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The criticism of American literature: The powers and limits of an institutional practice

Kayes, Jamie R. Barlowe, Ph.D.

The Ohio State University, 1988

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UMI
THE CRITICISM OF AMERICAN LITERATURE: THE POWERS AND LIMITS OF AN INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

Jamie R. Barlowe Kayes, B.A., M.A.

The Ohio State University
1988

Dissertation Committee:                                      Approved by

D. R. Barnes                                                      [Signature]
S. Fink                                                          Adviser
J. P. Phelan                                                     Department of English
To James Phelan
VITA

April 4, 1943 .......... Born - New Albany, Indiana
1968 .................. B.A., Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
1983 .................. M.A., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
1987-88 ................ Presidential Fellow, The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Fields: Literary Theory; Adviser, James Phelan.
Studies In:
Prose Fiction; Adviser, James Phelan.
American Literature; Adviser, Thomas Woodson
Renaissance Literature; Adviser, David Frantz.
Medieval Literature; Adviser, Lisa Kiser.
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INTRODUCTION

The "Tyrannous Eye": The Origins of American-ness

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe . . . We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable [American] materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the Middle Age; then in Calvinism . . . If I have not found that combination of gifts in my countrymen which I seek, neither could I aid myself to fix the idea of the poet by reading now and then . . . But I am not wise enough for a national criticism . . . ["The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson]

This study began as a way to understand the enormous influence of a group of critics of American literature who, in the early years of this century, established a critical agenda which remains virtually unchallenged. The bedrock of their agenda—the uniqueness of our national literature—was to legitimize the institutional study of texts written in America. This literature, when compared with English and European literature, had been considered inferior by scholars. Avoiding the assertion that American texts could stand alongside such "classics" as Beowulf and The Fairie Queene, critics gave them another status: in effect, they argued that the study of American literature could yield valuable historical and cultural knowledge. Vernon Parrington admits his participation in
directing the course of institutional criticism of American literature in his landmark study of 1927, Main Currents in American Thought:

I have undertaken to give some account of the genesis and development in American letters of certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American—how they came into being here, how they were opposed, and what influence they have exerted in determining the form and scope of our characteristic ideals and institutions. In pursuing such a task, I have chosen to follow the broad path of our political, economic, and social development, rather than the narrower belletristic; and the main divisions of the study have been fixed by forces that are anterior to literary schools and movements, creating the body of ideas from which literary culture eventually springs (p. iii).

Institutional criticism looked back at American texts, not to see richness and variety—in addition to knowledge—or even to envision an aesthetics which could appreciate a literature written under diverse circumstances by various writers, but instead to see a unified body of texts with the single intention of producing a uniquely American literature. As Robert Spiller notes in his "Address to the Reader," prefatory to Literary History of the United States (1948):

Our national unity does not and cannot depend upon blood or upon inherited tendencies. Thus very naturally our literature, which is a record of our experience, has been deeply, often subconsciously, aware of its responsibility in the making of a nation from a complex of peoples in voluntary union. It has been an inquiring, an exploratory, literature from the beginning—asking questions of the New World, challenging the effects of sudden release and expansion upon the spiritual nature, delighting in adventure... It has been a literature profoundly influenced by ideals and by practices developed in democratic living. It has been intensely conscious
of the needs of the common man, and equally conscious of the aspirations of the individual in such a democracy as we have known here. It has been humanitarian. It has been, on the whole, an optimistic literature, made virile by criticism of the actual in comparison with the ideal (pp. xv-xvi).

Despite the appeal that Spiller's words have, the idea that there could have been commonality of intention on the part of American writers, either consciously or subconsciously, or that the literature of an entire nation could be summed up so easily, seems reductive in light of our knowledge that American authors wrote at various times in various places, producing a variety of texts which call for various responses from readers. For example, to lump Emerson's essays with Hawthorne's tales, and Irving's sketches with Melville's metaphysical fiction and Mark Twain's humor denies any such variety—demands, in fact, the repression of it. F. O. Matthiessen in American Renaissance (1941) describes concerns such as mine when he says that the "common reader . . . does not live by trends alone; he reads books, whether of the present or past, because they have an immediate life of their own." Yet, for all of his insight, Mattheissen, too, assumed that this body of literature was uniquely American and that we should study it in terms of its intertextuality:

