or even harmless fun. Instead, tens of millions of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children. The dream factory has become a poison factory. (3)

He quoted Pat Buchanan’s assertion that liberals were “engaged in a cultural struggle to root out the old America of family, faith, and flag and recreate society in a pagan image” (qtd. in Medved Hollywood 23). “Family” and “faith” were also highly loaded and
exclusionary terms on this front of the culture war as well, and the industry was labeled, as it was by Quayle, a major contributor to the climate of licentiousness and disrespect for traditional values that pervaded the culture and led to unwed motherhood. Medved documented the “increasingly common conviction that mass entertainment exacerbates our most serious social problems” (4) by promoting impoverished values. Family and faith are undermined when “Hollywood no longer reflects—or even respects—the values of most American families… Our fellow citizens cherish the institution of marriage and consider religion an important priority in life; but the entertainment industry promotes every form of sexual adventurism and regularly ridicules religious believers as crooks or crazies” (10). Of course, Hollywood was as easy a target as the unwed mother in the politically motivated culture war. It had always been a source of furious public objection. Medved’s book promotes an ‘us-vs.-them’ mentality, with his almost obsessive use of “we Americans” also found in the Contract With the American Family and the rhetoric of conservative pundits.

Medved is absolutely right when he comments that the culture war’s “struggle in Hollywood is not so much a fight between two competing sets of values as it is a dispute over whether it is appropriate to impose values at all on the creation or evaluation of entertainment” (23). Hollywood’s defenders recognized the dangers of the family values debate—they remembered 1934. MPPA President Jack Valenti, who oversaw the dismantling of the Production Code, argued in 1991, “What we cannot do is allow zealots or self-anointed special groups who claim divine vision to intimidate us or coerce us or frighten us” (qtd. in Medved Hollywood 23). New York City cultural affairs commissioner Mary Schmidt Campbell asserted that the culture war “is no longer a fight
about obscenity... This is about the very principles of democracy and the fundamental values of this country” (23). The vital issue in the Nineties’ family values debate, whether surrounding the unwed mother in the ghetto or the unwed fictional character on prime-time, rested on a society’s right to regulate the beliefs and behavior of its members, its right to impose one set of values—those of a powerful lobby group, elected officials, or even the majority—on everyone. It is, as I have shown, the core social issue in twentieth century American social history. And it is, of course, the principal matter of The Scarlet Letter. As Pearl asks in the Joffe film, “Who is to say what is a sin?” This question is also at the heart of Joffe’s attack on contemporary conservative attempts to legislate morality in the 1995 film. The townsfolk, led by the ministers and officials, impose punishments on women for crimes like adultery and witchcraft, using a religious rhetoric to cover their more earthly political agenda, the maintenance of control over the community. This control is threatened by the marginal women’s rejection of their roles.

While the Puritans, and by extension the Right, use a religious and familist pretext to further their social agenda, Joffe uses a sexual pretext to further his. Sacvan Bercovitch maintains that “in the film, the right to adultery is the cornerstone of democratic values. It signifies by extension...the right to your own beliefs... [T]he magistrates should not have imposed their beliefs on others, and...the good Puritans [Hester, Dimmesdale, Hibbins] would not have done so. The movie’s divine imperative is non-interference” (“Twice-Told” 7-8). The commission of adultery is, in the film, symbolically a final break with the law, since its oppressions, culminating in the imposition of a seven-year waiting period for remarriage, have become intolerable restraints on individual needs. The film makes it clear that “the heart has its irrepresible
reasons and society has its undeniable demands. In the individualist-democratic version of this stand-off, their reasons for self-fulfillment take absolute priority. The tragedy is that society can interfere at all” (11). It is after the sexual act that parts her forever from the law that Hester begins speaking against the law at the meetings, “heading up what looks like the first women’s group in the new world, encouraging self-expression and shocking everyone with her brazen, free-spirited beliefs” (Turan 1), and threatening social cohesion. She has fallen, but only from her unworkable, patriarchally constructed role. This is interpreted as a fortunate fall since, as Bercovitch notes, “governed as it is by patriarchs, society itself makes honest interaction impossible. Hester tries, but she is first ostracized for her beliefs and then imprisoned for witchcraft. Moral: society imprisons the self. Arthur would love to confess, but he’d be hanged if he did. Moral: society kills natural desire” (“Twice-Told” 8). Their adultery is made to stand, in this system, for Nature unsubjugated to human law, which is its opposite. In the film, the magistrates understand that symbolic connection explicitly and even discuss it. The political opportunism of a moral social agenda is even clear to Demi Moore, who commented, “To me, one of the strongest elements that Roland took and really brought to the book is that he proved she’s not being branded for adultery; she’s being branded because they feared the power of her voice. And what she may communicate to other women” (Thompson-Georges 4).

