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A Cognitive Study of the Ethics of Adultery in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*.



Figure 1. Tanya Shpakow, 'The Scarlet Letter' colored pencil

“This illustration of a scarlet letter A was inspired by looking at homespun fabric in several New England museums as well as viewing some old Irish linen. My admiration for Erica Wilson, the needlework artist, inspired me to draw from some of my own rather primitive embroidery and crewelwork”- Tanya Shpakow.

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M. Res.
Macquarie University, and is entirely my own work, not submitted elsewhere for
examination.

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Summary

The novels that constitute my project, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), challenge the conventional taboo that has seen cultures over centuries reject adulterers generally, and female adulterers more particularly. In their respective representations of sexual transgression, both Hawthorne and Wharton surprise us. Adultery becomes a vehicle through which both authors elevate the scarlet woman to the point of admiration.

My enquiry is situated in a transdisciplinary space, combining cognitive approaches to literature, gender studies and close attention to historical sources as well as to the novels. It recruits the capacity of the combination of these approaches to examine Hawthorne and Wharton's primary sources in order to gauge how far these sources shed light on both the intent and construction of their respective texts. The primary value that emerges from this combined approach is that, when the interplay between context and text is considered in close detail, both Hawthorne and Wharton can be shown to have held a high regard for women, a regard that plays out in their fiction. This shared value necessitates drawing on gender studies, looking specifically at how 'the spatial turn' and the question of how women are made to 'perform gender' invite us to recognise the originality of Hawthorne and Wharton's representations of Hester Prynne and Ellen Olenska. By enlisting cognitive approaches to literary studies this thesis identifies the narrative strategies deployed by both novelists to invite the reader to not only empathise with the scarlet woman, but, surprisingly, to admire her.

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A Cognitive Study of the Ethics of Adultery in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*.

Introduction

Violation of the marital relationship carries a high charge, and those who threaten this institution suffer, unsurprisingly, charged judgments. Breaking its code is taboo. It is a taboo so extreme that, in some cultures today, adultery still results in people being stoned to death. When an adulterous couple is accused, it is often the woman who is stoned while the man is merely whipped. What could be concluded here is that adultery is not only judged severely by these cultures, but that the judgment is gendered. English literature's engagement with the taboo that is adultery often repeats the pattern of this judgment and this gendering according to cultural norms, although the physical punishment depicted can be less severe.

The novels that constitute my project, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), challenge this pattern and the taboo schemas of their own cultural contexts. In their respective representations of sexual transgression, both Hawthorne and Wharton confound our expectations by representing acts of and reactions to adultery in order to encourage admiration rather than condemnation of the so-called 'scarlet woman'. The protagonists of their novels, Hester Prynne and the Countess Olenska, are individuals who create a space for themselves where they stand apart from, even above, their respective society's legalism and laws. In the same way, Hawthorne and Wharton have created texts that stand apart from and above the traditional patterned judgments concerning adultery; the texts are spaces that honour women.

Both representations of these women, Hester Prynne and Ellen Olenska, bear striking similarities. The women seem to be the location in both narratives of truly principled

behaviour, generating an almost numinous quality. The irony generated, that the ethical sits within the adulterous, seems to lend enormous strength to the representation of both characters. What complicates this intriguing representation is that often it is only the reader, or at times a very minor character, who perceives this superior quality. Hidden from the elite and powerful in the settings of Salem and New York respectively, but privileged to only a few, this hidden architecture of knowledge is a strategy through which both authors invite the reader to revere the characters of Hester and Ellen. As readers, we are offered a fuller picture of their character, of the people they are when they are not observed, and in these moments their true nature is revealed.

It would appear then that both Hawthorne and Wharton choose to represent the adulterer as the ethical centre of the narrative - an audacious move. Two questions prompted by these representations form the heart of this study. What might be the author's purpose for such a daring move? What strategies are recruited to achieve such an ethical recalibration?

The necessity of a transdisciplinary study

An author's decision to emotionally align the reader with the character of an adulterer prompts many further questions. While this project is essentially a literary study with close textual analysis as the foundation, answers to these questions must necessarily draw on knowledge drawn from a range of disciplines combining cognitive approaches to literature, gender studies and close attention to historical sources as well as to the novels.

Examining Hawthorne and Wharton's primary sources, such as their letters and diaries, will allow me to gauge how far these sources shed light on both the intent and construction of their respective texts. This contextual study will offer some insight into their values and once this is achieved, I can examine how far the values that governed the relevant author's life shaped the narratives that tell us of the characters of Hester Prynne and Ellen Olenska,

the female heroines of the texts, both of whom are scarlet women. While my interest in the text's context is influenced to some degree by New Historicism generally and the work of Stephen Greenblatt more particularly, rather than reducing a text to being merely a representation of its context (one of the dangers of the New Historicist approach) I am more interested in how the texts spoke directly to their first audience and how they now speak directly to the readers of today. Stephen Greenblatt's recent comment referencing this interest is apt. He reflects that his:

deep, ongoing interest is in the relation between literature and history, the process through which certain remarkable works of art are at once embedded in a highly specific life-world and seem to pull free of that life-world. I am constantly struck by the strangeness of reading works that seem addressed, personally and intimately, to me, and yet were written by people who crumbled to dust long ago, (2000).

The structure of this study reflects my view that context, Greenblatt's "highly specific life-world" is a rich resource through which to better understand a text (2000). In Chapter 1, I research Nathaniel Hawthorne's context and in Chapter 2, I apply my findings pertaining to his values to the literary criticism that has framed our reading of *The Scarlet Letter*. I pay closer attention to what Hawthorne valued in his "life-world", hoping that it might provide a valuable scale by which to weigh the relative values of past criticism, and provide a framework within which further research could be profitably situated (2000). The same pattern is repeated for my study of Edith Wharton. Chapter 3 is a study of her context, looking as an historian would at the primary sources of her letters, diaries and essays. In Chapter 4 I deploy my findings to firstly weigh the fine tradition of literary criticism of her work, and then use this scale to properly assess my own criticism. One common value emerges from each study of the "life-world[s]" of Hawthorne and Wharton, (Greenblatt). It is their esteem for women.

Since the author's esteem for women is a primary value that emerges from a study of the respective contexts of both Hawthorne and Wharton, my study is also informed by gender studies. Within this tradition it is the feminist understanding of 'the spatial turn', and of the

notion of gender as performance, that best enrich my enquiry. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* images the necessary new female space as a "room" created by the woman that will both define and free her to become the subject (1945). In this, Woolf challenged the ancient binary that empowered men in a public space and relegated women to a merely private domestic space which had limited power. Having part of that supposedly domestic space of the home cordoned off and designated to be a place for the female to develop, not through domesticity but through her mind, may well have allowed for the development of more recent theories of feminist geography. The recent 'spatial turn' has prompted a reconsideration of what space can be and do for the female and how space can be deployed by the author to gender representation. Susan Stanford Friedman's

"new geographies" articulates "the mapping of terrains and boundaries, the dialectical terrains of inside/outside or centre/margin, the axial intersections of different positionalities, and the spaces of dynamic encounter" (19).

Friedman's understanding can be applied to the character of Hester Prynne, as the physical space to which she is relegated for her adultery, the cottage beyond the bounds of the civilized, while initially being a part of the "centre/ margin" binary, becomes the space of liberty, equality and The Arts, a space of "dynamic encounter" (19). Hester changes the perceived architecture of her home because it becomes a space, not of isolation and punishment, but one where, despite having soil "too sterile for cultivation", she cultivates her artistic skills creating garments such as "gorgeously embroidered gloves" for the town's men of rank (105-106). Similarly the Countess Olenska's deliberate location of her domicile in an "[un]fashionable" sector of New York, "*des quartiers excentriques*" where she welcomes artists and intellectuals who are scorned by New York's elite, is a marker of her independence and suggests that the space a character occupies is a powerful, perhaps gendered, narrative strategy (47). It marks her as a woman who represents a reversal of traditional power structures: male/female; society/ the individual; reality/ The Arts; an

uncommon “space of dynamic encounter” (Friedman, 19). Here we observe how both novelists have recruited a narrative strategy as apparently simple as setting, in order to signal how the space a person chooses to occupy can be a statement of power and individuality which can garner admiration. I would take this argument further and suggest that the male author, Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850, and the female novelist, Edith Wharton in 1920, both created in their works of art a new artistic and female space which transcend the judgments of society that are intended to imprison.

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler argues that gender is a ‘performance’, a metaphor that offers a layered and nuanced lens through which to consider each text (1990). Butler’s description of the female gender as “a stylized repetition of acts . . . a *performative* accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief ” effectively isolates what is uncommon about how both Hawthorne and Wharton construct their heroines (173).

Curiously Hawthorne does not have Hester perform the role of iniquitous woman; instead she performs “dignity” (80). Hawthorne has the narrator position us to admire Hester from her first entry into the narrative as she is described as walking with “natural dignity and force of character” even as she leaves the prison where she has been interred (80).

Similarly Countess Ellen Olenska seems to be amused by New York’s judgmental milieu. When Newland first visits her in her new unfashionable home she laughingly states “Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one’s own fashions?” (47).

The Countess is characterised as a woman who constructs her own understanding of gender and performs what she constructs, rather than being controlled by society’s external values. Through Ellen’s amusement, Wharton positions us with the adulterer, rather than with New York’s elite. Both authors deliberately refuse the established gendered judgment that normally follows the breaking of taboo that is adultery. The works of Woolf and Butler assist in identifying precisely how this gendered pattern of judgment has been

broken and how the new pattern has been established in its place. What remains is to examine the narrative strategies deployed by both authors through which to secure the reader's admiration for the female protagonist: the scarlet women.

Discerning how empathy is generated in the reader is a deeply humanist concern and one that has re-emerged with the Academy's profitable embrace of the cognitive sciences. Specifically, I wish to ascertain how Hawthorne and Wharton's narrative strategies invite the reader to admire the adulteress - a response so personal that Stephen Greenblatt defines it as being:

Constantly struck by the strangeness of reading works that seem addressed, personally and intimately, to me, and yet were written by people who crumbled to dust long ago, (2000).

Perhaps part of what Greenblatt is describing is how literature generally, and the novel form particularly, can position us within the mind of a character. We can be positioned within the mind of an adulterer so entirely that we are required to suspend our judgment of that character and instead embrace their grief. Identifying the narrative strategies deployed to represent these emotional states in order to recruit the reader's judgment, and the purpose of these ethical judgments, form a central part of this enquiry.

Blakey Vermeule's recent work on why we read fiction offers some insights that begin to explain the intimacy of fiction, placing its power in how it moves the reader affectively. Vermeule's central line of enquiry is openly declared in the title of her work, *Why do we care about literary characters?* -an enquiry which interrogates the narrative strategies used to make us "care" (xiii). Vermeule offers a concise history regarding, what she terms, the "trick[s]" writers employ to engage the reader affectively (87). She evaluates the affective capacity of these narrative strategies; strategies deployed by both Hawthorne and Wharton.

Having suggested that narrative strategies are constructed to produce both cognitive and empathic responses, it is timely to ascertain the nature of empathy itself. Within the larger evolutionary process I am tracing lies an evolution on a smaller, but no less important scale, which pertains to the status of empathy studies. In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen offers an incisive and precise summary as to why, until relatively recently, a poised distrust of empathy in aesthetic theory has been *de rigeur* in the Academy (2010). She explains that:

No sooner had the term [empathy] been announced [in the early twentieth century] and situated so centrally in aesthetic theory for an English-language audience ... than it received brisk challenge from high modernist quarters. The disdain of Bertolt Brecht for empathy (and his advocacy of so-called alienation effects), the embrace of difficulty by modernist poets, and the dominance of New Criticism, which taught students to avoid the affective fallacy, all interfered with the integration of empathy into literary theory until recently (19).

No doubt postmodernism's penchant for scepticism and distrust, a position that requires a defensive position, added to this general distrust of the affective domain. However, it seems that the contemporary milieu wisely distrusts postmodern doubt, and increasingly literary studies have been enriched by considering the importance of reader empathy and admiration, as my study hopes to demonstrate.

The text selection may initially appear narrow, yet I would argue that what occurs in them is not easily found elsewhere in the American canon since depicting the adulteress as a deeply ethical character is rare. My situating the two texts together as a study of the representation of sexual transgression, and my consideration of how this representation moves the reader is unprecedented and promises to open up a rewarding field of enquiry.

The scope of the project is challenging because of the number of secondary disciplines being drawn upon. Yet I would argue for the necessity of such a demand, since it is only through considering the content and the importance of primary sources that Hawthorne and Wharton's high regard for women becomes clear. In this context, gender studies offers the appropriate focusing lens through which to examine such esteem. It is from this premise that I can then move to examine how narrative strategies work to move the reader affectively so that the reader is positioned to admire the scarlet woman. At this final point we can begin to reflect on the central irony of both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Age of Innocence*, which is that in these two texts, it is within the adulterous woman that truly ethical behaviour can be found.

Chapter 1

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Context - Legalism and Laws

“The Unpardonable Sin might consist of a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks* (1844, 215)

Hawthorne's values

When Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850 there was a serious objection from some sections of the New England community, demanding that the author rescind 'The Custom-House', which is what appeared to be an autobiographical framework that he had written in order to explain the existence of the tale of 'The Scarlet Letter'. This reaction delighted Hawthorne, who refused to remove it. No matter that the central tale of 'The Scarlet Letter' told of the deepest moral woe, the only concern for many was that in 'The Custom-House' sketch, their Salem community had been satirized. In the Preface to the Second Edition Hawthorne, in keeping with the theatrical tenor of the entire work, declared in an amused tone that he was “constrained... to republish his introductory sketch without the change of a word” (33).

My first interest is in what caused Hawthorne's stubborn delight and what this cause might reveal about his values and his hopes for the novel. What values did he satirize in the sketch, and what can they reveal about his own values in relation to those of his contemporary Salem community? And why is 'The Custom-House' sketch so integral to the effect of the whole text that it must be kept “without change of a word”? (33) Since my argument, that Hawthorne intends for his original Puritan audience to admire an

adulteress (a radical and provocative ambition), it is imperative that I offer an accurate assessment of Hawthorne's values compared to those of his Salem community. I will argue that his amusing and assured dismissal of the indolent men in 'The Custom-House' sketch, is merely part of his larger satirical exposure and denigration of Puritan Salem. Through contrast, his satire serves to elevate the industry and dignity of the adulterous Hester Prynne, the scarlet woman with whom Salem fails to identify.

The second point of interest is more complicated and less amusing. It pertains to the Salem community's failure to recognize the satirical mocking of themselves in 'The Scarlet Letter'. The town immediately recognized themselves in the Custom-House portraiture, and resented Hawthorne's judgment and exposure of their indolence and gluttony, yet Salem failed to recognize the portraiture of themselves in the narrative of 'The Scarlet Letter' and not to notice their abject failure as Puritans to exhibit purity in action. While they watched the Salemites of the 1800s watch the Salemites of the 1600s watch Hester Prynne and condemn her carnality, Hawthorne was watching their failure to read the signs of their own human limitations. My argument is that his goal is to have his contemporaries see themselves in both narratives, not only in 'The Custom-House' sketch. While he trumpets his satire in 'The Custom-House', his mockery in 'The Scarlet Letter' is far more nuanced, so much so that it was missed by his initial audience, and can be missed by readers through the ages. I will argue that Hawthorne wanted his original audience to be moved to pity the adulteress who represents their own weaknesses, and to come to admire this woman, whose humanity finally transcends their own. He wanted to teach them how *not* to read a scarlet letter. This desire is what fires Hawthorne and energises the novel; its source is the deeply held belief in the dignity of the human soul and more particularly, in the power of the feminine.