the fact remain[s] that Emerson's theory of expression was that on which Thoreau built, to which Whitman gave extension, and to which Hawthorne and Melville were indebted by being forced to react against its philosophical assumptions . . . The types of interrelation that have seemed most productive to understanding the literature itself
were first of all the obvious debts, of Thoreau to Emerson, or Melville to Hawthorne. In the next place there were certain patterns of taste and aspiration [and so] . . . the structure of the volume [American Renaissance] is based on recurrent themes. In addition to the types of interrelation I have mentioned, the most dominant of these themes are: the adequacy of the different writers’ conceptions of the relation of the individual to society and of the nature of good and evil . . . Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville all wrote literature for democracy in a double sense. They felt it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfilment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity. Their tones were sometimes optimistic, sometimes blatantly, even dangerously expansive, sometimes disillusioned, even despairing, but what emerges from the total pattern of their achievement—if we will make the effort to repossess it [my emphasis]—is literature for our democracy [xiv-xv].

This American uniqueness and the consequent principles of a unified body of texts and a commonality of intention demanded a critical methodology that would produce those principles, seemingly as inductive conclusions. That method involves the examination of American texts for the purpose of discovering what many critics—for example, Nina Baym, Russell Reising, and Sacvan Bercovitch—call "American-ness"; in other words, texts become repositories of American identity or national notions of self. Depending on the focus of a particular critic, that search can begin with such early Americans as Bradford, or with Irving, or with Emerson for those who, like F.O. Matthiessen, identify a group of texts within the boundaries of the "American Renaissance." However, given the consistently a priori methodology, where a
critic begins is inconsequential as long as the author is an American or planned to be an American.

Rather than a unified body of literature, my study uncovers a unified body of criticism. What we have studied and based our scholarship on and argued all our theoretical and critical positions on is not American literature but the views of a few critics who became influential and who have remained so. Although we can safely assume that these critics set out to honor American texts, they, and their followers, have instead reduced these texts (at best) and (at worst) distorted them beyond recognition.

My working hypothesis is that this critical heritage has outlived its usefulness. In other words, I am arguing that we gain little from the attempt to find the distinctively American in American literature. We are almost always required to stand either too close to or too far from the text to discern those elements; and, what's more, the concept of the distinctively American is typically derived from outside the work and then found in it. We gain economy of explanation—Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter, and Walden can all be seen together this way—but we lose adequacy; to maintain our vision, our gaze must be either distant or partial.

To demonstrate that this earlier generation still profoundly shapes the practice of American literary
criticism, I will focus on books about American fiction written within the last eight years, some of which follow the established traditions and some of which either implicitly or explicitly depart from those traditions. To do justice to the diversity among the earlier generation and to the current generation, I draw my contemporary critical works from several kinds of criticism such as cultural, biographical, generic, linguistic, and historical. This wide-ranging sample then provides the basis for my general conclusions about the criticism of American literature.

I begin, in Part I, with two chapters in which I present two critics who are the most prominent, recent representatives of traditional Americanist approaches—broadly cultural and biographical—although these critics, Larzer Ziff and Alfred Kazin, claim to extend the boundaries of knowledge within the tradition even as they maintain the traditional terminology and methodology. The next three chapters, Part II, will focus on critics who exemplify the current practice of "dissensus" criticism—those who seek, in other words, to revise or rupture the traditional critical discourses as well as to reenvision American literary texts and their contexts, for example, deconstructionists, feminists, and narratologists. These critics—Joseph Kronick, Annette Kolodny, Judith Fetterley, Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, and Janet McKay—
then, represent kinds of theories and critical practices rather than particular traditional Americanist approaches. Despite their departure from traditional approaches, I argue that these critics nonetheless fail to escape the institutional paradigm of American-ness.

The first book I examine in Part I is Larzer Ziff's *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (1981), which is a good example of broadly cultural and biographical criticism of American literature, equally valuing as it does the "common concerns of society and the distinct literary achievements of its writers." Ziff believes that "literature is a particular concentration of cultural forces continuous with, rather than apart from, society"; in other words, he views "literature as a unique and intense social form." He feels that his study extends Van Wyck Brooks's earlier biographical studies and "makes precise connections, literary as well as biographical, between American democracy" and its writings. Although Ziff claims that his emphasis is different from F.O. Matthiessen's greater emphasis on the "social origins of great writing," he remains so close to the critical heritage that I begin with him.