It is imperative to Joffe’s rhetorical program that the connection between Puritan repression and the contemporary conservative backlash in social policy be explicit. The press kit released by Hollywood Pictures speaks of Joffe’s desire to “speak directly to our own age” (14). Joffe is historicizing the current debate by presenting the colonial era as
the "time when the seeds were sown for the bigotry, sexism and lack of tolerance we still battle today" (15). And connections are simplified as much as possible, to the end that "Joffe's movie does make for an obvious allegory for contemporary society—Puritan oppressors murdering a slave girl, labeling single mothers witches, betraying the trust of Native Americans, and repressing women in general can easily be seen as Joffe's stab at The Contract With America, Dan Quayle's attack on single mothers," and conservatives both in front of and behind the political scenes (Barnstone D6). In the press kit, Joffe explicitly names Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell as the model for one of the magistrates (Joffe/Hollywood Pictures 29).

The "good Puritans" and "bad Puritans," as Bercovitch calls them, are delineated not just by their speech and action, but by their connection to Nature, constructed as the absence of restraint. Joffe explains that "the Puritans feared anything that was uncontrolled... They had a deep fear of the forest, of the Indians and also of sexuality" (18). The three characters who resist community repression, Hester, Dimmesdale, and Mistress Hibbins, are thus connected to all three threats to Puritan order. The gravest sin in the world of the film is repression, figured as a turning away from Nature, and by extension, the natural love of freedom and sexuality.

Hester is connected to Nature immediately in her first scene, when she expresses her wish to have seen the New World "when it was wild and untouched." She chooses to live close to the woods over the objections of the community, and transforms herself into a priestess of Nature at her first opportunity. When she discovers Dimmesdale swimming nude, her hair has been loosened and her head is ringed with flowers. When she is called back to the farm to prepare for church, she sheepishly hides her crown, expecting the
disapproval of the minister who comes to fetch her. But she is not sheepish at all about her bathing tub, about which she laughs off Mituba’s suspicion, rooted as it is in a presumed connection between the body, sexuality, and Satan.

Harriet Hibbins identifies Hester immediately as a kindred spirit. She is not a feminist prophet, but she understands human nature, “the hearts of men,” through a natural intuition, not through witchcraft as she jokes. The community condemns as witchcraft (a peculiarly feminine perversion of nature) matriarchal communal living and herbal medicine, things that represent for Hibbins only living in harmony with the natural world. Significantly, Hibbins is a midwife, possessing the secrets of childbirth. She is the woman’s sphere embodied. Hibbins is also frank and open about sex, as are her cohorts, joking about it with a distinctly un-Puritan raucousness. But these women, among them prostitutes and a captive, have had to be pragmatic about sex when they have been abused and rejected by the community for their sexuality.

The Hibbins group’s tolerance is best expressed in the absorption of Native women and Native culture evident in their camp. Hibbins wears a feathered headdress, and Native women are seen drying skins and dancing around the compound’s fire. Even Hester attaches a feathered decoration to her satchel. And the former captive, Mary, reports that her Indian captors treated her well, better than her own people in fact. The Native image is explicitly sexualized in the bawdy talk during the women’s meeting, and in their speculation about Native sexual practices. Of course, this is all to the horror of a conventional Puritan matron, who expresses the conventional preference for death over sexual dishonor with a savage, and is shocked to find she possesses a minority opinion.

Finally, Dimmesdale is very strongly connected to the Native world and Nature
unadulterated in his first two scenes, and consistently throughout the film. In the opening scene, Metacomet singles him out as worthy, and he exchanges dialogue with him in Algonquin. Dimmesdale is translating the Bible into the Native language, more as an attempt to bridge the cultural divide than to impose Puritan dogma on his friends. In the second half of the movie, Pearl reports in voice-over that her father spent little time in town after his love for Hester was frustrated by the law, preferring to roam the forest with a Native companion. But the forest was always Dimmesdale’s natural habitat, as we learn from his second appearance onscreen, in which he bathes nude in a secluded pond, in the full embrace of Nature.