It seems that the audience of 'The Custom-House', and the audience of 'The Scarlet Letter' are the same audience, and that the men of The Custom-House and the

community of 'The Scarlet Letter' are mocked similarly, albeit through different narrative strategies. Given this parity, my intention is to establish the relationship between his satire of the Salemites of the 1800s depicted in 'The Custom-House' sketch, and his satire of the Puritan Salemites of the 1600s who, in the central tale, excoriate the adulteress, Hester Prynne - making her wear a scarlet letter for her transgressions. Part of my argument depends on explaining that, rather than the two components of the text being regarded as discrete, they are purposely connected in form, structure and strategy. Despite being framed in two antithetical genres, one seemingly autobiographical and one a romance, 'The Custom-House' sketch and 'The Scarlet Letter' have precisely the same intent. Hawthorne asks his original audience, the Salem of the 1800s, to look at how they read their signs, the "letters", that define their lives, and to learn to venerate a woman, an adulteress, whose dignity and integrity redefines what it is to be human. Finally, we will understand that the "darkening ... tale of human frailty and sorrow" is not Hester's story, but their own (76).

By providing a contextual framework for how *The Scarlet Letter* was received by its very first audience and how this framework can influence how we read the text today, I will argue that Hawthorne set out to have the original audience and the readers who have followed them, despite their original judgment, finally sympathise with, and even admire, Hester Prynne. As my contextual study will reveal, Hester embodies the strength of the female that Hawthorne came to experience by marrying into the Peabody family with its feminist 'sisterhood' and by meeting and reading the work of Margaret Fuller, America's first feminist (Mitchell). Once this powerful identification with the feminine is proved I can then disclose how the reader is primed, from the opening address to the Reader in 'The Custom-House' sketch, until the closing words of the romance, to align their sympathies with her. Hawthorne's passionate advocacy of the

adulteress, and equally acidic condemnation of the judgmental Puritan, work simultaneously.

Looking closely at the context in which Hawthorne wrote will reveal how his beliefs were at odds with the values of the time, in particular, for the individual's right to autonomy, and his veneration of women.¹ After having briefly traced the nineteenth and twentieth century criticism pertaining to Hawthorne scholarship, the twenty-first century critical works by Michael Ryan, Nina Baym, Leland S. Person, Stephan Railton and Margaret Mitchell will open up the text in a way that allows us to come closer to Hawthorne's purpose and strategy in *The Scarlet Letter*, and in doing so, to reconcile some of the critical work on the novel that has produced sometimes diametrically opposed readings pertaining to politics, religion and gender. It will also enable me to argue that Hawthorne invites the reader to not only sympathise with the sexual transgressor Hester Prynne, a scarlet woman, but also to admire her. This positioning of the reader to admire the adulteress is not only unorthodox, it is also less than common in American literature. My study on this reader positioning depends on a close examination of the interplay between context and text, but scholarly criticism has not always offered a sustained contemplation of this interplay or, if it has, has not drawn the same conclusions.

The Critical Context

A brief overview of how *The Scarlet Letter* has been read since its publication reveals it to be the site of considerable contestation. By tracking the evolution of the criticism I

¹ Proof for this belief system will be drawn from Hawthorne's own letters; from early critical responses to *The Scarlet Letter*; and from the diary both Hawthorne and his wife kept during their marriage. The third source of proof by which to establish Hawthorne's primary values comes, not through the critical commentary of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but from the most recent criticism in the twentieth-first century, where we can see a profitable return in the academy to considerations of context as a fruitful framework within which to consider literary texts.

hope to isolate these difficulties and suggest that detailed and historically documented consideration of Hawthorne's values in the world of 1850s New England will not only account for the causes of this contest of readings, but resolve them at their base. The study of context will also establish my premise: that Hawthorne respects the dignity of all people, and respects women as equals; with the result that through the text he aims to condemn the Puritan community and to honour Hester Prynne.

One important and fundamental distinction must be made before considering Hawthorne's context. It is the distinction between audience and reader, a distinction on which my argument rests. Stephen Railton in 'The Address of *The Scarlet Letter*' pithily states that "The audience precedes the text" (Person 484).² Railton cites Hawthorne's concerns for the "audience" of his novel and argues, essentially, that Hawthorne knew that the novel was "somehow against his audience" (Person 483). In order to prove this claim, Railton explains that Hawthorne and his publisher arranged with Herman Melville's friend Evert Duyckinck to publish an excerpt from the book in *The Literary World* as a kind of promotional strategy (Person 483). Hawthorne's one stipulation was that the excerpt come from 'The Custom-House', not from 'The Scarlet Letter'. Hawthorne writes: "I do not think it advisable to give anything from the story itself: because I know of no passage that would not throw too much light on the *plan* of the book" (*Letters* 322, my emphasis). Railton notes that Hawthorne uses the word "plan" here rather than "plot" and argues that this suggests that Hawthorne had organised the novel strategically to work on its contemporary audience in a specific

² He elaborates on this arguing that: we can use the term "reader" for anyone who at any time opens a book and begins to process a text. "Audience" on the other hand, could be reserved to designate the specific group, the contemporary reading public, to whom an author originally addresses the text... Thus, the readers of *The Scarlet Letter* have all come into existence after the novel was written. The novel's audience, though, was there before Hawthorne sat down to write (Person 481)

way. Hawthorne's secrecy here, Railton argues, suggests that his audience, these first readers, were going to be positioned in a very specific and controlled manner.

Determining Hawthorne's intention and the strategies he deployed to achieve this end, sit at the heart of my enquiry and constitute the subject of Chapter 2. Aligning the heart of a Puritan with an adulteress, arguing for the ethics of adultery, would require strategies redolent of military precision tantamount to cornering the enemy. However, my primary concern in *this* chapter is to determine Hawthorne's values and the values of the audience for which he wrote; an "audience which precedes the text" in a very real sense (Railton, 484). This distinction, between audience and reader, will allow me to demonstrate my belief that Hawthorne's principles are entirely antithetical to the principles of the Salem community to which he writes. Indeed, he is "against his audience" as Railton suggests (483). Proof of the ideologies of both Hawthorne and his Salem audience are the bedrock upon which my argument sits and are elaborated below.

Railton's notion of Hawthorne's heightened awareness of his audience's anticipated antipathy is strengthened by considering the content of the letters written by Hawthorne prior to the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*. Through the letters we are given direct access into Hawthorne's private hopes for the narrative and access to the strategies he deployed in the text to achieve its success. A letter to Mr Horatio Bridges dated February 4th 1850, voices his concern for the opus. He writes:

['The Scarlet Letter'] lacks sunshine. To tell you the truth it is (I hope Mrs Bridges is not present) - it is positively a h[e]ll fired story, into which I found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light (Person 228).

A few weeks earlier he had expressed similar concerns to J.T. Fields, in a letter dated 20th January 1850 but in it he had also made a more direct connection between his goal for the 'The Scarlet Letter' and his narrative strategy. He writes:

I found it impossible to relieve the shadows of the story with so much light as I would gladly have thrown in. *Keeping so close to its point as the tale does, and diversified no otherwise than by turning different sides of the same dark idea to the reader's eye,* it will weary very many people and disgust some. (Person 227, my emphasis)

Braving the possible “wear[iness]” of some readers and the “disgust” of others, Hawthorne describes himself as a man controlled by, rather than controlling, his art. There is a strange hybrid of energies at work. Despite his focused intention, it is “the tale” that seems to keep to “its point”, rather than Hawthorne since “Keeping so close to its point as the tale does” seems somehow beyond the control of the writer. Then the tale’s “point” becomes more specific – it is “a dark idea”. (Person 227). All that the writer can do is “turn different sides of the same dark idea to the reader’s eye” (Person 227) This controlling strategy, of “turn[ing] different sides of the same dark idea to the reader’s eye” is one which I will explore in full so that twenty-first century readers can comprehend how its “audience”, in Railton’s terms, and subsequent readers, are urged via narrative management to admire an adulteress. Perhaps this is Hawthorne’s shadowy and troubling purpose.

I would argue also that, rather than ‘The Custom-House’ sketch being merely a frivolously mocking introductory frame for the tale, and one which has been dispensed with over time without any apparent loss to the romance, it is essential to the realizing of Hawthorne’s final goal. He wants the Salem community of the 1800s so clearly recognizable in the sketch, to see that they are the same audience of Puritans preying on Hester Prynne, just thinly disguised by seventeenth century Puritan garb. He wants “The reader’s eye” fixed unswervingly on this truth (Person 227).

It appears that these letters, to Bridges and Fields, confirm Hawthorne's heightened awareness of both his audience and of the potency of his art: it is a "h[e]ll fired story".

Further evidence of Hawthorne having controlled his audience and achieved his art in the mind and body of the reader is in evidence in archives that record the responses of both his wife, Sarah Peabody, and himself, when he read the narrative to her on its completion. It is to these archives we now turn. Although neither Hawthorne nor Sarah is strictly speaking Hawthorne's "audience", because they were conversant with the text as it was being written, they are exemplary first readers. The first archive was penned some years after publication but records his own and his wife's response as he read to her the whole of *The Scarlet Letter* just prior to sending it off for publication. When writing in his *English Notebooks*, five years after the first publication of the novel he recorded the trauma at reading its dénouement to Mrs Hawthorne.³ In the account the artist, fully aware of the narrative strategies that have constructed the fiction he reads, is so entirely moved that his reading is hampered by emotions that make his voice "swell" and "heave". His strategy of "keeping so close to its point as the tale does, and diversified no otherwise than by turning different sides of the same dark idea to the reader's eye" has moved him affectively: mind, body, and I would suggest, spirit. Hawthorne depends on secrecy for the success of his narrative, refusing to alert the reader to its "plan" in *The Literary World* excerpt. And yet even when reading the story to his wife, knowing and anticipating the strategies because they are

³ He records:

when I read the last scene of *The Scarlet Letter* to my wife, just after writing it, - tried to read it, rather, for my voice swelled and heaved, as if I were tossed up and down on an ocean, as it subsided after a storm. (Person 228, Footnote #4).

his own, his own affective response is embodied. This suggests something of the power of his narrative strategies.

A deeply emotional charge also marks the affective responses of another noteworthy first reader. In a letter to Horatio Bridge dated February 4th 1850, Hawthorne records how Sarah his wife is emotionally and physically debilitated by hearing *The Scarlet Letter* read to her.⁴ Compared to his approbation of his wife's response, Hawthorne's impatience with Salem's anger at his satire of them in 'The Custom-House' once the text has been published is palpable, as evidenced in his letter to Horatio Bridge on April 13th 1850.⁵ His exuberant delight at having offended the Salem Puritans reveals his distaste for them and their values. His aversion can be partly explained by his having just lost his role as Customs Officer, a consequence of the Puritan Whig Party coming into power and ejecting him from his position at the Custom House since his politics support the Democrats. Yet his deliberately confronting proposition that he be a woman, a witch, "tarr[ed]-and-feather[ed]" and that this punishment, for him, would be a

⁴ He records how:

My book, the publisher tells me, will not be out before April. He speaks of it in tremendous terms of approbation: so does Mrs Hawthorne, to whom I read the conclusion last night. *It broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache* - which I look upon as triumphant success! (Person 228, my emphasis)

⁵ He writes:

Dear Bridge,

I am glad you like *The Scarlet Letter*...

As to the Salem people...I feel an infinite contempt for them, and probably have expressed more of it than I had intended; for my preliminary chapter has caused the greatest uproar that ever happened here since witch-times. If I escape from town without being tarred-and-feathered, I shall consider it good luck. I wish they *would* tar-and-feather me- it would be such an entirely novel kind of distinction for a literary man! And from such judges as my fellow-citizens, I should look upon it as a higher honor than a laurel-crown (Person 230, Hawthorne's emphasis).

“distinction” tells of a much deeper and more ancient resentment, tracing back to the arrogance of his ancestors. In ‘The Custom-House’ he records his shame at his own ancestor, John Hathorne (despite the different spelling) who participated in the witch trials of 1692, and who “inherited the persecuting spirit” (41).⁶ Despite the obvious rhetoric, it is no unremarkable thing for a man to identify himself so brazenly and deliberately with the version of humanity so entirely reviled- a woman, a witch, who is “tarr[ed]-and-feather[ed]”; one who is not simply expelled as Other, but who is reduced to the level of an animal. This inhumane, barbaric act symbolises misogyny at perhaps its most repugnant level. Though framed in rage mixed with an ancient grudge, it is still a remarkable moment, and hints at something of how Hawthorne esteems women and his awareness of how women have been wronged. As we move through this contextual study, other details will emerge to confirm unequivocally Hawthorne’s deep respect for women.

Looking back over these original letters and early documents, it would seem that Hawthorne was, indeed, “against” his Puritan audience (Railton 483). However, the conundrum that sits at the heart of the text is that he is, at the same time, so entirely *for* them. Both ‘The Custom-House’ and ‘The Scarlet Letter’ offered Hawthorne’s original audience a chance to see differently; to read the scarlet letter, not as the Puritans of the 1600s do, but differently. “Another view of Hester”, while being a chapter title within

⁶ His emotive language is clear as he condemns Hathorne who:

inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him...I, the present writer, as [his] representative take shame upon myself for their sakes, (Hawthorne 41).

the text, could easily work as metonym for the offering that is the text- the opportunity to see differently and to be changed.

Having looked closely at Hawthorne's eighteenth century context, it appears that his values were at odds with the values of the time, with particular regard to his respect for the individual's right to autonomy, and with regard to his high regard for women (*The American Notebooks* 215). These two principles can be usefully referenced to evaluate nineteenth and twentieth century criticism of *The Scarlet Letter*, determining whether this criticism, while rightly emerging from the values of the critic's context, calibrate authentically with Hawthorne's original hopes for his eighteenth century audience. My argument is that more profitable readings are those that consider Hawthorne's values, particularly in terms of the rights of the individual and gender.

Early criticism

Unsurprisingly, since its publication in 1850, critical work on *The Scarlet Letter* effectively tracks the fashions and vicissitudes of critical approaches in the Academy. Published in *The Literary World* on August 17th 1850, Herman Melville's praise for the "blackness" of Hawthorne's vision, augured well and set the precedent for criticism that refrains from the romanticised readings that have often diminished its power (243). While we have observed that many of Hawthorne's contemporaries deplored the caustic satire of 'The Custom-House', little explanation was offered for the connection between its seeming non-fictional status and the romance proper that followed. This failure to adequately explain the connection between the two continued to be one of the perennial problems in the critical commentary on *The Scarlet Letter*, but it is a connection that I hope to explain when Hawthorne's context is properly considered. It was D.H. Lawrence, in his chapter on *The Scarlet Letter* in *Studies in Classical American*

Literature (1923), who moved criticism from simple praise, into alerting readers to something not as yet defined at play in the text, something that was the real source of its power, at which Melville's "blackness" had hinted (243). Lawrence argues that Hester animates a certain subversive protest that Hawthorne's romance effectively records. Subsequent to Lawrence's initial insight, different critical approaches have opened out new ways through which to resolve the ambiguity of Hester's character, but at its core the issue seems to pivot around the value Hawthorne places on women; their autonomy, agency and morality. Criticism pertaining to Nathaniel Hawthorne's position with regard to gender has dominated the Academy, and form two opposing lines of argument: those who see him as an advocate for woman, and those who decry this stance. Suggestions that resolve both of these difficulties will emerge as I consider the continuing evolution of Hawthorne's criticism on *The Scarlet Letter* and then set them against his own values.