In the second chapter I examine Alfred Kazin's *The American Procession* (1984), another book which closely follows traditional critical patterns. More exclusively
representative of biographical concerns than Ziff, Kazin "interprets" authors from Emerson to Hemingway as they reflect a personal self that both defines and develops a national literature. Kazin examines the lives of individual authors and their personal notions of a national literary self, which often opposed their society's conception of the self in America.

To begin Part II, I focus, in the third chapter, on Joseph G. Kronick's Poetics of History (1984) because it attempts to avoid subordinating literature to history—the idea that literature is a mirror of history—and focuses instead on the notion that history is contained in literary tropes. A poetics of history, he proposes, "shifts the ground of historical studies from epistemology to tropology, the rhetorical interplay that poses history as a problematic of reading wherein temporal relations are generated by a linguistic process of change." American writers, he feels, "rethink" American history to make it unique; they reveal that "nature and the past do not exist outside of language . . . ." Kronick's book also reflects the larger critical institutional shift toward post-structuralism, and therefore offers the opportunity to examine how the "American heritage" still exerts its influence within a critical practice that would ostensibly be opposed to it.
The fourth chapter focuses on four feminist critical works: Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land*; Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (1978); Nina Baym's "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," (1981) as well as her book, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* (1986); and Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* (1985). In addition to providing another important kind of cultural criticism, these critical works are good examples of attempts to enter the dominant discourse from a different and currently popular perspective. Their critical purposes include examining canonical texts with the specifically feminist agenda of interpretive revision and expanding the canon to include texts by women.

My fifth chapter will be concerned with an exemplary generic study, *Narrative and Discourse in American Realistic Fiction* (1982) by Janet McKay. McKay represents an example of a critic who addresses one of the major concerns of the earlier critics—realism—through a different critical tradition—narratology. Using the linguistic distinction of story and discourse (her specific models are Lubomir Dolezel and Seymour Chatman), she closely examines the narrative techniques of Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain. Realism functions, McKay argues, not only in the author's choice of subject matter but also, and more importantly, at the level of discourse. By reducing the authority of
narrators, these authors "foreground the perspectives of characters." McKay explains that the "realists discovered an important linguistic principle long before linguists began to consider the issue: namely, responsibility for directly reported discourse belongs to the speaker alone. Through direct discourse, the characters can come to the reader without mediation."

Assessing the powers and limits of the critical heritage and these extenders and resisters makes my position metacritical. In other words, my purpose is not, finally, to substitute merely another critical approach for the ones I examine and evaluate. Instead, I want to recognize the power and importance of the questions of all these critics, including those I place in the critical heritage, and to emphasize that these critical frameworks have the potential power to complicate our understanding of American literary texts rather than to reduce, even to distort them. I also want to avoid subsuming one approach under another, and therefore allow each its unique status and potential power. I want, however, to emphasize my ongoing critique of the pervasive influence of the institutional paradigms of American studies; thus, my objection to the paradigm of American-ness remains constant even as I acknowledge the powers of the general questions of these critical frameworks.
Thus, before I assess the powers and limits of each framework, I situate each in the tradition and in the larger, current critical debate. Then, I attempt to understand—to get inside—each framework by first discovering its particular focus and agenda and then using its methodology on The Scarlet Letter. When I assess the powers and limits of each framework, I do so in two ways: one, as it fulfills its own claims; and, two, as its methodology allows it to answer its own critical question and thus offer its special kind of knowledge, whether that knowledge be of the structure and form of the text itself, of history, of culture, of authors’ biographies, or of other extrinsic theoretical and philosophical ideas.

Furthermore, as the chapters unfold, in addition to the kind of examinations I have described so far, I will be paying attention to problems resulting from a multiplicity of critical languages which have neglected semantic differences, creating difficulties when inferences are made from terms and definitions which purport to be shared but are, in fact, not. For example, I will notice how various theories and critical practices differ in their definitions of texts, of intention, of history, of rhetoric, to name only a few. Such an awareness can, I hope, suggest that—although there is, inevitably, competition between and among critical
approaches—much of it can be reduced by recognizing multiple definitions, multiple critical purposes and methods, and multiple critical perspectives.