Through Hester, Dimmesdale, and the women of Hibbins’s collective, Joffe builds an association between Nature, Native sexuality, and a sort of ‘natural morality’ that sets these characters apart from the less reasonable Puritans who persecute them out of fear. This image of the ‘natural’ white race of the New World, the American, existing in opposition to Old World civilization and repressions, was famously popularized by James Fenimore Cooper in his character Natty Bumppo of the Leatherstocking series. But this image was, in 1995, experiencing a resurgence in popularity, including the success of an adaptation of Cooper’s most famous novel, The Last of the Mohicans, in 1992. The cinematic popularity of the natural American in the Nineties began in 1990 with Dances With Wolves. This film formed a blueprint for Hollywood’s Nineties revisionist Western politic, with the forces of civilization wearing the black hats, committing cultural genocide and fouling the untainted paradise of North America. They are opposed by brave but doomed Natives and their hero, the Nativized white man, the American. He is eco-friendly, politically correct, deeply spiritual but not religious, and distrustful of
traditional authority. From his adopted Native culture, he learns to respect Nature and value freedom above all else, and to despise his own culture's tyranny and repression.

Joffe plays with this new Native paradigm, but at the same time he is unwilling to fully relinquish the traditional Western-style suspense built through the paranoia about an Indian attack. The paranoia is built from the first scene, and paid off in the climactic attack on the town that saves Dimmesdale from the hangman’s noose and punishes the community as only the return of the repressed can. But Joffe’s ideological waters turn a bit murky when the noble Wampanoag people begin slaughtering the townsfolk, and even threatening little Pearl. Surely they should recognize her as one of the “good” Puritans! Even Dimmesdale’s faithful companion Johnnie Running Moose begins cutting throats with abandon. Perhaps Joffe is commenting on the inefficacy of Christian missionary work, but it is really the vicissitudes of a cinematic climax that are being expressed. Joffe is trying to have it both ways—exploit the Native in the traditional Western sense for excitement, and curry favor with the politically correct.

The confusion created by inconsistencies in Joffe’s politics finds its ultimate expression in Chillingworth. Of course, Hester’s husband is the only character connected to Native culture in the novel. He is introduced to the reader, positioned beside a Native visitor to town during the first scaffold scene, “clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume” (71). Hawthorne tells us very little about Chillingworth’s experiences among the Indians. Joffe opens up his time as a captive with several scenes in which he is tortured and then gradually absorbed into Talantine society. But he is eventually returned to the whites when his viciousness becomes apparent to the tribe. The disarray of white and Native clothing is replaced by a mad confusion in his mind, as his psyche is
split along cultural lines. The Puritan Chillingworth is cold and repressed, but when his emotions rise, he sheds that identity to give vent to them through a Native persona. First, he screams at Hester in Algonquin while abusing her physically. And ultimately, when his madness and desire for revenge overwhelm him, he transforms into a warrior. That desire sated by his (supposed) scalping of Dimmesdale, Chillingworth burns his Native costume and renounces that identity, now masking his savagery behind a placid Puritan exterior. Chillingworth, of course, is no natural man in the tradition of Natty Bumpo or *Dances With Wolves'* John Dunbar. As a Puritan, he represses his dark impulses, his anger and lust, but they do not disappear. Rather they return in the personality of a Native in the Western tradition—an identity that is presumed, in his mind, to be a repository for emotion. The result of his repression is madness. Instead of learning a respect for freedom and the natural order as a result of his contact with the Natives, Chillingworth transforms himself into the Western stereotype of the bloodthirsty brave—alien, painted, stalking his prey at night. He is uninterested in the ‘natural morality’ that sanctifies his wife’s union with another man, but is actuated only by rage. Joffe exploits the negative cinematic Indian stereotype safely by displacing it onto a white man, in whose madness Native values have been inverted.