Modern Criticism

Subsequent to the initial responses of Hawthorne's contemporaries, criticism of *The Scarlet Letter* has moved through two general phases, and is now perhaps in a third within which my study is situated, with each phase bringing new insights to his work. By looking at these three phases individually, their capacity and limitations can be ascertained and the value of the current phase, the larger framework that situates criticism within the interplay of context and text, privileged.

The first phase of critical work was dominated by New Critical readings of the earlier part of the twentieth century, which are typified by analyses that either remain within

the architecture of the text or, at their most ambitious, consider genre.⁷ My study rests on the New Critical model of close reading, but does not see the text as a closed system, sufficient unto itself. Instead, close reading is enriched by placing the readings within an historical framework.

The rise of critical theory in the Paris of the 1960s marked the second phase that engendered a new style of readings placing Hawthorne's work under the lens of a range of ideologies: feminism, Marxism, and psychoanalytic criticism, being just some. While this new approach refreshed readings of Hawthorne's text, significant antipathy marked the feminist approaches to both the author and to the text. Since establishing clearly Hawthorne's position regarding women is essential to my project, it is vital that these divisions be considered. Nina Baym's battle-weary tone as she "again" advocates for Hawthorne as a feminist in *Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism*, captures both her frustration from her long battle with feminists who condemn Hawthorne as a misogynist, but also signals her determined commitment to belief that Hawthorne viewed woman as equal to men (Person 541). It is heartening to note that the editor of the 2005 Norton critical edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, Leland S. Person, a male and a

⁷ Tony Tanner's ground-breaking work, *Adultery in the Novel* brought consideration of the genre into the Academy. However, my purpose is not, as Tanner's was, to explore adultery as transgressive and look at the novel as a transgressive form. Rather, I adopt an entirely different perspective, and argue for Hawthorne and Wharton's surprising advocacy of the adulteress as a figure of deep ethical power, rather than merely as a transgressor. Carol Benswick situates the text in this literary history- an approach that has assisted me to make more informed links pertaining to the uncommon admiration of the adulteress depicted in both *The Scarlet Letter* and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (25). David Van Leer, looking at discourse rather than genre, questions the role of the narrator and alerted me to the subjectivity of interpretation and it is van Leer's work on a constructed narrator in 'The Custom-House' as distinct from Hawthorne, that prompted my study in Chapter 2 which examines how the narrator of 'The Custom-House' is the same narrator as in 'The Scarlet Letter', even though the narrative strategies that he deploys are radically different, (Colacurcio, 57-100). The two parts form a unified whole, rather than being two separate entities. Despite the scholarly work produced by New Criticism outlined above, this phase of criticism rarely considered the connection between Hawthorne's context and the text.

renowned Hawthorne scholar, dedicates the edition to Nina Baym “in token of admiration for her career” (v).

Representative of the ‘Hawthorne as misogynist’ camp, Louise DeSalvo reads *The Scarlet Letter* as deflecting “attention away from [Hester]”, (Person 511). My difficulty with this type of reading is that, since, as I seek to argue below, Hawthorne positions the reader to sympathise with, even admire Hester so unequivocally, Hawthorne by implication must focus on Hester. If we look at Hawthorne’s contextual values and allow them to offer insights as to his purpose in the novel, we can read both Hawthorne and the text as affirmative of women. Rather than drawing attention away from women, Leland S. Person observes in *Aesthetic Headaches* that Hawthorne depicts women who refused to be controlled by men, “creating a paradigm of self-empowerment and influence that can be observed in... each of [Hawthorne’s] four romances” (122). My argument is that an informed study of Hawthorne’s world will reveal that his esteem for women was not in question, but rather that it pervasively informs his novel.

The third and current phase of criticism finds value in reading a text at the point of intersection between the author’s context and text. Rather than focusing on a text’s internal architecture, and reading the women as symbols of good or evil as in the first phase, or, as in the second phase, reading the texts under the lens of a particular epistemology such as feminism, I would suggest that considering Nathaniel Hawthorne as an historical figure and connecting him to his original audience is a useful way forward. It will not only offer a way to resolve the contest of readings but allow me to establish Hawthorne as a man who not only revered his own wife, but allowed women to shape his values. A preliminary list of the women who moulded his life and who will be considered in detail below include: his wife, Sophia Peabody; Margaret Fuller, America’s first feminist; the witches of the Salem of the 1600s; and Anne Hutchinson, arguably America’s first heretic. However, Hawthorne’s respect for these women and

the way they came to shape his thinking up until 1850 when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* and beyond, will be more profitably weighted if placed within the larger contextual framework of Hawthorne's politics and religion. It is his belief that "The Unpardonable Sin might consist of a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul" that undergirds the premise of his whole ontology, rendering his reverence for women simply a logical outworking of this quintessential belief (*American Notebooks* 215). Once I have established how his positions on religion and politics intersect, it will be a simple step to locate his stance on gender by looking specifically at the women listed above. From this point, my advocacy of Hawthorne's advocacy of the adulteress, Hester Prynne, can progress.

Recent criticism considering Hawthorne's historical context

Since engaging fully with Hawthorne's world is central to my project, and since, thus far, I have looked only at his letters and his *American Notebooks* as a way of determining his values, it is time to look beyond these primary sources to other sources whose research is based on the historical events and writings of learned men and women who were his contemporaries.⁸ An understanding of Hawthorne's commitment to the rights of all individuals, both male and female, and his rejection of any law or theology that would limit those rights and freedoms, form the epicentre of his beliefs and his text. While I would not reduce the text to a political and theological treaty, cognizance of Hawthorne's politics and theology will deepen our appreciation of its resonances.

Among the Democrats who formed part of Hawthorne's milieu and who advocated for the independence of the individual from government control were

⁸ Michael Ryan's recent work 'The Puritans of Today': The Anti- Whig Argument of *The Scarlet Letter*, explores the polemical context in which Hawthorne wrote, looking at the intersection of politics and religion (2008). He argues that both 'The Custom-House' sketch and 'The Scarlet Letter', are manifestations of Hawthorne's scathing condemnation of Whig politics as it attempted, since its inception in the early 1600s, to colonise individual lives in New England and in doing so compromise "reverence for the human soul" (*American Notebooks* 215).

the intellectuals, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, George Bancroft and John L. O'Sullivan. Taken as a whole, their writings resonate with the doctrines of natural revelation, a doctrine that advocates for the independence and rights of the individual.⁹ Politically, Nathaniel Hawthorne's position was undeniably that of a Democrat, advocating for the freedom of all individuals and entirely unfettered by the church. In my discussion in Chapter 2 it will become clear that the story of Hester Prynne is the narrative equivalent of this theology.

Transcendentalist advocacy of the Individual

Considering Hawthorne's encounter with the Transcendentalists generally and with Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular, will enlarge our understanding of his world.¹⁰

When I turn in Chapter 2 to the text of *The Scarlet Letter* it will emerge that Hawthorne does not merely position the reader to sympathise with the adulteress, but he positions

⁹ For intellectuals such as Bancroft and O'Sullivan God was present in nature. They believed that nature, because infused with divinity, should be allowed to follow its own course without theocratic interference. The Democrat position was that morality arose spontaneously from natural processes, and no legislation and no moral discipline were needed to control passions that, because natural and therefore divinely inspired, could not be sinful. Natural revelation located divinity in everyone, both male and female, without distinction of rank. By placing the rule of morality in nature rather than institutions or laws, Democrats sought to undermine the Whig justification for moral government (Ryan).

¹⁰ Between 1841 and 1846 Hawthorne engaged with the Transcendentalists. He joined their Brook Farm community for eight months and met frequently with these New England Romantics. Their leader, Ralph Waldo Emerson, had famously advised the Harvard Divinity School graduating class of 1838: "to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator and veil" (90). Here the progenitor of Transcendentalism honours the temerity that moves beyond the edifices of mankind's knowledge and experience, in order to know the Infinite directly, without recourse to another. His challenge resonates throughout the layers of the New England Community, capturing the best of what the Puritans envisaged when they rejected the Church of England's papist tendencies, and capturing his own Transcendentalist epistemological ontology, but also prophesying the narrative arc of the heroine of his friend's narrative- the story of Hester Prynne. For Hester does "refuse the good models" of Puritan morality (Emerson 90). She does love God without recourse to any other; she is outside the church, outside the community, and in the wild of nature in a cottage beside a lake, Waldenesque in its deliberate isolation. Hester's secure confidence in the Almighty, independent of church teaching and moral philosophy (the embodiment of Transcendentalist teachings), inform the arc of the entire narrative. The reader learns to take "Another view of Hester", a woman who has come to the profound insight, that "The world's law was no law for her mind" (*The Scarlet Letter*, 182). Hester Prynne transcends the gendered religious "models" of Salem in the 1600s and of New England in the 1850s. She enacts what Emerson had declared in his 1841 essay, 'Self-Reliance', which is "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men; that is genius" (27).

us to admire her as she lives out the transcendentalist credo Emerson gave to the men at Harvard Divinity School which was “to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator and veil” (90).

It seems that the battle ground between politics and religion over human freedom is a site of contestation in Hawthorne’s New England of the 1850s. As I will argue, in *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne argues for an ideal of personal freedom in moral matters, and criticizes the Whig attempt to impose restrictive moral norms on human proclivities that Democrats such as Hawthorne felt were embodiments of spirituality in nature (Ryan).

From this exploration of Hawthorne’s context and a consideration of his original audience, it can be argued that *The Scarlet Letter* emerges out of Hawthorne’s satire of Puritan political repression and Whig politics. Yet it is shaped equally by his admiration for women. I turn now to consider invaluable recent critical material exploring the women whom he allowed to shape his life and values. The women who I will argue primarily shaped his values are his wife, Sophia Peabody and Margaret Mitchell, America’s first feminist. Both of these women were instrumental in his learning to re-read the lives of the witches of Salem, whom he praises in his letter to Horatio Bridge, and the Antinomian, Anne Hutchinson, whom he references in what I will argue in Chapter 2, is an admiring tone, in the opening pages of ‘The Scarlet Letter’.

Recently in the Academy much has been rightly made of Thomas Mitchell’s scholarly work *Hawthorne’s Fuller Mystery*, which effectively brings to light the powerful influence of the feminist Margaret Fuller on both Sophia Peabody

(and her sisters) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (2005). This work will complete my argument for how Hawthorne esteemed women. However, prior to considering Mitchell's work, one original document and one very recent critical work must be considered, both of which have drawn insufficient critical attention, considering their import. They are the diary Hawthorne and Peabody shared during their marriage; and Megan Marshall's award-winning study, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women who Ignited American Romanticism* (2005).

Hawthorne and his wife both wrote every day in the same diary - a symbol of shared intellectual and emotional space, unity and equality. The diary is housed in the Morgan Library and Museum in New York that I was fortunate enough to visit as part of my research for this project (Morgan Library, current exhibition June 2016).¹¹ Creating the narrative of their life together in this unique manner gave him access to female conceptualization, and female narrative practice - what Julia Kristeva might deem to be *écriture féminine* (1981).¹²

Striking though the existence of this shared diary is as clear evidence for the argument that Hawthorne not only respected women but knew their psychological processes, Hawthorne's choice to marry into the Peabody family is further evidence for his esteem

¹¹ This book shows how when the Nathaniel Hawthorne and Sophia Peabody married they continued their habitual practice of writing in a diary but instead of writing privately, they decided to write jointly in one diary, each making entries in turn. They wrote in the same notebook—a small blank volume with marbled-paper covers and a leather spine—read each other's entries, and built a joint narrative of their intimate life as partners in their new home, the Old Manse in Concord. This act, this choosing to share equally in a diary with his wife, seems a rare occurrence in recorded human history. It suggests that Hawthorne, rather than deeming himself socially superior to or discursively separate from Sophia, saw her as his equal.

¹² On the first anniversary of their wedding day, the Hawthornes addressed love letters to each other within the diary. Sophia—pregnant with the couple's first child—recalled their lives the year before: "Then we had visions & dreamed of Paradise. Now Paradise is here & our fairest visions stand realized before us." (*Joint Diary*). Nathaniel, despite his profession and literary skills, felt powerless to capture the moment on paper: "life now heaves and swells beneath me like a brim-full ocean, and the endeavor to comprise and portion of it in words is like trying to dip up the ocean in a goblet." (*Joint Diary*) Here we hear a man not afraid to own and to express the fullness of his passion for his wife.

for women that is seldom commented upon. It is important to understand that when Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody, he consciously married into a distinctly female world, the significance of which is captured by Megan Marshall's prize-winning triple biography, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women who Ignited American Romanticism* (2005). This book was the recipient of the Society of American Historians' Francis Parkman Prize, the Mark Lynton History Prize, and the Massachusetts Book Award in nonfiction, as well as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography and memoir. It elegantly records this very female milieu.¹³

Finally, the writings of the feminist Margaret Fuller are particularly relevant in any consideration of Hawthorne's esteem for women. Thomas Mitchell in *Hawthorne's Fuller Mystery* records that Fuller was a guest of Sophia Peabody Hawthorne and Nathaniel Hawthorne in their home both in 1842 and 1844, and that Fuller's iconic *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, the first feminist American text written in 1844, is a treatise on feminine equality which Hawthorne undoubtedly read. Mitchell has written persuasively about traces of Fuller in Hawthorne's writing, seeing her influence clearly in the characterization of Hester Prynne and claims that sentences in *The Scarlet*

¹³ The matriarch of the Peabody family, Eliza Peabody, was "a published poet, read widely and critically all her life, passing her passion for literature to her daughters, who made books and learning the central focus of their own lives" (Marshall 14). Accompanying this was the senior Peabody's awareness of female confinement, a resentment of the limits placed upon her sex from birth. As she wrote to daughter Mary: "I long for means and power . . . but I wear petticoats and can never be Governor . . . nor Alderman, Judge or Jury, Senator or Representative—So I may as well be quiet—content with entreating the Father of all mercies" (Marshall 6). But as Marshall tells us matter-of-factly, Eliza Peabody was neither "quiet" nor "content": "Mrs. P. could never silence her longings, and she passed them on to her daughters." (Marshall 6) Marshall goes on to argue that at a time when a "woman artist" was anathema to most Americans, Sophia's dedication to art, her studies with the renowned New England painter Washington Allston and her tenuous but firm dedication to "art" as part of the human psyche, was considered peculiar: a wordless danger to the status quo of woman's conditioned place as helpmeet, mother and quiet partner (Marshall).

Letter appropriate Woman in the Nineteenth Century almost verbatim (Person 548).

First published in 1843 in *Dial*, Fuller's treatise *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is an essay originally entitled: "The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men. Woman versus Women." Fuller's regret at the change of title to the less evocative, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, is palpable in the Preface that accompanied its independent publication as a book.¹⁴ Her poetic envisioning of sexual equality, not as an end in itself, but as elemental to a beginning, are echoed in *The Scarlet Letter*, both in Hawthorne's creation in Hester of a woman who refused to be controlled by men, and in Hester's own vision of a future based on gender equality, which she shares with those who come to her cottage for wisdom and counsel at the close of the narrative.¹⁵ According to Mitchell, much more than an intellectual assent to feminist doctrine shaped Hawthorne's representation of Hester Prynne. Her characterisation is somehow akin to "the dark idea" which sits at the centre of the narrative and this will be explored as I look closely at the text in Chapter 2 (Person 227).

¹⁴ She explains that:

By Man I mean both man and woman; these are two halves of one thought. I lay no especial stress on the welfare of either. I believe the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other. My highest wish is that this truth should be distinctly and rationally apprehended, and the conditions of life and freedom recognised as the same for the daughters and the sons of time: twin exponents of a divine thought (5).