I will also be, implicitly, taking to task a deeply entrenched Americanist notion that studies based in history, culture, and biography are "outside" literary theory and that the "purity" of their approaches frees them from the kind of assessment I do. Instead, my study assumes that any approach to an American text is theoretical. If a critic believes that the study of American history allows him/her the widest range of knowledge and insight into American literature, then that critic is positing a theory of history and literature, whether admitted or not. Thus, this study assumes that there is no critical practice free of a theoretical perspective.
NOTES


The most general form of the question which Ziff asks in *Literary Democracy* is the one asked by all cultural critics: How does culture influence literature? More specifically, he asks about what he perceives to be cultural influences relevant to the lives and works of Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville. He selects these writers because, he claims, they established "American literature as a distinct way of imagining the world," creating innovations in language,
subject matter and literary forms. Ziff insists that he is not concerned with their literature as a mirror of society, viewing their work instead as a "unique and intense social form . . . a particular concentration of cultural forces continuous with, rather than apart from, society" (pp. vii-viii).

These forces form the context in which Ziff situates the biographical details he selects. Each chapter, which focuses on a particular author, reflects a different cultural force or myth, for example, landlessness (Melville), sexual repression (Hawthorne), political conservatism (Hawthorne), the self divided (Poe), "right naming" (Emerson), death (Whitman), and society vs. nature (Thoreau). Ziff then analyzes details of their literary works according to these applied cultural themes, concluding that their works reveal the culture as it was specifically perceived by each.

Ziff wants to show, as well, how he extends the tradition of cultural criticism; in part, he tries to show it by differentiating his work from that of Van Wyck Brooks and F.O. Matthiessen. He contends that "No previous work on the period turns on the two equally valued focal points of the common concerns of the society and the distinct literary achievements of its writers" (p. ix). He is unlike Matthiessen, he claims, because The
American Renaissance deals with "the aesthetics of American Romanticism" and is not concerned with the cultural context in which the literature was written. He further separates his work from Matthiessen's by eschewing "extended textual explications." Ziff does, however, "speak in detail about language and form as they reflect the state of the culture, and in this way [he] crosses Matthiessen's terrain on [his] different errand" (p. viii). He distinguishes his work from Brooks by claiming that he is "not so interested in the ways in which the writings . . . mirror society," nor in the "details of material culture" (p. viii). Instead, Ziff discusses only the aspects of the culture as they directly influence the literature of a particular author. Any other cultural information, he feels, is interesting, but, finally, extraneous and irrelevant to his question. He also describes his search as moving constantly "between the world observed and the creative processes of the writers who inhabited it, justifying description of the former by exhibiting its subtle effects on the latter" (p. viii).

In order to assess the powers and limits of Ziff's framework and to determine the extent to which he extends the tradition of cultural criticism, I need to situate him more carefully in that tradition by examining several other well-known cultural critics. I want to begin by
evaluating his claim to be different from Van Wyck Brooks.

Of Brooks's many writings, Ziff refers only to *The Flowering of New England*. The questions which motivate this book are similar to Ziff's. Brooks asks, what was the New England mind and how did it manifest itself in the writers of that region and how did that manifestation affect the ensuing literature? Ziff, of course, claims to look at the American mind more than the New England mind, but this finally is only a semantic difference since Ziff focuses on New Englanders. Brooks focuses on Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, Dickinson, Poe, and Whitman; Ziff, as I have mentioned, focuses on this group, minus Dickinson. Both critics examine other writers who were contemporaries of these major ones; Ziff gives particular emphasis to Fuller, Stowe, and Harris.

Ziff would also claim that he is different because he is interested in cultural influences on literature rather than manifestations of culture in literature. In other words, for Ziff, the word "manifestation" suggests that we look at the literature and directly see the tracings of society as filtered through the author. Ziff, however, wants to make clear that he sees no simple one-to-one correspondence between culture and literature. He wants to avoid the accusation that he searches for cultural images or specific references to culture or minor
revelations of an author’s place in his/her culture. He sees the influence of culture on writers as more pervasive and less self-conscious than that. He sees culture as influencing everything an author says, not just image-patterns and themes.

Yet, for all these efforts to support his claim, Ziff’s distinction remains a semantic one because he can only determine cultural influences on literature if literature in some way and to some extent manifests that culture. Furthermore, as I shall demonstrate later, Ziff’s claims about influence end up as guesses about psychological states of authors. His findings are non-refutable, but also not provable. Another critic could make different, even contradictory guesses and, with equal validity, claim them as truth.