Unfortunately, while a thorough reading of Joffe’s Chillingworth reveals the psychology of his identity confusion, for the audience he merely supplies a conventional terror. While Indianized heroes like Dimmesdale may represent the best qualities in humanity and a hope for a racially integrated future (as do his cinematic predecessors Hawkeye and Dunbar),

Joffe sadly perpetuates the racism he attempts
to comment on by making the Native Americans into set dressing and ultimately a weak story device. The occasional mentions of unrest in the Native American tribe are tantamount to the sounds of ‘tom-toms in the distance’ that were standard in old cowboy movies. And the evolution of the Robert Duvall character [Chillingworth] into a spiritually aware Native American warrior ultimately doesn’t bring him honor, but insanity and death. (Poland F3)

Joffe is, again, trying to have it both ways—to exploit a conventional image of Natives to advance his plot and build tension on a story level while relying on a more politically correct characterization of them to provide a philosophical underpinning for Hester and Dimmesdale’s heroism on a thematic level. Ultimately, these two aims clash as violently as the war party and townsfolk in the climactic scene.

Women and Natives, having been conflated within the world of the film as threats to order, also receive a similar double-dealing treatment in Joffe’s hands. His attempt to construct the ideal feminist heroine is sabotaged by a subtler sexism that pervades the film. Joffe reproduces traditional cinematic exploitation of women with a politically correct cover story. He shuts down his feminist heroine by containing her through the narrative. Hester’s potential as a feminist icon is circumscribed by the reformulated narrative. Brian Johnson argues that “despite her feminist posturing...Hollywood’s take on Hester is more old-fashioned than Hawthorne’s. The book’s heroine carved out a real independence, honing her skills as a seamstress. In the movie, she is just another love-struck female—promoting her passion with a scarlet logo” (68). Moore’s Hester is completely defined by her relationship with Dimmesdale, to the extent that she is “readier to be a martyr and lover than seamstress and mother” (Corliss 94). She even admits that
she worked hard during her pregnancy in an attempt to miscarry! The care of Pearl, whose role is significantly reduced in this film so that she becomes a sign of witchcraft in the courtroom rather than a supernatural imp herself, is mainly left to the slave Mituba. Moore’s Hester is only really maternal during a long, turgid birth scene, and then Pearl seems to drop out of the picture. She is reduced to a prop as Hester is increasingly defined as a feminist warrior, ready even to die with Hibbins and abandon her child to fate. As Owen Gleiberman comments, the film is “too busy canonizing its heroine to make much sense of her” as a mother or a lover (44).

Joffe’s inability to make sense of the motivations or psychology of Hawthorne’s heroine is most explicitly revealed in the new ending. Joffe explained in his interview for The Learning Channel’s “Great Books” series (Discovery Channel Video: 1996), “For me, the great false note in Hester’s character at the end is that Hester stays on in the town, puts off everything that she’s believed in the hopes that this will come to Pearl, and lives as a kind of gray eminence who earns the respect of the town. That for me is totally out of character.” In the logic of the character he has built, one to be played by Demi Moore, the feminist triumphant rejects the supplications of the community that has oppressed her and rides off into a better future. And so this is what she does. But this Hester does not go alone. Sacvan Bercovitch has called Joffe’s ending a wish-fulfillment (“Twice-Told” 2). In her piece on the film, Joyce Carol Oates picked up this idea, charging that
ness is a melancholy fantasy in 1995 when, unlike the movie’s Hester Prynne, so many women are still stalked, beaten or killed by possessive lovers, or left to raise a child on their own. (15)

Since the crime for which she is punished, adultery, is figured in the film as not only unsinful but a necessary rebellion against unjust social repression and consistent with natural morality, Hester is rewarded “with a healthy male” (Matthews B2). Moore’s Hester Prynne is not Murphy Brown—she will not have to sacrifice love or endure the hardship of single parenthood. The successful romance plot contains Hester’s true radicalism. She has defeated the masculinist state, but still gets her man. In this way, as Michael Dunne comments, the triumph of Joffe’s feminist icon

is mixed. Despite her professional self-reliance, she is well on her way to being hanged when the dashingly attired Dimmesdale finally arrives to declare his love and save the day. Significantly, Hester and the other accused women are gagged as well as bound in this scene… Joffe thus both strikes a note of feminism and sings the lyric of a violent finale, proving to his Nineties audience that—despite Puritan hang-ups suggesting the contrary—you really can have it all. (“Ninety” 37)