¹⁵ Mitchell's central argument is that: [Margaret Fuller] was more than simply a partial model for the most complex and provocative women characters in his fiction, as critics have occasionally proposed. She was to an important extent the very origin of their conception, the problem at their heart. As a provocative, intimate friend, and as the emblematic voice contesting the conventional ground on which the masculine and the feminine had been constructed, Fuller seems to have come to represent for Hawthorne, [a mystery at the centre of his existence] (Mitchell10)

It is clear then, that Hawthorne not only revered “the human soul” but esteemed women in a way that was perhaps unprecedented in nineteenth century New England (*American Notebooks* 215). This reverence influenced how Hawthorne reacted to Puritan politics and economics, and fuelled his delight in offending the Puritans through his satire of them in ‘The Custom-House’. His evident esteem for women is demonstrated in his marriage into a family of feminists whom Megan Marshall would argue are fêted as birthing Romanticism in New England; his shared diary with his educated and artistic wife during the time of their marriage; his engagement with the ideas and writing of feminist Margaret Fuller in a manner that Thomas Mitchell would argue went beyond mere admiration; his unflinching identification with those ancestors of his who publicly vilified women and personally accepted the shame of their crimes; and lastly, by his honouring of Anne Hutchinson, a woman who was wrongly expelled from the Salem community in 1638 by men who were threatened by her intellect and power, a reference I will explore fully in Chapter 2. The creative equivalent of his undeniable esteem for the individual generally and for women particularly is embodied in Hawthorne’s representation of the adulteress, Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. The narrative strategies he deploys to express this extraordinary admiration is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

The Scarlet Letter

Having contemplated Hawthorne's New England religion and politics, and having considered the individuals whom he admired, it would appear that he was politically a Democrat, an advocate for the right of each individual to govern their own lives, deeply respectful of women, and one who "reverence[d] the human soul" (*American Notebooks* 215). This habituated way of viewing human agency and responsibility deeply influenced Hawthorne's literary imagination and practice and we see its manifestation in *The Scarlet Letter*. We are now in a position to identify the narrative strategies deployed by Hawthorne to position the reader to empathise with, even admire his heroine, the sexual transgressor, Hester Prynne. The theoretical work of Blakey Vermeule (2010) on narrative strategies, and Suzanne Keen (2006) on empathy underpin this study. Ironically, the novel is a lesson in a failure to read a text: a failure to read the connection between 'The Custom-House' sketch and the narrative of 'The Scarlet Letter'; a failure to read the whole of *The Scarlet Letter*; a failure to read the letter "A"; and most importantly, a failure to read the character of Hester Prynne, the scarlet woman. These repeated failures are what finally position the reader to admire Hester Prynne as she lives out the transcendentalist credo.

As I have indicated previously, two problems have prevented appreciation of Hawthorne's complex art in *The Scarlet Letter*; problems, I would suggest, that have prompted mis-readings, or simply limited readings of the text. If these difficulties are resolved I will be able to advocate for how Hawthorne constructs the text to move the

reader affectively to admire Hester Prynne. As we have observed, the first impediment is an inability to see the two parts of the text as a whole. The second (partly responsible for this first limitation) is the assumption that Hawthorne, the author, is the voice of 'The Custom-House', while for the tale of 'The Scarlet Letter', Hawthorne constructs a narrator. I would argue that the same constructed narrator voices both parts, albeit through different mediums. While Hawthorne appears to be speaking in his own voice in 'The Custom-House', its meta-fictive nature and the performative style, indicate that Hawthorne has constructed a narrator; one that could be taken for his own, but which is essentially a simulacrum. The voice that satirizes the Puritans of Salem in the 1800s in the preliminary sketch is the same voice that both satirizes the Puritans of the 1600s in the romance, and depicts Hester Prynne, the adulteress, as the embodiment of dignity and strength. Although the two parts seem discrete, they work in tandem to keep "turning different sides of the same dark idea to the reader's eye", as Hawthorne shared with J.T. Fields, in a letter dated 20th January 1850 (Person 227). The argument of this chapter will demonstrate this claim through an analysis of both 'The Custom-House' and 'The Scarlet Letter'.

I want to suggest that 'The Custom-House' sketch is a theatrical *tour de force*, a deliberately melodramatic staging where Hawthorne's narrator minutely controls the reader in a manner so public and deliberate that it almost parallels the demands made of an audience by a pantomime, replete with visual cues for when to jeer and when to applaud. Rather than Hawthorne being the narrator of 'The Custom-House', we need to observe the distance between Hawthorne and the narrator. Hawthorne's sophisticated understanding of art as performance, and art as constructed performance- an act of representation- sits at the heart of the text and informs his narrative practice, which has frequently been misconstrued.

Hawthorne publishes his heightened awareness of a text as a construct and of the constructedness of his narrator in the opening address of the sketch. In both passages below the narrator's elaborate strategies secure the reader's support, and need to be understood as part of the strategy by which the narrator ensures the reader's acceptance of his vicious satire of the Puritans generally, of the bureaucrats in the Custom-House more particularly, and by implication, our acceptance of Hester Prynne. Hawthorne's satire of the Puritans of the 1850s, his immediate audience, is caustic and yet through the construct of the narrator he conveniently positions himself, at least initially, as an innocent in the text's import. The creation of the narrator allows him to distance himself from the satire, yet ensures that the reader is both repelled by the Puritan community, and also aligned with Hester.¹

Multiple forces are at play in the text's opening, all designed to flatter the reader and garner support for the narrator. The first is the apparently self-effacing tone amidst the intrusive comment, suggesting that he is not desirous of attention, being "disinclined to talk overmuch of myself". The narrator's sense of self-importance is claimed to be further diminished by explaining that, while what follows is about the self, since it is "autobiographical" it is not self-promoting because it is the product of "impulse", of

¹ 'The Custom-House' opens with this address:

It is a little remarkable that - though disinclined to talk overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my personal friends - an *autographical impulse* should twice in my life have *taken possession* of me, in addressing the public. The first was three or four years since, when I *favoured the reader* - inexcusable, and for no earthly reason, that either the *indulgent reader* or the *intrusive author* could imagine - with a description of my way of life in the deep quietude of the Old Manse. And now - because beyond my deserts, I was happy to *find a listener or two* on the former occasion, - I again seize the public by the button, and talk of my three years' experience in a Custom-House, (35, my emphasis).

some force outside the narrator that had “taken possession” of him rendering him merely a vehicle of, rather than an agent for, the story. How can a reader be anything but sympathetic to such insistent self-denial? The narrator’s careful curating of “The Reader” throughout both the sketch and the romance is striking as we shall observe, and is a measure of his determination to control the reader’s sympathies with his perspective. His over-emphasis on his self-conscious desire to appear credible and honest underpins his rhetorical strategy. The text’s meta-fictive status is sustained throughout as we shall see, and is integral to our alignment with Hester.

Having established his lack of self interest in the sketch that will ensue, the narrator, with a magician’s sleight of hand, continues his address to the reader and argues that he is simultaneously, both an “editor” (implying that the sketch is someone else’s tale) but also the author of the “representation”.² The effect of this too obvious shifting of positions (one cannot honestly be both the “editor” and the “author”) is both intriguing and amusing, but also works to alert the reader to the fact that the intelligence of the narrator is something of which we need to be wary. It is redolent of Lawrence Sterne’s dazzling meta-fictive positional shifts in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (2003). The performed innocence of the supposedly “autobiographical” framing is too elaborate and suggests that Hawthorne, the true author, is determined to remove himself from the judgments of the ensuing tale, but also provide himself with absolute freedom for its

² The narrator declares that:

It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the *authenticity of a narrative* therein contained. This, in fact- a desire to put myself in my true position as *editor, or very little more*, of the most prolix among the tales that make up the volume, - *this, and no other, is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public*. In accomplishing the main purpose, *it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation* of a mode of life not heretofore described, together with some of the characters that move in it, among whom *the author* happened to make one, (36, my emphasis).

theatrical and all-licensed satire. The narrator claims the “authenticity of a narrative” but immediately undercuts this claim by quietly confessing that “it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation of a mode of life not heretofore described” (36). The passive voice that “it appeared allowable” again removes Hawthorne from any responsibility for the opinions voiced in the sketch. The narrator’s assumed obsequiousness is polemical in its intent. Therefore, ‘The Custom-House’, while claiming authenticity or non-fictional status, is an elaborate fiction that recruits the “facts” of Hawthorne’s life to authenticate fiction. The applied-for fictional stance is essential because it is what gives Hawthorne license, through the narrator, to satirize, safe from criticism by the Whigs and Puritans who physically occupy not only The Custom-House but also the oppressive space of the Salem of the 1850s. It also enables Hawthorne, by contrast, to mythologise the narrative of Hester Prynne.

Hawthorne’s choice of form and structure in ‘The Custom-House’ work together to control the reader’s response throughout. As we have seen, the form presents itself as factual where its real import is fictional. The structure too, is revealing. Taken as a whole the entire sketch is a satire, except for two sequences within the larger sketch: the first is the story of how the narrator finds the scarlet letter and the related documents; and the second is the narrator’s lament that he lacks the imaginative capacity to relate this tale. An examination of the structure of the whole sequence of ‘The Custom-House’ will reveal much about how Hawthorne positions his reader against the Puritans and with the adulteress whom they condemn, yet protects himself through the device of the narrator from the criticism that such an audacious position, his “dark idea”, would ordinarily attract (Person 227).

Having secured the reader’s allegiance, through his feigned obsequiousness and obfuscation regarding his responsibility for his authorship, the narrator turns to his satire of the Custom-House and its occupants. Before identifying the specifics of the satire it is

important to recognise Hawthorne's purpose in this satire. While the representation of the officers of the Custom-House operate in their own right within the narrative, they also represent the Whig party of Salem, who, in turn, represent the Puritans of the Salem of the 1800s, who are his true "audience" in Stephen Railton's lexicon (Railton 481). Yet they also represent the Puritans of the 1600s in Hester's narrative. This multiple representation is a crucial narrative strategy in the text as the failure of the original audience and subsequent readers to link these representations is tantamount to a failure to properly read the text.

The novel's original audience felt the sting of 'The Custom-House' satire immediately on its publication and, as we have seen, demanded its removal from the text. However, Hawthorne purposely crafted the satire because the condemnation of the Salem community of the 1800s secured his condemnation of the Salem community of the 1600s, where Hester's tale is set. Their failure to make this connection and consequent failure to admire her is his central concern. What is required through his narrative strategies is that the reader is moved to not only empathise with Hester, but finally to consider her with "awe" ('The Scarlet Letter' 274).

The narrator's satire of The Custom-House and its officials centres on their ease, hardly an admirable Puritan characteristic and one designed to ensure that the reader deems them repellent. Rather than needing to engage industriously in their work, the aged men, too long in their respective roles, are to be seen on the porch.³

³ He describes:

a row of venerable figures, sitting in old fashioned chairs, which were tipped on their hind legs against the wall. Oftentimes they were asleep, but occasionally might be heard talking together, in voices between speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses. And all other human beings who depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolized labour, or anything else but their own independent exertions. These old gentlemen - seated, like Matthew, at the receipt of custom, but not very liable to be summoned thence like him, for apostolic errands - were Custom-House officers (38-39).

Condensed in one passage are Michael Ryan's references to the Whig and therefore Puritan practice of allowing government positions to be secured on grounds of religious and political affiliation rather than individual merit (2008). The narrator's biblical allusion paralleling Whig corruption with that of Matthew the tax collector, is delightfully comic in its audacity and the perfect climax to this litany of insults. It is important to understand that the sloth and selfishness that define these men in 'The Custom- House' sketch, so repellent to the reader, lies in direct contrast to the industry and selflessness of Hester that endears the reader to her as her story unfolds in 'The Scarlet Letter'. Here a narrative strategy as simple as contrast ensures that we "care about the literary character" of Hester, recalling Blakey Vermeule's work on cognitive practices (2010). The two pieces of the narrative are designed to be deeply inter-fused.

After this opening attack on those working in The Custom House, sustained as it is over many pages, the narrator narrows his focus to individuals in order to ensure that the reader finds nothing admirable in either the town of Salem with its long history, or in The Custom-House. He begins with condemning his own ancestors for their religious persecution of women of Salem as discussed in Chapter 1, and then turns to The Inspector. He moves the basis of his attack from the men's general sloth and corruption to how The Custom-House erases a man's capacity to be human, reducing The Inspector to the status of an "animal" since his only and abiding interest is in what he consumes at dinnertime, his "gourmandism" (48-49). Hawthorne's tone is venomous.⁴

⁴ The narrator describes The Inspector thus:

Looking at him merely as an *animal*- and there was very little else to look at – he was a most satisfactory object... The careless security of his life in the Custom-House on a regular income and with slight but infrequent apprehensions of removal, had no doubt contributed to make time pass lightly over him. The original and more potent causes, however, lay in the rare *perfection of his animal nature*, the moderate

The narrator's sustained metaphor of The Inspector as an animal captures Hawthorne's complete disdain for the people of Salem. As discussed earlier, he shared with Horatio Bridge in a letter dated April 13th 1850 that he felt "an infinite contempt for them" noting that his "preliminary chapter has caused the greatest uproar that ever happened here since witch-times" (Person 230). This portrayal of The Inspector marks the most caustic satire in the sketch and makes unequivocal his disdain for the people of Salem. Since his decision to set the story of Hester Prynne in the same town of Salem, with Puritan believers as audience to Hester's life, Hawthorne unflinchingly parallels the two audiences. Undoubtedly the contemporary Salemites are dressed in the garb of their predecessors, but the identification is or perhaps should have been, unmistakable. Hawthorne's creation of an all-licensed narrator has technically protected him from any accusation that was engendered by the sketch, but it also gave him permission to make such a pointed and unavoidably obvious parallel. *The Scarlet Letter's* first audience, the audience that in Railton's terms "precede[d] the text", should have been pinioned by this parallel (Person 484). The most profound irony in the text, and perhaps the very point of the text, is that they were not.

While continuing his satire of the Custom-House, Hawthorne now shifts his narrative strategy to a far more esoteric plane, since it is this position that will finally provide the segue into the narrative of 'The Scarlet Letter'. Rather than demeaning the officials for their sloth and "gourmandism", he demeans their lack of imaginative capacity. What is important here is that the distance between Hawthorne and the narrator appears to be all

proportion of his intellect, and the very trifling admixture of moral and spiritual in ingredients; these latter qualities, indeed, being in barely enough measure *to keep the old gentleman from walking on all-fours*... My conclusion was that he had no soul, no heart, no mind (48-49, my emphasis).

but collapsed, since what he records draws directly on the facts of Hawthorne's life at Brook Farm, the utopian experiment of the transcendentalist, and with great men of intellect and passion.⁵

Although self-consciously performative and elaborately literary in style, Hawthorne's report accurately records his life before becoming the "Surveyor of Revenue"(57). However, this supposed collapse of the construct of the narrator is strategically deceptive because the apparent movement into factual events in time and space, work to present his finding of Mr. Surveyor Pue's "authorized and authenticated... document[s]" regarding Hester Prynne as operating out of that same space/time continuum (63). The reality is that they do not. Hawthorne did commune with the Transcendentalists; Hawthorne did not find documents that authenticate the story of Hester Prynne. Yet the narrator labours over the fabrication of their discovery and again this labour is strategic as it teaches the reader how to read the letter "A", how to read, sympathise with and admire Hester, even before we have met her. 'The Custom-House' is a gift to the reader, but one Hawthorne's original audience failed to decipher.