From this perspective, what is striking about the efforts of Brooks and Ziff are not the minor differences, but the similarities of their principles. They both see that a region or a country must have a sense of itself in order for there to be a literature which reflects it; it must, in other words, have progressed far enough to have collective characteristics, which begin to be noticed and talked about. The thinkers and writers then react to these cultural notions and their inherent contradictions or reductions.
Brooks's method is to characterize the culture of New England as a whole—as well as regional and localized versions—by situating authors in that culture. Brooks's book purports to teach us that many authors of New England expressed only the regional qualities and their particular versions of those qualities in their writings. These works, while perhaps very popular at the time of their writing, failed to garner a larger and longer lasting audience. Brooks claims that only the group of writers from New England on whom he focuses were interested in a deeper human understanding; thus their works, which were complex and difficult to grasp, continue to be the focus of academic studies and of popular readings.

Ziff focuses similarly and draws similar conclusions, but he includes fewer material details of the culture and offers more detailed analyses of a few literary works. Ziff's method is to move from the selected biographical details to particular works of authors, which are analyzed, not unlike Brooks's briefer accounts, in accordance with cultural notions which are particularized in an author. Thus, despite the valiant effort of Ziff to extend the tradition of cultural criticism that he sees as rooted in *The Flowering of New England*, he is different from Brooks only in his more expansive use of the biographical cum cultural details of an author's life in particular writings.
If their questions, principles, methods, and conclusions are thus similar, Ziff's book participates in rather than extends the tradition of cultural criticism. Furthermore, like *The Flowering of New England, Literary Democracy* actually does little to bring the reader closer to any one of these American authors or to any of the works of literature they produced. Ziff's careful analysis of various images and patterns in various literary works is valuable because it provides specific knowledge about those images and patterns. Finally, and most significantly, however, his analysis of those images and patterns cannot be extended to serve as an analysis of whole texts and does not get us much further than Brooks in our understanding of the literature or even much closer to the connections, so important to cultural critics, between a culture, an author, and the literature.

In either critic's case, however, as in the cases of the critics I will discuss next, I can use their paradigms about the influence of culture on literature and make them work. In other words, the trouble with these methods is not that they don't work but that they work at the expense of the literature. Once these critics allow themselves to be ruled by the notion that it is possible to extract indications of the influence of culture on a literary work by minimizing the complexity of the work and privileging cultural forces or myths--once they believe that they can
fully account for the psychological motivation of individual authors through subjective speculation about the influence of the culture—they are short-circuiting the process of inquiry.

To situate Ziff more fully in the tradition of cultural criticism and, then, to make a stronger case for my claim that he remains in the tradition he claims to extend, I will look briefly at six other cultural critics whose work turns on the same axis as that of Brooks and Ziff. The publications of these critics cluster around a period from 1955 to 1963. They remain influential studies and are considered to have given us critical insight into American literature and its authors. These critics are R.W.B. Lewis, Leo Marx, Leslie Fiedler, Daniel Hoffman, and A.N. Kaul. These, of course, are not the only cultural critics whose work I could examine; I chose them because of the reception their studies received when published and because of their continuing influence.

In general, cultural critics have taken deCrevecour’s question, "Who then is the American, this new man," as their own and, guided by the assumption that its writers had the same question in mind when they wrote, search for an answer about our cultural identity and then move to the literature, armed with a new questions based on that answer. In other words, they ask first what our cultural identity is, and once they discover their version of the
answer, next ask how that identity, which, they imply, unavoidably influenced writers and their literary efforts—is revealed in American narratives.

Their answer to the question about what constitutes our cultural identity—what constitutes American-ness, in other words—despite the variations and nuances discovered by individual critics, is the same: this American is a self which reflects the divisions in the culture. The individual critical discoveries form the various divisions of the self: for example, this American is torn between the freedom of individuality and the need to conform to a community, between unconscious sexual desires and conscious fears of sexuality, between growing up or remaining the Adamic innocent who is forever free of women and responsibility, between fatherhood and perpetual "sonhood," between the culture in which this American lives and the ideal culture that s/he envisions, between regionalism and nationalism, between technology and pastoral landscapes, and between "highbrow" pursuits and "low-brow" pragmatism.

These dialectical tensions in American culture and literature are never resolved in any way that is satisfactory to Americans, and thus, these critics argue, cultural progress is not made. The literature therefore—whatever the time-frame it reflects—reveals the same dialectical patterns, that of a "one-generation" culture,
never looking to or learning from the previous generation, doomed to repeat the same mistakes, ask the same questions, feel the same psychic pain—and, finally, to disregard its past.