The film tries to “have it all” by asserting Hester’s independence and then rewarding her with a romantic relationship. Just as he tried to be racially progressive and exploit stereotypes, Joffe here tries to be feminist and romantic. The earlier adaptations that ended the story with Dimmesdale’s death on the scaffold left Hester’s future an open question, unwilling to confirm the possibility that she would never find love and happiness. Joffe takes this evasion of Hawthorne’s unromantic conclusion a step further, disallowing that possibility entirely. Although Pearl reports in voice-over that her parents’ years together were short and that Hester never remarried, it is the image of the
two of them in the wagon, riding off into the sunset, that remains. Hester’s independent life occurs outside the film, unrepresented and unrepresentable, given the conventional logic of punishment and reward the film has set up. Hester need never become what the magistrates feared—an alternative. Having proposed a mutually supportive feminist collective that operates as an alternative to the dominant ideology, the film ultimately separates Hester from it and places her in a conventional nuclear, heterosexual family unit. The “family” as a concept is not under siege by the rebellion of women like Hester—it is her family that is under siege by ideologues. They are an outlaw family, but they are still a conventionally structured family. And they have the moral upper hand, because their relationship is consecrated by God.

Ultimately, Joffe’s attempt to “have it all” unravels the film entirely. With its sights set on the Right Wing’s social agenda, the film attempts to expose the hypocrisy and oppressiveness of the attempt to legislate morality in the name of God. But rather than open up morality as an issue and separate it from the structures of power, earthly and divine, the film simply replaces conservative morality with its own. The natural morality that the film asserts, along with the love relationship, stands outside of the man-made law (dogmatic, political, oppressive) because it is God’s law. This is the film’s ultimate betrayal of its own message. Pearl asks, echoing both her parents, “Who is to say what is a sin in God’s eyes?” The implication is that we cannot know His will, and must create a just society without invoking Him. This is the film’s argument against the reintroduction in the Nineties of religion and morality into social policy—it is autocratic. But although in the early love scenes Dimmesdale confesses that he does not know God’s will, and Hester argues to the magistrates that no one can be assured of God’s favor, they both
become confident that they know what Heaven allows. Dimmesdale suggests that God arranged Roger's death at the hands of the Talantine so that the lovers could unite, and he prays in the forest to a God he *knows* has given him his family. Both lovers insist, she to the magistrates and he to the crowd, that Dimmesdale is, despite the law, Hester's "true husband," as Dimmesdale shouts, "*in God's eyes.*" The natural morality the film asserts as consecrated and eternal because it derives from nature is only a liberal post-Enlightenment Nineties' perspective. But for the characters, it is God's true will, revealed only to his natural priest and priestess. The Puritan law, which the magistrates use to control the community in God's name, is a false idol. The lovers are not concerned for their eternal souls when they break the law, because they are confident that God's will is knowable and known to them alone. They know what is a sin in God's eyes. The magistrates, and by extension conservative lobby groups and congressmen wading into the family values debate, sin when they use God's name to justify their actions. So does anyone who attempts to speak for God and impose a social agenda on anyone. But ultimately, this is what Hester and Dimmesdale do, as they are caught in the crossfire between the film's confused messages.

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1 A 1996 book detailing the results of the General Social Survey (conducted periodically by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago) supports Medved's claims. The study compared attitudes on a variety of issues among various professions. Among its findings was the conclusion that "only 42 percent of movie makers believe that adultery is wrong, compared to 76 percent of business elites, 62 percent of lawyers, and nine out of ten religious leaders. Yet again, the public is much more conservative than Hollywood: from 1972 to 1982, 70 percent of the GSS respondents indicated that extramarital sex is always wrong and in 1990, 77 percent felt this way, as did 76 percent in 1993" (Powers, Rothman and Rothman 64).

2 In an interview for The Learning Channel's "Great Books" series (Discovery Channel Video: 1996), Joffe discussed the complex nature of the contrary pulls of community order and individual will played out in *The Scarlet Letter.* He commented, "All the issues in *The Scarlet Letter* are totally alive. You know, women are still struggling...in the world that honestly is not shaped in their best interests. We're caught in a conflict... On one hand we need order and we need balance to create a society because we want to create
a world that’s stable enough for people to be able to survive in, and because people want to live, as much as they can, a peaceful life; that’s one side of it. The other side of it is we’re all autonomous human beings, we all have our own passionate natures, our own desires, our own need to create the world in our own mold.”

This destigmatizing of adultery is consistent with the trend in films noted by Powers and the Rothmans. They report that since the mid-Sixties (and the total abandonment of the Production Code),

the negative consequences for characters engaging in non-marital sex have radically declined. In newer movies, characters who engage in non-marital sex are far less likely to be punished for their transgressions...