Hawthorne's construction of the moment when the narrator finds the documents pertaining to Hester are exquisitely written and have been the site of much rich and incisive criticism that could not easily be improved upon. However, my interest in its construction is primarily how it works affectively on the reader. Apart from the brief moment when the narrator shares his esteem for the Transcendentalists, this is the first

⁵ He reports that:

after living for three years within the subtle influence of an intellect like Emerson's; after those wild, free days on the Assabeth, indulging fantastic speculations beside the fire of fallen boughs, with Ellery Channing; after talking with Thoreau about the pine-trees and Indian relics, in his hermitage at Walden; ... after becoming imbued with poetic sentiment at Longfellow's hearth-stone... (56).

time in the sketch that his satirical mode is set aside. What we are given instead is the strident re-emergence of the self-conscious and demanding meta-fictive stance that opened the sketch, where the narrator demands that the reader read the narrative as authentic. The heightened level of this demand is necessary, since what we are asked to accept as authentic is a story which operates, essentially, on a metaphysical plane.

He begins the sequence by stating that he is “considering depositing” the documents pertaining to the story “with the Essex Historical Society” (61). This perfect blend of casualness, since he is only “considering” the act, and historical validation, since the documents merit being housed in an “historical society”, capture the skill of the narrator. What follows is a relentless positioning of the reader to respond, as the narrator has responded, to Hester. She is represented as a figure, a sign, of mystery, of grace and of morality. This is how we might read her.

What is striking is that the narrator continually delays specifics. He ensures that there is a sympathetic emotional response to each detail of the narrative before its import is revealed. First he finds “a certain affair of fine red cloth... wrought with wonderful skill of needlework” (61). His first response and perhaps ours, is one of reverence for the artist, a quality dependant on imaginative capacity not found in the officers at the Custom House. He then records how “it assumed the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A... intended, there could be no doubt, as an ornamental article of dress” (61). His delay in reading and then deliberate failure to read the letter as representing Adultery enacts one of the text’s central concerns: that to delay judgment and to delay fixing meaning is what it means to value human dignity. While Hester is branded with and by judgment, the real condemnation lies with those who condemn her. The sequence climaxes in a

metaphysical moment where the reader's response is carefully controlled so that their mind's doubts are set aside and their capacity for belief is engaged.⁶ What the narrator teaches the reader, challenging our "smil[ing]" scepticism, is that the letter speaks, "burn[s]" and even brands us, regardless of whether the intellect comprehends its import (62). Its sign, two hundred years old, is the "red-hot iron" of judgment that burns the narrator and that, I would argue, Hawthorne would have us feel that we are positioned with Hester in the narrative.

Having chronicled his experiential embodiment of the sign of the A, the narrator's style and entreaty to the reader subside at this point, and the logic of history and report are relied upon to finally position the reader to admire the supposedly historical character of Hester. The narrator's diction and style are those of the confident historian, marked by terms such as "complete explanation" and "oral testimony", yet he is alive as always to those who are either unable to, or refuse to read the history; those who read the "angel" as an "intruder" (63). This different ability to see, to read the signs, is familiar. Hawthorne's original audience failed to see that his mockery of them in 'The Custom-House' was the mockery of them in 'The Scarlet Letter'. Perhaps this is the difficulty of the text, the "dark idea" that sits at its heart (Person 227). As we read the text, as we read life, Hawthorne challenges us to refrain from judging despite the signs with which we label each other. He challenges us to venerate the scarlet woman.

⁶ The narrator records how:

My eyes fastened themselves on the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to me sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind.

While thus perplexed... I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me, -the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word,- it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of *burning heat*; and as if the latter were not of red cloth, *but red-hot iron*. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor (62, my emphasis).

‘The Scarlet Letter’

One might imagine, that by the close of ‘The Custom-House’ sketch, Hawthorne was well satisfied with his narrator’s assured and purposeful strategies through which to recruit the reader’s sympathy and admiration for Hester. However, it is not to be supposed that these strategies were deployed only for the sketch: they are deployed again in ‘The Scarlet-Letter’ in order to both strengthen the unity of the text’s two components, and in order to realise his “dark idea”, of having the reader admire an adulteress (Person 227). The strategies rested firstly on his vicious satire of the occupants of the Custom House, contrasting their indolence and imaginative dullness with Hester’s creative industry, and rested secondarily on the construction of his own sacred version of Hester’s character as being that of an “angel” (63). It is this second strategy I wish to explore more fully now. Hawthorne’s construction of Hester as a venerable religious figure has been skilful and purposeful. His first casual reference to the object of the scarlet letter in ‘The Custom-House’ sketch- that it is a “rag” - is slowly and deliberately erased so that at the close of the sketch an ecclesiastical palimpsest is inscribed instead, as its sign. It becomes “a most curious relic” (61- 63). We need to be aware, as Hawthorne’s original audience were, of the religious power of such a word. A “relic” is “the physical remains of a saint, martyr, or other deceased holy person, or thing believed to be sanctified by contact with him or her, preserved as an object of veneration” (OED). Through this cunning palimpsest where the “rag” becomes “relic”, Hester’s elevation to sainthood becomes a trope which the narrator now deploys to anchor the narrative.

Hawthorne ensures that the trope of ‘Hester as saint’ forms a strong base in the reader’s mind as he has the narrator repeat it three times within a very short sequence: the first is in

her history, constructed by the narrator in the sketch; the next immediately follows in the first chapter of the narrative, The Prison-Door, when Hester is by subtle implication compared to “the *sainted* Anne Hutchinson” and the third occurs later in the following chapter, The Market Place (76, my emphasis). In this last sequence Hester and her child mount the scaffold where they are to be ridiculed by the Puritans of the town. Ironically, as Hester holds her baby to her, they innocently create a tableau of “Divine Maternity”, of the *sainted* Mary and the Christ child (83). While the trope is easily decoded by most readers, there has been much debate about Hawthorne’s intention and tone in his allusion here to Anne Hutchinson, used in the second deployment of the trope, and Hutchinson’s critical history deserves a brief explanation.⁷ To conclude this line of reasoning, I would argue that Hawthorne would have been delightfully alive to the chagrin engendered in his original Puritan audience when America’s first female heretic, Anne Hutchinson, is deemed in the narrative to be a “saint” (76).⁸

⁷ Hawthorne’s early essay ‘Mrs. Hutchinson’, derisive of the woman, was written in 1830 and his understanding of her at that point was rather limited, a difficulty the intellect of women such as the Peabody women, Sophia Peabody in particular, and Margaret Fuller would have easily corrected (*Gazette*). The man who wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, knew, intimately, the power of women and the importance of the individual to hold their own beliefs, since this is what constituted for him, “reverence for the Human Soul” (*American Notebooks*, 1944). Therefore, the narrator’s attitude is certainly one of reverence for Anne Hutchinson when he references her in The Prison-Door. She is a symbol of religious freedom who saw neither man nor woman as having any authority over her; instead believing that her relationship with God was sovereign. For these beliefs the Puritan Church expelled her from their midst and confined her to Rhode Island- the outer edge of the civilized world at that time- where she was slaughtered in an attack by the Siwanoy tribe of New Netherland known as Kieft’s War. It is interesting to consider that Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous advice to the Harvard Divinity School graduating class of 1838: “to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator and veil” (90) had a significant resonance with Anne Hutchinson’s beliefs; the supposedly “good model” she refused was the Puritan church, and the men who controlled that patriarchal institution expelled her from it. Hawthorne’s deliberate paralleling of Hutchinson’s life with his representation of Hester Prynne is unmistakable.

⁸ Recent critical work on the historical context of New England in the 1800s by Amy Schrager Lang, *Prophetic Woman: Anne Hutchinson and the Problem of Dissent in the Literature of New England*, has rescued Anne Hutchinson from undeserved condemnation (1987), just as Thomas Mitchell’s *Hawthorne’s Fuller Mystery* has freed Margaret Fuller from the damage done to the reputation of this great feminist when Julian Hawthorne published works on his parents’ marriage that maligned Fuller (1885).

‘The Prison-Door’ is the first short chapter of ‘The Scarlet Letter’ and the metaphorical “door”, or portal into the story. It conflates two powerful strategies that the narrator has deployed previously to recruit the reader’s sympathy for Hester. He positions us to admire Hester Prynne through the trope of sainthood, and he reveals to us the poverty of the Puritan spirit. Yet curiously within this first chapter, Hester is not mentioned, but another sainted character is - Anne Hutchinson. Something larger is at work that engages the reader’s mind and heart in the act of judging, since judging is what the text enacts. The Prison-Door is not about Hester Prynne so she is, necessarily, absent. Hawthorne’s point is about judgment.

In the opening of The Prison-Door, the narrator physically and metaphorically juxtaposes two competing sites of human experience: a prison house with its “iron spike[d]” door symbolizing violent human judgment; and a “rose”, symbolising Nature’s grace (75-76).⁹

For the Puritans in their spiked “steeple-crowned” hats who stand at the door of the prison house waiting for a prisoner to emerge, there is no contest, there is no battle. They are there watching and waiting because they have already judged the prisoner within to be guilty. They have already decided on the prisoner’s character and despise the prisoner in their hearts. The reader watches the audience watching for the prisoner whom they have already condemned. Yet the reader is not at that point of judgment. We are observing. We are aware that Hawthorne is watching the narrator’s construction of these events, and we are aware that the narrator condemns the crowd’s condemnation. Their “sad-colored garments” and “gray...hats” externalise and enact how dull hearts that feed on judging

⁹ We are asked to observe:

A throng of bearded man, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes (75).

others, are unaware that this feeding leeches colour and fragrance from their lives. What is intriguing, just for this moment when they are silent and before they begin to speak out their venomous verdicts as they do in Chapter 2, The Market-Place, there is the distinct lack of judgment from the narrator; it seems that he sees into their pitiful hearts and feels only pity. Hawthorne carefully crafts the narrative's opening; the reader is placed in a liminal space, a threshold- a place of choice. In time and space it can be read as a place before and a place after judgment. His primary request is that we do not choose, that we do not judge: that we do not judge before the prison door is opened, and that we do not judge after. This most difficult demand by Hawthorne occupies the central ethical space of the text. By looking carefully at this passage, the complex request that is really a demand can be understood.

The narrator has primed the reader on how to read this ethical situation, symbolising the choice we have as represented by “the spiked door” and the “rose” at the threshold. We are told that “the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him” (75-76). It suggests, through “kind to him”, that the prisoner is a man rather than a woman but what is more arresting is the symbolism of the “rose”. The narrator describes how:

On one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose bush covered in this month of June with its fragrant gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, *in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him*. This Rose bush, by a strange chance, had been kept alive in history...there is fair authority for believing it had sprung up under *the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson as she entered the prison-door*. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue forth from that inauspicious portal, *we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader*. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolise some sweet moral blossom that maybe found along the track, or relive the darkening close of a tale of human frailty a sorrow (75- 76, my emphasis).

The narrator's strategies here are precisely those deployed in ‘The Custom-House’, where we are told of the scarlet letter. Firstly, he blends the metaphysical and the metafictional.

Then the narrator's tone becomes elaborately persuasive, almost comically so, making the

unnatural not only natural but supernatural- all within this simple sentence: “This Rose bush, *by a strange chance*, had been kept alive in history...there is fair authority for believing it had sprung up under *the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson as she entered the prison-door* (76, my emphasis). The radical unlikeliness or “strange chance” of this rose bush being at the threshold of the prison door, being in full bloom and “covered with delicate gems”, having sprung up of its own accord (rather than being planted) “under the footsteps of . . . Anne Hutchinson” is all claimed as true, and therefore exists in the reader’s fictional world. Yet immediately on having created this elaborate and beautiful construct, the narrator quickly sidesteps any responsibility for its veracity with “We shall not take it upon us to determine” (76). His fluid relationship with the truth takes us back to his opening address in ‘The Custom- House’, further proof that this narrator and the narrator of the sketch are identical. However, he moves now into the realm of true metafiction.

Breaking the fiction of the fiction of Hester Prynne’s fabricated story, while at the same time breaking the fiction of the rose bush on the “*threshold of the narrative*”, the narrator offers the fictional “rose”, weighted as it is with supernatural beauty, with the female heroism of Anne Hutchinson, and with the Transcendentalist’s reverence for Nature, to the reader (74). It is a *tour de force*. A lexical *trompe l’oeil*. It is a calculated and self-assured strategy intended to position the reader to submit to what is offered, which is Nature’s “pity...and kind[ness]” or grace, rather than being allowed to choose the Puritan’s judgment (74). We have been and are being and will be aligned with Hester Prynne, even before she is revealed to be the prisoner within The Prison-Door.

Having established the reader's alignment with Hester in the sketch and then in the opening moments of the narrative, the narrator ensures that our sympathy is deepened into admiration by a number of obvious strategies. These strategies include: the profoundly ironic and sustained injustice of the Puritan disdain for Hester and reverence for her lover, Reverend Dimmesdale; the demonic character of Chillingworth as he binds Hester by keeping secret their marriage and persecutes her by persecuting Reverend Dimmesdale; Hester's fierce love for Pearl as she struggles to be both mother and father to the child in an isolated wilderness; and the hypocritical injustice of the townsfolk as they not only prize Hester's exquisite needlecraft yet refuse to acknowledge her publicly, but also refuse to allow her craft to metaphorically stain the veils of virginal brides. The narrator describes how "it was not recorded, in a single instance, her skill was called in aid to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride. The exception indicated the ever relentless vigor with which society frowned upon her sin", (107). Hawthorne's tone is one of disdain for the hypocrisy and misplaced "vigor" (107). Yet this hypocrisy is quickly exposed in another unusual sequence that extends my exploration of how the reader is taught to read signs and to forbear judgment. It is one of the less obvious strategies Hawthorne deploys to augment reader alignment with Hester, the adulteress.

In the sequence the narrator has the reader enter Hester's mind directly. We are privileged to know what only Hester knows about the supernatural power of the scarlet letter that is intended to shame her, and to know about the real status of supposedly virginal brides.¹⁰

¹⁰ The narrator records how:

[Hester] felt that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, *that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts*. She was terror-stricken by the revelations that were thus made. What were they? In all her miserable experience, there was nothing else so awful and so loathsome as this sense. It perplexed, as well as shocked her, by the irreverent inopportune of the occasions that brought it into vivid action. *Sometimes, the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb, as she passed near a venerable minister or magistrate, the model of piety and justice...* Or, once more, the electric thrill would give her warning, "Behold, Hester, here is a companion!" –and looking up, she would detect the eyes of a *young maiden*

A number of ironies inform this sequence and complicate our response to Hester. The first is that the heart of the adulteress is so pure that she is both “shocked” by the sin of the other, whether that other is the supposed embodiment of the Law or the supposed embodiment of the virgin girl, but Hester is also “sympathetic” to their predicament, despite their hypocrisy. The second irony is that the narrator wrongly attributes the supernatural power of the “red infamy” to the “Fiend”, to the devil. Exasperated by this additional and hidden injustice visited upon Hester, he deems this “new sense” to be demonic in origin and courageously confronts the Devil, demanding that Hester be left alone so that this new burden cannot strike “terror” into her soul. It is a poignant moment in the text. The reader honours the narrator’s courage and sympathy for Hester but we are also alive to Hawthorne’s position, which is to be our position. We need to read this ‘New sense’, this “talismán” in a manner entirely antithetical to that of the narrator. The ethical position Hawthorne is asking the reader to consider is that the capacity to “revere” another human being is not dependent on whether or not they have sinned. It is dependent entirely on the capacity of the human heart. The sin is immaterial. It is this truth that Hester learns as she is given the sign’s “new sense”. I would suggest that for Nathaniel Hawthorne, the “The Unpardonable Sin might [not be adultery] but consist of a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul” (*American Notebooks* 215.)