The American writers, these critics posit, are a part of the cultural problem but have intellectual distance and creative impulses which spring from their self-consciousness about their place in the culture; thus, they can critically examine the culture and present their observations and suggestions through the themes and images of the literary works.

The first of these critics is R. W. B. Lewis, whose book, *The American Adam* (1955), claims to reveal the ways in which dialectical tension is lodged in the on-going cultural debate about Adamic innocence, about sinful human natures after "the Fall," and about the ironically tragic optimism engendered by innocence and knowledge of sin. He believes that he can illustrate the participation in this debate, and thus the vision, of individual authors by locating and discussing Adamic images in American narratives.

Lewis's espoused intention is to "disentangle" the "emergent American myth and the dialogue in which it was formed" from the writings of America (p.4). He implies, too, that this myth is somehow separable from other aspects of the writings. This image of the American Adam
becomes increasingly tragic as the culture becomes more self-conscious. The culture recognizes the danger in the Adamic ideal but nonetheless continues to repeat the mistakes of innocence and its illusion of freedom. By looking at the history of such images, Lewis draws the conclusion that the American never learns and thus never matures (p. 9).

As Lewis continues, his claims grow for the comprehensiveness of his critical method. He admits, first, that explicit Adamic images tend to appear only in the final work of an author, when s/he has, in other words, "sought to summarize the whole of experience of America"; then Lewis claims that this Adamic myth has "lurked" beneath the surface of all American narratives. He even goes so far as to say that the "fact" of the use of the Adamic myth is a "model for narrative" (p. 6).

Leo Marx's study, The Machine in the Garden (1964) answers the question of how American writings move us from the historical fact of industrialization, filtered through the literary dialectic of industry vs. pastoral idyllic life/virgin landscape, to a notion of a culture of contradictions, which, however, offers us the possibility of reconciliation, "a balance of human experience." Although Marx emphasizes that the writers may not have consciously included these images of technology in their writings, what he calls the "Sleepy Hollow pattern," (the
intrusion of the sounds of a train on idyllic musings of Hawthorne), is a "creation of culture," and thus intrinsic to the experience of these nineteenth century writers. The sounds of industrialization, he feels, have been a part of our lives, and thus have "reverberated endlessly in our literature" (pp. 9-16). He sees dialectical tension in our literature, not the tension between innocence and knowledge that Lewis sees but that which results from "the machine's sudden entrance into the landscape" (p. 343).

Such intrusions into a pastoral setting, however, are not limited to the literature of America; as far back as Virgil there has been, according to Marx, a tension between the intrusion of civilization, with its political notions, and the freedom and beauty offered by nature. Pastorals throughout the centuries reveal, Marx argues, an individual who feels powerless and alienated in the face of civilized forces. Nineteenth century American narratives offer us a reconciliations between these forces, he asserts, but by the twentieth century the narrative heroes who would offer such reconciliation are alienated or dead.

Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) examines a set of images, revelatory of another dialectical tension in American literature, which centers around the fears of American males to grow up. Although
close to Lewis's images of innocence, Fiedler's images reveal instead an intentional desire to remain adolescent and thus free. The fear of growing up is reflected in literature in confining marriages, in avoidance of passion, and in a "search for an innocent substitute for adulterous passion and marriage alike" (p. 332). This substitute often takes the form of powerful male relationships, which ostensibly have nothing to do with sexual interests, but which provide an alternative to the restrictions of home and family--a kind of never-ending weekend with the boys, if you will.

In the work of both Marx and Fiedler, as we saw in Lewis, there are tragic overtones to the tensions, whatever form they may take, because finally the culture is revealed in the literature as unable to move forward in a way that allows for personal self-awareness, particularly in males. They are always distracted from the business of maturity by whatever cultural tensions intrude most often in their lives.

Daniel Hoffman's Form and Fable in American Fiction (1961), searches for answers to questions similar to Lewis's, Marx's, and to Fiedler's. Hoffman asks, what is the American hero as he is revealed in American fiction? He also asks how American authors make use of the "fragmentary folk sagas which outline the folk concepts of a heroic personality" (p. 231). Hoffman's
folk hero resembles Lewis's Adam because of his "spiritual immaturity and his lack of human depth" (p. 231). However, there is a tension, Hoffman feels, in the presentation of this folk hero and the mythic and legendary heroes of European literature; these American heroes subsume attributes of these earlier heroic figures at the same time their American values seem to oppose the values of the more ritualistic and powerful heroes of the past. The American hero has no past, no parents, "no patrimony, no siblings, no family, and no life cycles, because he never marries or has children. He seldom dies" (p. 229).