In the 1976-1990 period, non-marital sex has negative outcomes for some or all individuals in only 26 percent of the films (in only 6 percent are consequences negative for all characters), and in the rest (74 percent), no individuals suffer any negative consequences whatsoever. For better or worse, Hollywood has endorsed a judgment-free approach to sex outside of marriage and the most recent films are the most permissive. (160)
Chapter Seven—“That Isn’t Hawthorne’s Hester”

In 1995, Roland Joffe had a lot of explaining to do. Having produced a film “freely adapted from the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne,” as the opening titles announced, he was hounded by critics charging him with high literary treason. A question he was often asked was this: Why even call the film *The Scarlet Letter* when it so clearly was not to be the story audiences expected, and custodians of American high culture considered sacrosanct? He answered: “I think not to call it ‘The Scarlet Letter’ would have been an act of cowardice, an attempt to hide what I’m doing. I couldn’t very well make a film about a couple of characters who stand up for personal freedom and then back away from my own convictions. *I considered the film to be a dialogue with Hawthorne’s book,* and I wanted the title all over it” (qtd. in Crisafulli F8, italics mine).

Joffe very self-consciously wades into the culture war of his time and engages Hawthorne himself in a battle over interpretation of his most famous characters, creating “a critical essay which stresses what it sees as the main theme,” in the phrasing of Neil Sinyard’s prescription for adaptation (117). Joffe says of the end of the novel,

> I felt Hawthorne’s ending was totally a product of the time he wrote it, in the 1840s. It was an easy resolution for Hawthorne because if he killed Arthur and punished Hester, he avoided the consequences of his own statements. He didn’t have to deal with the fact that this was based on an adulterous affair that was going to get rewarded. So he didn’t reward it. He allowed himself the luxury of dealing with an adulterous affair with an immense amount of sympathy and then backed off when he had to nail his flag to the mast for real and punished them both. (qtd. in Grove 12)

He frames the original novel as cultural portraiture, a sort of dated interpretation of its own themes, which he considers eternal. But what Joffe confidently considers a
corrective, his film, is merely a product of the time in which he produced it. He explains that Hawthorne “turns Hester into the model of the nineteenth century ‘good woman,’ a woman who does good work, has a modulated voice and eventually wins the approval of the town. But that isn’t Hawthorne’s Hester. Hawthorne is writing about a woman who had a sensuality and a power and a sense of her own self and would never have asked for forgiveness from the town” (12, italics mine). Not in 1995, surely.

But who is Hester Prynne now, if not the woman Hawthorne created? She is a winsome waif with a will of iron and a dark secret, a tough but loving and maternal woman making do and keeping her chin up, a strong, independent and stoic survivor, a neurotic, stricken lover, a noble protofeminist and a thoroughly modern free spirit. She is whoever we need her to be. Jeanine Basinger, one of the few academics to defend Joffe, did so by reminding us that “[i]t’s been a Hollywood tradition to use classics to reflect the moral and political concerns of the time” (qtd. in Crisafulli F8). Above all else, this study has demonstrated that. And above all other concerns, it is the politics of gender, with its related questions of morality, that film and television have most pervasively influenced, reflected, and chronicled.

One of the passages that first inspired this project reads: “[s]ince the image of womanhood upheld by society is a cultural by-product of its mores and profoundly resistant to change, whenever change occurs, society is experiencing certain transformations” (Higashi 110). Films and television have been crucial contributors to those changes, often blamed for them, but always evocative reflections of them. And so it is with adaptations of The Scarlet Letter. Each Hester we have met represents an idea of womanhood for which the film argues. And the variety of Hesters examined herein
(from Gish to Demi, or even from Mary Sinclair to Kim Stanley!) is a testimony to the radical transformations—advancements and retrenchments—of the twentieth century.

In this way, Hester stands not only for women in modern America but, like the original Hester, for America itself. Hester’s cultural status as America’s first heroine, and first complex protagonist, contributes to the idealization of her character in the films (she is never so idealized by Hawthorne). A sort of burden of fame, or heritage, is at work here in the way the films construct her. Therefore, each generation’s Hester is, in a sense, put forward as both its ideal woman and the apotheosis of the national character appropriate to the era. Thus a close study of the character of Hester in the films reveals its argument not just about women but also about America. In Hester, Hawthorne saw the kernel of the American paradox—how can a society promote personal freedom and limit it at the same time? It was a question of crucial import to the nineteenth century novelist, the Twenties flapper in the back seat of the new motor coach, Frances Marion at her typewriter under the domination of the Legion of Decency, the ERA supporter and the fictional Murphy Brown.