Our admiration for the adulteress, Hester Prynne, blossoms in the closing moments of the narrative. The narrator’s offer of a “rose” to us at its opening has done its work (76).

glancing at the scarlet letter, shyly and aside, and quickly averted, with a faint chill crimson in her cheeks; *as if purity were somewhat sullied by that momentary glance. O Fiend, whose talisman was that fatal symbol, wouldst thou leave nothing, whether in youth or age, for this poor sinner to revere?* (110-111, my emphasis).

Finally, Hester comes to see the sign of the scarlet letter as a blessing; she reads it as part of a different lexicon. She returns from her time living with her daughter, beyond the narrow province of New England's supposed Utopia, and:

resumed, - of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it, - resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom...[and] the letter ceased to be a *stigma* which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became *a type of something* to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too (274, my emphasis).

The narrator's choice of diction registers this ontological shift in how Hester regards herself. The scarlet letter is no longer a "stigma", a word that conflates both dishonour and religious persecution, but a phenomenon that defies classification - it is simply "a type of something" (274).

One final irony closes Hester's story. It is Hawthorne's final declaration that Hester is indeed a saint, even though neither the narrator nor Hester perceives this truth. The trope of "the saint" is one the narrator introduced in regard to her in 'The Custom-House' sketch and in the opening chapters of the tale, but one thereafter enacted rather than claimed. When the women from the town seek Hester out in her cottage by the lake to find wisdom and solace, she offers them something else- a new vision of womanhood. As the narrator relays this story, he seems to be merely gently recording his version of Hester's belief.¹¹ What we actually hear are the precise words of Hester Prynne in her complete humility, recorded by a narrator who concurs entirely with her. Ironically, what

¹¹ He records how:

She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined *prophetess*, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of the divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin...The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, *lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise...So said Hester Prynne, and glanced her sad eyes downward at the scarlet letter.*(275 my emphasis)

we also hear is Hawthorne's suggestion that Hester Prynne embodies the "prophetess", despite her inability to perceive this (275). Her capacity to know the evil of the hearts of those who expelled her from their midst and yet not expose or condemn them, her ability to honour a dishonourable husband and be loyal to a lover who will not acknowledge her, and her capacity for compassion, all render her "*lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise,*" (275). Hester's rhetoric reaches far beyond the confines of the narrative. It resonates with the works of the women who shaped Hawthorne's life. I sense not only Hawthorne behind this affirmation of his representation of Hester Prynne, but also the affirmation of Sophia Peabody and her sisterhood, Margaret Fuller, and even the "sainted" Anne Hutchinson (76). How can one not admire a woman who is both "saint" (76) and "prophetess" (275)?

Chapter 3

Edith Wharton's Context - Modernity and Morals

Ma vie fut en ce livre, elle a passé en lui. It a été mon seul événement. Michelet

(Lee 576)

My life has been in this book, it has passed into it, it has been the sole event of my life.

Michelet

Edith Wharton underlined these lines in the Preface of her much annotated copy of Jules Michelet's *History of France*, published in 1855. I would suggest that they could be a fitting epitaph for Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, since in the character of the Countess Olenska we find distilled the passions and intellect of Edith Wharton. Wharton's advocacy of the character of Ellen Olenska is striking, not only because the Countess is perceived to be an adulteress, but because she represents the antithesis of modernity's New Woman, the version of womanhood most revered in America during Wharton's lifetime. Edith Wharton's challenge and achievement in *The Age of Innocence* is to position the reader to admire one who is read as a sexual transgressor, the Countess Olenska. By examining Edith Wharton's "highly specific life-world" as Stephen Greenblatt would define it, Wharton's beliefs and values will emerge and the interplay between these values and *The Age of Innocence* explored, (Greenblatt, 2000).

Edith Wharton - The Author and the Artist

Just as many in Hawthorne's Salem failed to see themselves in his portrait of them as the Puritans who wait, brimming with judgment, outside the prison door of Hester Prynne, so too many of Wharton's 1920s New York, failed to see themselves in *The Age of Innocence*

when it was published in 1921. Many of the first reviews read the narrative as a critique of New York in the 1870s, not imagining that Wharton may have her contemporary “audience” in mind (Person 481). In her comprehensive biography *Edith Wharton*, Hermione Lee records how the novel was read as “autobiographical reminiscence”, with publisher Charles Scribner, a month after publication of the novel, sending Wharton a copy of Maitland Armstrong’s *Day Before Yesterday: Reminiscences of A Varied Life*, “a memoir of New York from the 1840s to the 1880s (Lee 568). If her publisher read the novel as a comment on “*Yesterday*”, it is unsurprising that New York followed suit.

More intriguing still is the delightful misinterpretation that led to *The Age of Innocence* being awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1921. Since at that time the Pulitzer was awarded to an American novel that best presented “the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood”, it is clear that the judges of the prize, all from Columbia University as was conventional at that time, did not apprehend Wharton’s satirical intent, regardless of whether they perceived the novel to represent New York of the 1870s or the New York of the 1900s (Benstock 365). Apparently when Wharton heard of the award, she “chuckled over the fact that the judges apparently had missed all irony in her novel” (Singley 382). I would argue that *The Age of Innocence* was read by its first readers in ways that Edith Wharton did not expect. By examining her world as a woman and an author as she wrote this text, we may come closer to discover what she did expect so that we, too, do not “miss all [the] irony” (Singley 382). My suggestion is that she intended, ironically, to surprise her readers by locating the ethical centre of her narrative within the character of an adulteress.

The events surrounding Wharton’s winning of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence* capture her radical isolation as an author. She discovered that Sinclair Lewis had originally been awarded the prize for *Main Street*, an *exposé* of small-town life in the Mid-West of

America, but that it had been revoked because the novel was deemed offensive to the people of the Mid-West (Singley 382). Instead, the Pulitzer was granted to Wharton (her intended “offence” to New York ironically unseen, as noted). Sinclair Lewis wrote to Wharton congratulating her on being awarded the prize. Wharton’s reply, written from Pavilion Colombe, her Paris home on rue de Montmorency, is poignant.¹

The disarmingly honest sentiment and humility when she states in the letter “so you can imagine what a pleasure it is to know that you have read *me*, & cared, & understood” publishes her isolation to Sinclair (Singley 383). She is not merely an unmarried woman, a woman without children, and an American in Paris. While Henry James recognised and respected her literary standing, she is a woman whose equals she perceives to be literary men, some of whom have failed to acknowledge her, and this is a deep source of grief. Imagining that she is viewed as “the Mrs. Humphrey Ward of the Western Hemisphere” when Mrs Ward is a popular English novelist known for her philanthropic and religious polemics, articulates her sense of segregation (Singley 383). Sinclair Lewis’s honouring

¹ The letter reads:

My dear Mr Lewis,

Your letter touched me very deeply...

What you say is so kind, so generous & so unexpected, that I don’t know here to begin to answer. It is the first sign I have ever had- literally- that “les jeunes” at home had ever read a word of me...I had long since resigned myself to the idea that I was regarded by you all as the – say the Mrs. Humphrey Ward of the Western Hemisphere... Your book & Susan Lennox (unexpurgated) have been the only things out of America that have made me cease to despair of the republic – of letters; so you can imagine what a pleasure it is to know that you have read *me*, & cared, & understood. It gives me a “Nunc Dimittis” feeling...

Subsequently, when I found the prize [should] really have been yours, but was withdrawn because your book (I quote from memory) had “offended a number of prominent persons in the Middle West,” disgust was added to despair. - Hope returns to me, however, with your letter, & with the enclosed article just received. –Some sort of standard *is* emerging from the welter of cant & sentimentality, & if two or three of us are gathered together, I believe we can still save fiction in America...

Believe me,

[Yours] very sincerely,

E. Wharton (Wharton’s italics, syntax and punctuation, Singley 383)

letter signals her inclusion as one of America's *literati*, perhaps far more than winning the actual prize. That his letter gave her, a "Nunc Dimittis feeling..." is telling (Singley 383). She references the Song of Simeon in the New Testament. Simeon, having prayed to see the promised Messiah, upon being visited by Mary and Joseph with the Christ Child, declares:

Now Thou dost dismiss Thy servant, O Lord, according to Thy word in peace;
Because my eyes have seen Thy salvation,
Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples:
A light to the revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.

(Luke 2: 29-32. English-Douay- Rheims, 1582).

Wharton's sense of relief at Sinclair's acceptance can be seen to parallel Simeon's long waiting. Just as Simeon waited for the promise of the salvation for the world, Wharton claims to have waited for the "[salvation] of fiction in America" (Singley 383). Yet her tone is so full of appreciation, almost of reverence, that I would suggest the source of her feeling is the relief that she is, finally, to be taken into the inner circle; to be inside the literary camp. She can now, like Simeon, "dismiss" her true self from the untenable, excluded position she has held for so long (Luke 2:29). It finally matters not that she is a divorced, unmarried, childless American woman in Paris; she is a writer.

Perhaps the depth of this relief and her motivation behind her creation of the Countess can be even better understood if we look back at the formation of Wharton as a child, particularly referencing her mother's cold dismissal of her daughter's predilection as a child to "make up", the phrase Wharton shaped as a child to describe her creative experiences (Lee 13). In one of her two autobiographies, *A Backward Glance*, published at the age of seventy two, Wharton is blunt in recording her mother's failure to encourage her

young daughter's creative pursuit.² Hermione Lee argues that Wharton became a "painfully shy self-conscious child" because Wharton's mother's invariable response to her daughter's literary pretensions, her solecisms, and her looks, was one of laughter or direct dismissal (36). With this parental dismissal in mind, Sinclair Lewis's letter can be even more easily understood as one that was to end a very long wait for affirmation, and which signaled inclusion into the *literati*, where she belonged.

Yet it is not merely New York's inability to read *The Age of Innocence* as speaking to their contemporary milieu that intrigues me about the initial reception of the text, it is the absence until recently in the Academy, of extensive enquiry into the connection between Wharton and her heroine, the supposed adulteress, Madam Olenska. By first establishing how the representation of Ellen Olenska parallels the historical figure of Edith Wharton, as an author and artist, and as a woman, I will then examine the narrative strategies through which Wharton recruits the reader's sympathy and ultimately admiration for the foreigner, Madam Olenska. Edith Wharton positions her readers to admire an unmarried childless woman who is independent, an artist; and who, above all, values "freedom"- the word chosen by the character of Ellen Olenska to capture her highest value (*The Age of Innocence* 71). We are invited to admire a scarlet woman who crystallises the values Wharton herself most admired.

² She writes of how:

My first attempt (at the age of eleven) was a novel which began: "Oh, how do you do, Mrs Brown?" said Mrs Tompkins. "If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing room". Timorously I submitted this to my mother, and never shall I forget the sudden drop of my creative frenzy when she returned it with the icy comment: "Drawing-rooms are always tidy" (ch.3, iii.).

Edith Wharton - The Woman

While Wharton's preoccupation with her status as an author deepens our understanding of *The Age of Innocence* and underscores the layered parallels between Wharton and her representation of the Countess Olenska, a study of Wharton's understanding of her individualised self as a woman will further refine this connection between Wharton and her characterisation of Ellen, the apparent adulteress. While it has been read as criticism of an earlier age, Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* directly challenged the nineteenth and early twentieth-century narrative of America's patriarchal hegemony, which recruited the modern stereotype of America's New Woman to embody American Idealism. Paul John Eakins's *The New England Girl* argues that in the nineteenth century "women functioned as an all-purpose symbol of the ideals of culture; the official repository of its acknowledged moral code, and she appears accordingly as a redemptive figure in the era" (5). While Eakins's summary does not take into account Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, nor, as Nina Baym argues, nineteenth century novels written by women about women, there is considerable truth to his claim (Baym 22). By the turn of the century, William Dean Howells, a highly respected academic in America, had written *Heroines of Fiction*, arguing that it was his "prime position that the highest type of novelist is he who can most winningly impart the sense of womanhood" (II:43). The heroine Howells references is "fresh, intelligent, self-confident, and morally irradiating" (Ammons 439). Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, whilst shocking the nation in the 1870s, had become the standard image of the New Woman; Daisy Miller is a character who is both intelligent and independent. This particular value system is reflected beyond the world of literature. In 1898 James Fullarton Muirhead, in the chapter 'An Appreciation of the American Woman' in his *Land of Contrasts*, had observed that:

Put roughly, what chiefly strikes the stranger in the American woman is her candour, her frankness ... her apparent absence of consciousness of self or of sex, her spontaneity, her vivacity, her fearlessness (50).

Muirhead's decision to complicate the New Woman's relationship to her sexuality by the word "apparent" in "her apparent absence of consciousness of self or sex" publishes the hidden issue in the new stereotype, a gap which I will argue Wharton addresses in *The Age of Innocence*. Qualities chosen by Muirhead could easily describe a child: "candour, frankness, spontaneity, vivacity, fearlessness" (50). The element in the description that would define womanhood is sexual confidence and awareness, yet it is this element that is only "apparent". It seems that he either finds it hard to comprehend that a woman could be ignorant of this element of her being, or that he cannot quite comprehend the absence of this element in America's New Woman. I would suggest that Edith Wharton's representation of Madam Olenska is one that addresses this gap in the stereotype of modernity's New Woman, and unequivocally publishes Madam Olenska's sexuality as the quintessential part of her being. Evidence for this position can be found in Wharton's non-fiction writing just prior to publication of *The Age of Innocence* in 1920. In 1919 Wharton published *French Ways and Their Meaning*, a collection of articles she had written for various publications, but which she collected together in one volume. One article in the collection, 'The New Frenchwoman' gives us insight into how she created the character of Madam Olenska. While Elizabeth Ammons has argued persuasively that Madam Olenska is expelled from New York because "America finds the creative woman dangerous *because she is female*", I would argue that Madam Olenska is expelled because she is an artist, because she is a specifically sexual threat, but more importantly because she is the embodiment of a female who blends artistry and sexuality into a mature ethical identity that New York fails entirely to comprehend (445).

While the modern American narrative of the New Woman may have emerged as part of an embryonic movement of freedom for women which was a release from earlier types that

confined women in domestic spaces and prohibited economic freedom, this New Woman had hidden within it yet another type of confinement: a taboo. This taboo was sexual expression and sexual freedom.

In *French Ways and Their Meaning* the article titled ‘The New Frenchwoman’ is Wharton’s direct challenge to the repressive, reductive narrative of America’s stereotype of the New Woman. Historically its sentiments echo Margaret Fuller’s manifesto *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* which was a document written by a woman that exposes and challenges the discrimination under which women labour as a result of patriarchy; a text that so clearly shaped Nathaniel Hawthorne’s high regard for women as previously argued. In ‘The New Frenchwoman’ Wharton not only exposes the patriarchy that sits at its heart and robs women of their true essence, but reveals much of what was in her own heart. The article reveals Wharton’s increasing concern with her own status as a woman, her concern with the relegation of women and men into separate spheres, and with the sexual repression of women. It takes issue with the dominant nineteenth –century patriarchal ideology and has a direct bearing on how Wharton shapes the representation of the character of Madam Olenska, positioning the reader to admire this supposedly scarlet woman.

Wharton’s argument in ‘The New Frenchwoman’ is established bluntly. She declares:

There is no new French woman; but the real French woman is new to America, and it may be of interest to American women to learn something of what she is really like...