Hoffman traces the historical and folk examples which appear in our literature and which he says "prove not only . . . considerable positive powers, but also the limitations of the American notion of selfhood" (p. 231). Thus, while this hero has "indomitable self-confidence [and] a courage in his adaptation to the world," he also is forced to deny the possibility of tragedy in his life (p.230).

In The Continuity of American Poetry (1961), Roy Harvey Pearce investigates how the American poet contains and uses his 'modernism' and how the poetry manifests the 'two radically opposed ways of life open to modern man.' These two "radically opposed ways of life" are much like those of American life since its beginnings:
Americans are always trying to reconcile the "impulse to freedom with the impulse to community" (p. 157). Pearce, like Lewis, sees the Adamic image as central to the understanding of this tension in American life.

This "antinomian, Adamic impulse" fights against the growing American society that frightens people even as they see its growth and values as necessary. Some poets pursue this Adamic impulse which reveals and make us aware of both self-definition and self-limitation. Other, more mythic poets use people as places and occasions—"worthwhile not intrinsically but only as they can be made out to share some universal, depersonalizing vitality . . . " (p. 178). Finally, however, these American poets believe that man can make sense of his world, "no matter what its inherent confusions; that he can make, or discover, or make-and-discover, meaning" (p. 179).

In The American Vision (1963), A.N. Kaul asks how novelists were "deeply concerned with both the society of their times and an ideal conception of social relationships, and how the consequent interplay between actual and ideal social values constitutes at least a partial source of their continuing vitality."

Kaul describes social reality to see how the writers constructed an imaginative world that mirrored their societies, despite their lack of particularized description of them and their apparent claims to care
about a reality which was only tangential to society. Eaul first examines Bradford, Winthrop, Franklin, and deCreveceour to set a tradition, then considers Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Mark Twain as they fit into it. This continuing tradition, revealed in the American myth of creating a culture of ideal community life, began in the movements of society and history. These four novelists, however, were interested in the moral alienation which results when individuals attempt to reconcile individual integrity and freedom with society. Their themes also include separation from that society to look for a better one, which they have imagined and idealized.

What we have is a continuing discovery that American narratives are marked by dialectical tension, and a continuing attempt to read them as revealing that tension. The turn of the cultural screw forces recognition of some kind of tension and some kind of revelation of the tension in the writings of America. Even before we ask about the relations of the various tensions to each other, we should note the similarity of the reasoning employed by these critics. The form of their argument is this: they seize upon tension between terms--innocence and knowledge, adolescence and maturity, pastoral and industrial--and then examine both the literature and the culture in light of the tension.
Furthermore, once the opposition between terms is established, there are only a few possible outcomes to these tensions: dominance of one or the other, unhappy conflict, successful coalescence, or standoff.

Such logic thus predetermines the reading, privileges one American quality, and simplifies complex texts—and methods based in this logic will always yield the desired results. Once these critics discover a dialectical tension, it becomes the basis for another question which asks how this tension is revealed in the literature. Once we notice that the critic asks how it is revealed and not if the tension is revealed, we can recognize that s/he has already predetermined the existence of the tension in the literature. Some cultural critics, like Brooks, attempt to answer only the question about cultural identity and its revelation in the literature, but most—as in our examples here of Lewis, Marx, Fiedler, Hoffman, and Pearce—follow the pattern just described and, without examining their own assumptions or the ones on which this kind of method rest, take for granted that such criticism provides satisfactory intellectual inquiry.

Ziff, however, claims to extend the limits of that critical framework and seeks to avoid the appearance of merely searching for yet another pattern of dialectical tension, resulting in one of the predetermined outcomes. Yet, he, too, uses the logical structure of the other
cultural critics, as we shall see when we closely examine his methodology. He also seeks to avoid the accusation that his brand of criticism is, at best, a partial critical framework by appearing to examine culture and literature as equals. However admirable Ziff’s impulse is, his execution betrays that impulse. Ziff does no more to illuminate the literature of American than his predecessors. He, too, claims to explain whole literary works when, in fact, he explains only a part, perhaps only one theme, of a literary work. In such a trap is the limiting belief that these authors, whom the cultural critics present as the thinkers of our society, wrote with such collective notions. That a group of writers from various places would collectively try to conclude what constitutes American identity seems a reductive description of the complicated process of writing essays, fiction, and poetry.