As representations of, and arguments within, their respective cultural conversations about gender and freedom, each adaptation is poignant and profound. But what is their argument, collectively and individually? Each film fashions its heroine (with the exception of Kim Stanley) as a strong-minded and independent woman, and implies that she is a feminist. Her struggle is a trope of gender conflict in that era. The notion of a feminist as an American ideal of womanhood and even national character is part of each filmmaker’s cultural work. But while the cinematic Hesters are more purely heroic and wholly endorsed by their creators than their literary predecessor, they do not
reflect a whole-hearted endorsement of feminism by the filmmakers any more than that which is found in the novel. Hawthorne contains her radicalism rhetorically, and by returning her to the colony in the end. But most of the films contain her radicalism by romanticizing and conventionalizing the love story, building up Dimmesdale as a hero to match her in stature, and refusing to depict her life beyond his death. The story ends on the scaffold because in the world of the films, Hester cannot live beyond her mate. This may reflect the lack of true feminist commitment in the films, but it more likely reveals a concession to the more conservative elements in the audience, society, or production office. It also reveals a commitment to a proven, bankable romantic formula. The exceptions, of course, are the two adaptations produced in the Seventies. The Wenders film permits Hester to escape while Dimmesdale is being throttled, and leaves her future, and that of her female fellow travelers, an open question. The PBS version, with its fidelity mandate, leaves her where Hawthorne does—in the grave, having died a revered counselor of women. Certainly their appearance in the midst of the era of Women’s Liberation accounts for this difference from the other films, this refusal to compromise to romantic convention, but so too does the distance of these productions from mainstream Hollywood, and their distinct (and small) audiences.

The PBS adaptation is the only one to formally commit itself to faithfully dramatizing the novel, but ironically, the film that reorganizes the story the most, Wenders’s, is the one most often praised as consistent with Hawthorne’s tragic vision. But why does this even matter? The ‘letter and spirit’ adaptation theory of Andre Bazin has long been discounted as too limiting and unsympathetic to the independent concerns of film as an art form. As Joffe argues, “the closer you keep to a kind of reproduction,
the less you really allow the book to breathe” (qtd. in Grove 12). Throughout this study, I have paid scrupulous attention to the precise ways in which each adaptation “kicks the novel around” (Sinyard 117). It is my argument that fidelity issues are still relevant to the study of film adaptation, not because the written text should be privileged over the cinematic, but because the very specific (large-scale or even minute) changes made to the story reveal compelling historical information. The precise ways that each adaptation alters the source material, and symptomatic investigations of the reasons for the changes, yield fascinating evidence of cultural assumptions and rhetorical challenges to those assumptions. A literary work of the status of The Scarlet Letter is not altered on a whim, since any change, any interpretation that is unorthodox, is certain to produce outrage (as we have seen). Changes made to Hester’s story, therefore, must be the result of perceived necessity to the adaptor’s ends. The interpretation of the novel represented by each film is consecrated by its adaptor and its audience. The close study of each film’s infidelity (if that word can be so casually used in a discussion of this novel) will reveal the motivations that necessitated it.

My proposition, to conduct a rhetorical hermeneuticist analysis of each film’s rhetoric based on the way it reinterprets the novel, permits a comparative analysis of multiple interpretations over the history of film, revealing a further wealth of information about the changes in a culture’s cultural conversations over time. Once a film adaptor’s reasons for interpreting and retelling the story in a specific way have been revealed, and the historical particulars that influence and determine that reading are established, it is possible to enlarge the scope of study to consider the interpretations consecrated for other historical moments. While many academic and popular studies of film’s intersection with
social history chronicle the medium's relationship to the ever-shifting cultural landscape of America in the twentieth century, it is my belief that most of them have built their arguments on an unstable base. By attempting to distill the nature of cultural attitudes from a survey of wholly different films—comedies, tragedies, and even completely different stories within the same genre—students of American culture have failed to exploit the possibility for a more reliable form of comparative analysis inherent in the study of different adaptations of the same novel (comparing apples to apples, if you will). In a study like this, the original story provides a more stable template, structurally. This has proven a more reliable and methodological methodology. But for it to succeed, fidelity to the novel must once again be a basis for analysis, not as a judgement of the film's value, but as a first step in divining its rhetoric.
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