First of all, she is, in nearly all respects, as different as possible from the average American woman... and the real reason is simply that, like the men of her race, the Frenchwoman is *grown up* [and being adult depends] above all, on close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women.

Compared with the women of France the average American woman is still in kindergarten . . . [because] American women are each other’s only audience, and to a great extent each other’s companions...

If, then, being “grown up” consists in having a larger and more liberal experience of life, in being less concerned with trifles, and less afraid of

strong feelings, passions and risks, then the French woman is distinctly more grown up than her American sister; and she is so because she is playing a much larger and more interesting part in men's lives (Waid 288-295, Wharton's emphasis).

Throughout this excerpt we hear Wharton's relentless criticism of American women and privileging of French women. What is striking is the central thread - her insistence on conversation - and on "the close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women," where the anaphora of "and" underscores the particular importance of each aspect of this equal interchange between men and women (289). Even today, when considering *mixité* - the ideal of a free association of men and woman in society - academics reference Wharton's ideal in *French Ways and their Meaning* (Eubanks 212).³ Significantly, Wharton chose to enact this ideal in the text of *The Age of Innocence*. We will watch the centrality of verbal exchange in Chapter 4, where the rich conversation between Newland and Madam Olenska renders hollow the inane and "perform(ative)" conversations between Newland and May, where in Butleresque style, they speak the script scripted by gender stereotypes (Butler, 173). That Henry James and Walter Berry were two of Edith Wharton's most intimate friends and mentors during her life, signals the centrality of rigorous intellectual conversation to her being (Lee, 215-216). This rigour, for which Newland longs, is Madam Olenska's milieu.

Wharton's insistence in 'The New Frenchwoman' on the image of French women being "grown up" (289) and American women being like children is reminiscent of James Fullarton Muirhead's earlier description in *Land of Contrasts* where he describes the New American Woman in terms of adjectives that could easily describe a child. Wharton's

³ Recent discussion in France surrounding the concept of *mixité*, largely spurred by national discussions about French identity and the challenges posed by some immigrant groups advocating for a greater degree of gender separation in public spheres, bring fresh relevance to Wharton's 1919 manifesto. Wharton proposes *mixité* for emulation in America, and suggests that a freer mingling of men and woman in society will allow for greater cultural, intellectual, and artistic refinement generally (Eubanks).

conclusion in 'The New Frenchwoman', "If, then, being "grown up" consists in . . . being . . . less afraid of strong feelings, passions and risks", directly addresses the gap in the stereotype of the American New Woman; that gap is "passion" (295). Passion is admired in the New Woman if it is for sport or for domestic order or perhaps an intellectual pursuit, but sexual passion is not often referenced. As William Dean Howells in *Heroines of Fiction* noted, the new heroines of literature in America were required to be merely "fresh, intelligent, self-confident, and morally irradiating" (Ammons 439). For Edith Wharton the constraint and emptiness expected in the New American Woman, was anathema. Sexual passion was central to the historical character of Edith Wharton, and is central to her representation of Ellen Olenska. A brief overview of Wharton's sexual development will clarify its import in her life and offer an explanation of what motivates her representation of the character of Madam Olenska.

Wharton's novels speak clearly of sexual desire and her experience of passion came, not with her husband Teddy Wharton, but with a secret and brief affair with libertine Moreton Fullerton, whose sexual range embraced both sexes and even a relationship with his half-sister (Lee 328). Henry James captures the intensity of Wharton and Fullerton's passion by privately identifying it as "gilded bondage" or "gorgeous vortex" (Lee 319). The secrecy is not merely a result of the fact that Wharton was married. It derives also from the fact that it was not until she was forty six that she finally knows this sexual ache; it is a new, charged, volatile and treacherous landscape, requiring nuanced navigation. Whereas Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne kept one diary to share their love and passion, Edith Wharton kept two: one for her public life as an author, and one for her private, passionate life as a woman. Wharton's careful curation of the documents that record her affair with Fullerton is telling; it is entirely secret, but entirely abandoned in its record, often chronicled in a hybrid of English and French as a fitting representation of desire. Excerpts read: "How happy I was..." and "Oh God - Oh God", and "blissful hours..." where the language of orgasm

records her experience (Lee 321). There is considerable evidence that Wharton's relationship with Fullerton taught her much of the range of available sexual experience.⁴ As we look at the text of *The Age of Innocence* in Chapter 4, significant parallels occur between Wharton's life and the imagined lives of Newland Archer and Madam Olenska. In many respects Wharton's representation of Newland's character as he comes to know Madam Olenska, is the representation of her journey into sexual knowledge. The irony is, of course, obvious, since Newland had had an affair with a married American Woman prior to meeting Madam Olenska. Yet neither his relationship with this woman nor his marriage to May Welland, the New Woman, even begins to enter the landscape where Madam Olenska resides.

As we consider Edith Wharton's isolation as an Author, as an Artist and as a Woman, we begin to understand the poignant dénouement of *The Age of Innocence*. The character of Madam Olenska embodies Wharton's highest values but they have been little valued in her home country, America, and the narrative's close enacts this loss. It is the double loss of both Madam Olenska and Newland Archer. The latter's loss is captured in the final scene of the novel. An older, widowed Newland is in Paris and sitting outside Madam Olenska's home. He intends to visit her yet the novel's closing line records how "Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel" (Waid 217). Despite brilliant conversations with men such as James and Berry, despite Fullerton's intense albeit brief passion, and despite being revered as a great writer, isolation and the loss of missed opportunity define

⁴ Hermione Lee records how Wharton's unpublished short story "Beatrice Palmato" reveals a good deal of what obsessed Wharton; "Double lives, repression, sexual hypocrisy, hidden longings" (589). Lee goes on to describe how in "the narrative sexual pleasure- so rarely felt by Wharton's characters – is set about here, as always, with prohibitions, shame and secrecy" (589). There is an "Unpublishable Fragment" where Mr Palmato is described making love to his highly aroused daughter. It is clear that they have already had a prolonged sexual relationship: "Always in the dark, but that he has patiently waited until she is married (a "dull" misery to her) and lost her virginity, so that they can make love completely, and in the light" (589). In a luxurious, exotic setting the father and daughter engage in a complete and unrestrained sexual encounter. The accuracy of the descriptions suggest that Wharton may well have experienced this measure of physicality.

much of the life of Edith Wharton. *The Age of Innocence* is a record of loss, of one who “walk[s] back alone to [her] hotel,” (Waid 217). Jules Michelet’s “*Ma vie fut en ce livre, elle a passé en lui*” could be its fitting epitaph, as it records Wharton’s own life experience in the character of the supposedly scarlet woman, Madam Olenska; a woman whose intelligence, sexuality and artistry rendered her an exile.

Edith Wharton’s achievement in *The Age of Innocence* is to position the reader to admire one who is read as a sexual transgressor, the Countess Olenska. The narrative strategies she deploys to achieve this extraordinary admiration can now be considered.

Chapter 4

The Age of Innocence

Having contemplated Edith Wharton's position as an exile in Europe, and having considered the individuals whom she admired and loved, what emerges is a portrait of Wharton's status as an author and as a woman of deep passion. Yet she is more than this, for it is not merely her artistic gift and sexuality that adequately explain her. There is something else as well, located within her status as a *mature* woman. The term can too quickly register dullness and a lack of passion, but Wharton's maturity is the antithesis of this stereotype. Her identity is that of the aesthete, sexually aware, one who creates a space in the world that operates on an entirely equal footing with men. It is a space where a woman holds the attention of men in a manner that is the antithesis of how the New American Woman seeks to hold the attention of men. Rather, she is 'The New Frenchwoman' discussed in the previous chapter, penned by Wharton as part of *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919). This woman is one whose intelligent and authentic conversation, determined defence of her own freedom, and effortless control of sexual power through how she constructs her home as well as her *couture*, combine to generate this most alluring and powerful maturity. This marvellous definition of the female is what Edith Wharton saw herself as embodying in her own life and also represents through the character of Madam Olenska.

We see the manifestation of Wharton's New French woman in *The Age of Innocence* generally and in her representation of Ellen Olenska particularly. What follows is an attempt to identify the narrative strategies deployed by Wharton through which to invite the reader to empathise with, even admire this most unusual heroine, the supposed sexual

transgressor, Madam Olenska. If this invitation is accepted, Wharton will have not only affirmed her own values, but worked to challenge the values of conservative America. Strangely, Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* echoes Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. It is as if, in both texts, the narrative strategies fail to operate effectively on their first audience. Like Hawthorne's text, Wharton's is a lesson in a failure to read a text: a failure of its first audience to read the connection between Wharton's 1870s setting and their own 1920s context which ironically lead to Wharton winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction; and the failure of Wharton's fictional 1870s New York to accurately read the scarlet woman, Madam Olenska.

Wharton's most powerful narrative tools in controlling the reader's empathy and admiration for Madam Olenska are firstly the story's narrator, and secondly the representation of Madam Olenska as a woman who understands, responds to and deploys physical space as a method of signalling meaning. Both strategies work simultaneously. By looking closely at how the narrator positions us to observe Ellen Olenska as she both creates and enters the public and private spaces of 1870s New York, we learn to read her, as does Newland Archer. What Newland and the reader finally come to know is that Ellen is a cultured woman whose authentic passion for and knowledge of the Arts renders her superior to New York's elite and able to converse easily with those of intellect. She is a sexual being who effortlessly performs female sexuality; and she is a mature, ethical adult, cognizant of and able to play Old New York at its own, supposedly superior, ethical games. In essence, Madam Olenska is at once the French Woman in *French Ways and their Meaning*, and an idealised portrait of Edith Wharton herself (Wharton 1919).

Wharton signals her preference for Madam Olenska through the manner in which her character occupies space. Unlike the residents of Old New York, Ellen refuses to allow existing spaces to define her and, instead, constructs her own response. This point of difference is established from the narrative's opening sequence at the Opera House.

Whereas Wharton satirises both New York and Newland Archer's failure to correctly perceive the facile social performance that surrounds the actual performance of Gounod's *Faust*, Wharton affirms Ellen Olenska's skill in exposing New York's pretensions to understand the Arts. Wharton's success depends on double-voiced discourse. Narratologist James Phelan's recent work on reading the American novel looks at *The Age of Innocence* and frames it as psychologically and ethically complex territory, looking specifically at how Wharton controls the narrative voice in order to control the reader's judgment of Newland (2013). Phelan examines the following passage that records why Newland arrives late at the opera:

New York was a metropolis, and [he was] perfectly aware that in metropolises it is "not the thing" to arrive early at the Opera; and what was or was not "the thing" played a part as important to Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago (4).

Phelan notes how the double-voiced discourse ironizes Newland's behaviour, as we hear simultaneously both the narrator's view of Newland and Newland's view of himself.

While Newland sees himself as superior to Old New York, the narrator identifies him as participating in its social world. Phelan highlights the narrator's skill which artfully and efficiently equates "the dictates of fashion with the 'totem errors' of Newland's ancestors ... to give a new, deeper sense of the power of social convention in both New York high society and Newland's life: whether being on time for the Opera has the same status in this society as the fears accompanying the mysteries of existence did on ancient times" (45). In contrast to Newland, Wharton's narrator relates without irony Ellen Olenska's easy ability to dismantle and mock the pretensions of Old New York. In fact, both Wharton and her narrator enjoy Ellen's irreverence as:

Her glance swept the horseshoe curve of the [opera] boxes. "Ah, how this brings [my childhood] back to me - *I see everybody here in knickerbockers and pantalettes*"... [The] young man was shocked that [Ellen's eyes] should reflect so unseemly a picture of the august tribunal

before which, at that very moment, her case was being tried. Nothing could be worse than misplaced flippancy (12, my emphasis).

What we are made to observe here is Ellen's maturity, developed in her years in Europe, and her sense of her self which permit her to see through Old New York (comically, down to the undergarments of their childhood) as it performs the role of audience at the opera while ironically not having the least interest in the Arts. The narrator scorns how Americans "want to get away from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it" (4). The narrator captures Ellen's disinterest in petty New World politics and contrasts it with her deep interest in *Faust*:

As for the cause of the commotion, she sat *gracefully* in her corner of the box, *her eyes fixed on the stage*, and revealing, as she leaned forward, *a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing*, at least in ladies who had reasons for wishing to pass unnoticed (10, my emphasis).

The simple adverb "gracefully" and the simple phrase, "her eyes fixed on the stage", signal Ellen's total engagement and artistic appreciation of Christine Nilsson's performance of Marguerite (3). The narrator's approving tone is clear. The narrator then draws our attention to Ellen's sexual nature by referencing her displayed "bosom", but there is no criticism in this reference because any possible disapproval is mitigated by the earlier approbation. Rather, New York's prudery is on display. Wharton's tone when representing Madam Olenska is marked by something that is quite the reverse of the satirical lens through which she views New York. What we read is a deep respect for this 'Other'; appreciator of art, sexual being, and confident woman. While Wharton's preference for Ellen is clearly tabled here, it is more overt in the representation of Ellen in private spaces rather than public places like the Opera. Ellen Olenska's response to the artistry of *Faust* is European and superior to the response of all of New York; even to the dilettante Newland Archer. Wharton's insistence on Ellen's character being European, despite being

raised as a child in America, is central to the binary through which Wharton privileges Europe and denigrates America.

Recently in the Academy ‘the spatial turn’ has allowed an awareness of the relationship between space and identity to be more fully explored and this has been of benefit to those who study Edith Wharton’s opus, looking particularly at how the homes chosen by her characters reflect the values of those characters. As a woman *au fait* with the significance and symbolism of architecture having written *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton understood how physical space can represent human character (1987). Wharton’s representation of Madam Olenska’s construction of and interaction with space effortlessly reveals Wharton’s privileging of Ellen’s values. Valuable work on this interaction has been explored by Katheryn Beebe and Angela Davis who argue that:

the concept of space provides a rich analytical framework within which to investigate the fluctuating constructions of *gender and social status* as they respond to economic and political concerns¹ (39, my emphasis).

While ‘the spatial turn’ has clearly explored how space is gendered and space is a record of status, Wharton’s construction of Ellen’s abode depends on the interplay between these two states (gender and social status) and does so in ways that puzzles the logic of the Americans who visit her there. In a town that claims that things are “straight-up-and-down”, Madam Olenska and her *milieu* defy conventional signage (49).

What we observe in Wharton’s creation of Madam Olenska’s abode in New York is the careful construction of a place that exists entirely beyond the confines and comprehension of the American mind. We observe the mind of the French Woman, articulated with such

¹ Beeb and Davis go on to reference a range of prominent theorists who explore ‘the spatial turn’. They argue that “the social and political use of space lies at the heart of its construction, echoing de Certeau’s emphasis on spatial practice as action in and transformation of space. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of ‘practice’ (meaning and action), or how people act and interact in various ways to reproduce and reinforce culture can offer practical insight here. Low and Lawrence-Zuninga explain that, ‘because social practice activates spatial meanings, they are not fixed in space, but are invoked by actors, men and women, who bring their own discursive knowledge and strategic intentions to the interpretation of spatial meanings (39).

passion in *French Ways and Their Meaning*; she is intelligent, sexual, and artistic; one who performs equally with men the art of conversation (Wharton). The deep knowledge and nuanced depiction is possible because it is the portrait of the lady and author, Edith Wharton. As the narrator describes the physical space of Ellen's home in "*des quartiers excentriques*" and Newland Archer enters her home, what we as readers enter with him is a space of nuanced artistry, independence, and passion (47). The description of the location of Ellen's abode detail the eccentricity that makes Ellen the 'Other'.² There deliberate violence embedded in the description registers Wharton's intention to offend and mock Old New York. It is almost as if she wished to "throttle it[s] feeble cast-iron [prejudices]" (43). The narrator labours the shabbiness of the neighbourhood through "dishevelled" and "dilapidated", yet the real venom is housed within the scathing mockery of New York's abhorrence of "people who wrote" such as Wharton herself, and in Archer's sobering reflection about the "mean housing" of the "humanities" (43).

The real power of Ellen's construction of space lies not merely within her choice to live in an unfashionable quarter but within her home; not merely within its *decor*, but in every rhythm of its life. The narrator focalises through Newland's mind and we observe that, rather than being offended by being kept waiting by Ellen, as would be *de rigueur* for a

² We read of how:

Newland Archer rang the bell of the peeling stucco house with a *giant wisteria throttling it feeble cast-iron balcony*, which she had hired, far down West Twenty-Third Street, from the vagabond Medora.

It was certainly a strange quarter to have settled in. Small dressmakers, bird-stuffers, and "*people who wrote*" were her nearest neighbours, and further down the *dishevelled* street Archer recognised a *dilapidated* wooden house, at the end of a paved path, in which a writer and journalist called Winsett, whom he used to come across now and then, had mentioned that he lived. Winsett did not invite himself to his house; but he had once pointed it out to Archer in the course of a nocturnal stroll, and the *latter had asked himself whether the humanities were so meanly housed in other capitals*, (43, my emphasis).

man in 1870s New York, he merely found it “odd to have been summoned in that way, and then forgotten ...but Archer felt more curious than mortified”(45). As he enters the room where he is to wait, Archer is unable to identify the artistic elements deployed by Ellen to create her home.³

It is not Ellen’s body that first woos Newland: it is her difference; her disinterest in keeping to times; her mysterious creation of *décor* that embraces all the senses; and her independence. He “tries to find the trick of it” but its source is within Ellen herself, within her artistic understanding of the world that does not merely adhere to established rules of aesthetics (45). For Ellen, *décor* is not the empty echoing of the latest dictates of fashion, but the choosing of artistic pieces to create a pastiche that creates an individual aesthetic. When she finally arrives, she is unaware that she has kept him waiting, not seeing herself as enslaved to a man’s timings. Her response to his formal flattery of her home is to ignore it and engage in an adult conversation that continues the thread of authentic conversation between them that began at the opera, continued at the van der Luyden dinner, and is to mark their interaction throughout their relationship. She openly declares the importance of freedom.⁴ She is “free” in multiple senses: of her husband’s objectification of her; of New

³ The narrator records Newland’s thinking in:

Medora Manson’s shabby hired house...had, by a turn of the hand, and the skilful use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, “foreign”, subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. *He tried to analyse the trick, to find a clue to it* in the way the chairs and tables were grouped, in the fact that only two Jacqueminot roses (of which nobody ever bought less than a dozen) had been placed in the slender vase at his elbow, and in the vague pervading perfume that was not one put on handkerchiefs, but rather like the scent of some far-off bazaar, a smell made up of Turkish coffee and ambergris and dried roses (45 my emphasis).

⁴ She asserts:

“I like the little house...but I suppose the blessedness of its being here, in my *own* country, and my *own* town, and then, of being *alone* in it... They’re all a little vexed with me for *setting up for myself* – poor Granny especially. She wanted to keep me with her: but I had to be *free*” (47-49 my emphasis).

York's geographical constraints regarding what is fashionable; and she lives "alone". Yet her inner freedom is perhaps best measured by her capacity, enacted here, to engage in authentic conversations freely with men, as equals. She is "setting up for [her]self", not for men (49). She embodies Wharton's vision of the New French Woman (1918). This marvellous independence is part of what makes her admirable to the reader as it is so clearly approved of by the narrator; and part of what first shocks Newland, and then piques his interest in her. Initially he is appalled that she should show herself at the Opera, seated next to May, and then appalled that she should want a divorce and freedom. However, gradually he comes to value her authentic and intelligent conversation, becoming increasingly conversant with her cultural world, one that renders his barren and dead.

Redolent in the first description of Ellen's home is Wharton's own identification of herself as a cultured woman, as one "who wrote" and one who knew that the "humanities were...meanly housed" (43). Ellen's regard for *the literati* carries more weight than the superficialities of a "dishevelled street" or a "dilapidated wooden house" (43). What she values is real conversations, those described in 'The New Frenchwoman' (1919). Later in the narrative when a married Newland and May visit Mrs Carfry's in London as part of their honeymoon, Newland observes at the dinner party that May's "conversation was a chill to repartee" (121). As they drive home from the dinner party he hopes to secure her approval and invite home to dinner one of the guests, the man of letters, M. Rivière. When he and M. Rivière conversed at the dinner M. Rivière confided in Newland that he has made a choice between slavery and freedom.⁵ In their conversation at dinner, unmediated,

⁵ The narrator records the cost of this choice:

It's worth everything, isn't it, to keep one's intellectual liberty, not to enslave one's powers of appreciation, one's critical independence? It is because of that that I abandoned journalism, and took to so much duller work: tutoring and private secretaryship. There is a good deal of drudgery, of course; but one preserves one's moral freedom, what we call in French one's *quant à soi*. And when one hears good talk one can join in and listen...Ah, good conversation – there's nothing like it, is there? The air of ideas is the only air worth breathing" (122, my emphasis, except for the French).

we hear the voice of Edith Wharton, declaring one of her highest values: “good conversation”, the signal of “one’s moral freedom”, which leaves one free- “*quant á soi*” (122). In his conversations with Ellen, Newland had found that freedom. Ironically, May refuses to have M. Rivière to dinner, declaring “common” what the narrator had described as a man with “an insatiable taste for letters”, and with May’s declaration Wharton’s damnation of the New American Woman is complete (122-123). May’s ignorant incomprehension of the world of ideas and the art of conversation is enacted here. Her lack of allure resides not merely in her girlish figure and seeming naiveté; it resides in her intellectual vacuity. She offers no repartee, she has no vitality; she is the antithesis of the mature woman, the Countess Olenska. Added to this is May’s feigned innocence, a pretence that is exposed as pure cunning when both the reader and Newland come to understand May’s part in Ellen’s final expulsion from New York society.

The whole narrative arc traces Newland’s journey and it is one of gradual loss. The loss begins with his understanding of Ellen’s reverence for the mind and culture over the appearance of the civilized. It begins with his first visit to her home. When Newland Archer leaves Madam Olenska’s quarters, he has begun to change in a way that effectively dismantles his understanding of himself and his world. He enters as a dilettante and leaves as one who has entered a world that seems “too rich, too strong, [in its] fiery beauty” (51).

These are the words he finds to interpret the power of the yellow roses he considers sending to May, but instead sends to Madam Olenska. He is discovering another kind of “beauty” (51). Her very being has already begun to seduce him. Her beauty also has an ethical dimension. When Newland and Archer meet in Boston and agree that their love for each

other must not be reduced to an illicit affair but must consist of a delight in the mere fact they exist together in the world, Newland understands Ellen's true calibre. He is comforted by "the perfect balance [Ellen] had held between loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves...; a balance not artfully calculated, as her tears and her faltering showed, but resulting naturally from her unabashed sincerity"(149). The final grief of the story is that Newland is left with May Welland's artless conversation, ignorance of The Arts, tedious sexual innocence, and cunning which is so "artfully calculated" (149).

Wharton recommends Madam Olenska to the reader in a multiplicity of ways, one of which is her ability, while being 'the Other', to be embraced by the established Old New York. An entertaining and poignant sequence in the narrative is one where Mr. Henry van der Luyden, the patriarch of New York society, visits the Archer household, who are anxiously discussing how their cousin Madam Olenska has offended the van der Luydens. The cause of the offence is that Madam Olenska has been visiting Mrs Struthers, a woman who, according to Newland, "has good music, and amuses people on Sunday evenings, when the whole of New York is dying of inanition" (55). To the surprise of the Archer household, Mr van der Luyden arrives and announces that he has been to visit Madam Olenska and declares her to be "a charming woman"(57). What is striking is that as he recounts his visit, he repeats Newland's inability, when he first visits her, to comprehend Madam Olenska.⁶ Wharton parallels the responses of three men to Madam Olenska's drawing room: Newland Archer, The Duke, and Mr van der Luyden. The mystery of the

⁶ Mr van der Luyden is perplexed as he records how:

She has a real gift for arranging flowers. I had sent her a few carnations from Skuytercliff, and I was *astonished*. Instead of massing them in a big bunch as our head- gardener does, she had scattered them loosely, *here and there*. . . *I can't say how*. The Duke had told me: he said: 'Go and see how cleverly she's arranged her drawing room.' *And she has*. I should really like to take Louisa to see her, if the neighbourhood were not so – unpleasant (57, my emphasis).

space is an embodiment of her mystery and it is one that none of the men is able to articulate. Mr Van der Luyden is “astonished” and the wonder and inability to comprehend is further represented in the ellipsis, and the final acknowledgment, “I can’t say how”. Her aesthetic is entirely new to them and entrancing. All three men are seduced by the space she constructs which is individual, free, sexually charged and adult.

Wharton characterises Madam Olenska not only through the spaces she inhabits but also through the authentic and mature conversations that occur in those spaces. Wharton’s decision to identify Madam Olenska’s initial abode as European generally, living in Nice more specifically, and married to a Polish Count, registers her full approval of Europe - the ancient historical place claimed as the known world’s centre of culture and intellectual rigour. Wharton is fully aware of, and amused by, the idea that it is the “Other” according to American geography. Madam Olenska’s final retreat to Paris in the novel’s dénouement affirms Wharton’s endorsement of the binary which privileges Europe over all things American. The dénouement is the clearest registration of the loss that informs the whole narrative. It is the loss of European civility and its mature female embodiment, Madam Olenska. When Newland understands that he was lied to by his wife May, a lie that denied him the richness of living in a civilized city such as Paris, with a woman who was his intellectual and sexual equal, it is a moment of poignant loss. There is an extreme contrast between May’s feigned innocence as she manoeuvres Ellen back to Europe, and Ellen Olenska’s real innocence as Ellen refuses to engage in a sexual affair with Newland because it would betray the people who have been kind to her, a group that includes May. These are the details surrounding Newland’s epiphany regarding May’s unethical behaviour. Immediately after Dallas tells Newland of May’s lie, that she had asked

Newland to give up Madam Olenska, the narrator records his pain.⁷ Wharton's tone in the passage is unmistakable. It is one of the deepest sympathy and its source could be her own grief as a woman denied a life with a man who was her intellectual and sexual equal. With the revelation at the end of his life of May's deliberate scheming to imprison him in marriage, he is forced "all at once" to recalibrate his reading of his whole married life; it renders him "stifled" and "inarticulate" just as marriage to May rendered him "stifled" and "inarticulate"(214). His son, Dallas, aptly describes his life with May as "a deaf-and-dumb asylum" (214). There has been no genuine intelligent exchange. Wharton's own suffering informs her characterisation of Newland and her portrait of Madam Olenska. While Europe was her home, in her marriage to Teddy Wharton she was denied the *sympatico*, sexual expression and conversation that would have been the highest value to her (Lee 309). Except for the one brief year in 1908 during her affair with Moreton Fullerton, her marriage to Teddy was, indeed, "a deaf-and-dumb asylum" (214).

New York's failure to read the worth of Ellen Olenska and Newland's loss of someone of such substance (an aesthete, a female who understood the nuance of sexuality, and a principled woman) is the teleological focus of the narrative. It is in the *dénouement* that the reader understands most fully that Madam Olenska, the supposed adulteress, is the character most prized by Wharton in *The Age of Innocence*. Ellen Olenska's representation embodies Edith Wharton's representation of herself as a mature, alluring member of the *literati*, yet Ellen is also the vision of what women should be – an ideal that effortlessly

⁷ The narrator tells of how:

Archer did not accompany his son to Versailles. He preferred to spend the afternoon in solitary roaming through Paris. He had to *deal all at once with the packed regrets and stifled memoirs of an inarticulate lifetime* (214, my emphasis).

embodies intelligent conversation, revels in female sexuality, acts honourably, and esteems artistry in all its manifestations.

Conclusion

There is a biblical story that sits behind both Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, but it is one that is often ignored, perhaps because the accounts of it in the Gospels differ so widely. The story refers to a woman who could see beyond the immediacy of the present and beyond the merely temporal. In Luke's Gospel, she is described as a woman of iniquity (Luke 7:36-50). She foresaw that Christ's death was imminent (something his most intimate companions could not imagine) and bathed his feet in an exquisite perfume in readiness for his burial. Mark records this version of the story:

³ And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on his head.⁴ And there were some that had indignation within themselves, and said, Why was this waste of the ointment made? ⁵ For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence, and have been given to the poor. And they murmured against her. ⁶ And Jesus said, Let her alone; why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work on me. ⁷ For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always.⁸ She hath done what she could: *she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying* (Mark 13: 3-9, King James, my emphasis)

The woman's actions astonished the disciples but not the Christ. His condemnation of their condemnation of her, surprised them. This woman might be the archetype of how the ethical can be found, ironically, within what can too easily be judged as iniquitous. Perhaps Hawthorne and Wharton surprise us, just as the disciples were surprised, by showing how profound wisdom and insight can co-exist with sexual transgression. Perhaps there is further consideration here. Perhaps both Hawthorne and Wharton, quite strangely and counterintuitively, demonstrate how a society's violent, self-righteous derision can refine the person being vilified. The iniquitous woman in the Gospels knows and sees more than the disciples. Has the suffering that her sin has brought her somehow brought her insights denied to others? Are the characters of both Hester and Ellen refined through the condemnation they suffer?

Edith Wharton's audacity in choosing a scarlet woman to exemplify her vision of the principled female appears to be deliberate, and is, I would suggest, a knowing repetition of Nathaniel Hawthorne's deliberateness in prizing Hester Prynne as the moral centre of his narrative. Perhaps, in turn, Hawthorne's portrayal of Hester Prynne is a perceptive iteration of the woman who poured the perfume to anoint the soon to be crucified Christ. Given this pattern of referencing the conflation of wisdom and social ostracism in response to perceived sexual deviancy, simplistic judgments of the characters of Hester Prynne and Ellen Olenska will prevent those whose vision is limited to read the ethics that can lie within adultery. Both Hawthorne and Wharton deploy narrative strategies that invite the reader to judge these women wisely and, finally, to admire them. They use the capacities of fiction to show that only those who can see, will see.

By adopting a transdisciplinary method, this study of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Age of Innocence* has profited by being situated at the intersection of an historical study of primary sources, a theoretical framework that examines how considerations of gender shape both author and reader, and a cognitive analysis of how narrative strategies position the reader to engage affectively with the protagonists. This approach, giving equal weight to context and text, permits us to see how Nathaniel Hawthorne's esteem for the Peabody family and for Margaret Fuller seems to find an echo in his portrayal of Hester Prynne, just as Edith Wharton's 'The New Frenchwoman' captures her vision of her ideal woman, realized in Ellen Olenska. Hawthorne's letters to his publishers reveal his plan to focus the gaze of the people of New England on their religious hypocrisy, just as Wharton's letter to Sinclair Lewis reveal her longing to be recognised as one who reveres the Arts, captured in her portrayal of the Countess.

The protagonists of both stories, Hester Prynne and the Countess Olenska, are individuals who create a space for themselves where they stand apart from, even above, their respective society's legalism and laws. In the same way, Hawthorne and Wharton have

created texts that stand apart from and above the traditional patterned judgments concerning adultery; the texts are spaces that honour these women.

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