Although we can see that Larzer Ziff is part of the on-going tradition in cultural criticism, we can also see that he wants to complicate the relationship between the literature and the culture. If we now look more closely at his method, we can examine his claim that he is not merely pointing to specific images or patterns of images in American literature. At first, his method seems to be more subtle and his project more concerned with the larger issue of how the psyches of American writers are
influenced by culture than with proving the existence of a particular cultural concept. Thus, Ziff appears less addicted to a single controlling tension, but when he begins to discuss a literary work, the logical structure employed by the other cultural critics appears. Ziff's version of reasoning by means of binary oppositions, however, is applied to individual authors rather than to one pattern of images revealed in all authors of American literature.

I have chosen his discussion of Hawthorne to exemplify this methodology, and I will extend his discussion of The Scarlet Letter to include a character other than Hester Prynne, who serves as Ziff's example of Hawthorne's particular notions of conservative democratic beliefs and secret sexual desires. In the first of his two chapters on Hawthorne, "The Great Conservative: Hawthorne and America," Ziff sets him in Salem, mentioning first the Hawthorne family's past history in that town. "In losing their wealth," he argues, "the Hawthornes had lost their place" (p. 110). Ziff does not feel that Nathaniel Hawthorne attempted to regain his place in Salem society, instead, devoting himself, after college at Bowdoin, to writing in his "dismal chamber." Eventually, Hawthorne's increased public exposure, through the publication of some of his writings, led him to the
Peabody’s, where he met his wife-to-be, Sophia (p. 112-13).

Ziff continues to take us through selected details of Hawthorne’s life, particularly those that deal with his financial instability, his employments at various Custom Houses, his reclusiveness, and his tendency to see himself as enclosing an "other" Hawthorne--one part of Hawthorne observing another part of himself: "The real Hawthorne, Hawthorne the writer, was separate from that worldly double" (p.115). Ziff also argues that Hawthorne felt a tension between freedom and solitude: "Freedom was a self-realization that depended upon separation, but solitude was a curse that could lock freedom out of its share in our common humanity. The resolution of the opposition was at the core of his character and his art" (p. 115). As Ziff continues, he weaves in pieces of Hawthorne’s writings as evidence of the ways in which Hawthorne manifested the influence of his culture. Ziff is not saying that everyone in Salem would have acted in exactly the same way or shown exactly the same influences; instead, he sees someone like Hawthorne as uniquely influenced and then uniquely imbuing his literature with that influence. Ziff discusses The Scarlet Letter and its relation to Hawthorne’s own life and beliefs, moving then to other novels. Finally, Ziff indicates that Hawthorne was unable to work, out of touch with his community, the
Civil War, and his creative impulses. By the time Hawthorne died in 1864, "solitude and freedom were no longer the different aspects of a single complex condition demanding creative resolution. They had become, rather, simply different words for the same bleak isolation from his country and his art" (p. 128).

Ziff strongly asserts that Hawthorne "compensated in his writing for the coldness of his social detachment by consistently punishing those characters--even artists--who held themselves aloof as he did: "Hardly a man of the people in his own conduct, he was in his fictions a vigorous defender of the mob. . . . He used the mob as the standard of emotional health in his fictions . . . he embraced it because its very undifferentiation meant truth to human feeling rather than adherence to mere ideas" (p. 115).

As we can easily recognize, Ziff has set up the tension that results from binary oppositions. For Ziff, this tension was inherent in Hawthorne's particular psychological make-up, which was affected by his culture. Ziff's version of the divided self initially seems more complex than, say, Hoffman's, but the logic he uses can be manipulated easily to fit any character's situation in any literary work. The only limitation on the logic is that the work must have a divided self, but the logic for
determining the author's self-division has no restraints.

The structure of Ziff's argument, then, has the following logic: all Hawthorne can be divided into two parts—freedom and solitude; for a time Hawthorne achieved a successful resolution of the parts, but they ultimately collapse into a single, unsuccessful resolution. Further, this psychological condition has its negative consequences in his writing: some characters—for the most part, those who, like Hawthorne, struggle with inherent opposing tensions—will be punished.

Hester Prynne is Ziff's example of a character who is punished for holding herself aloof from her community. He argues that she challenges her "semidemocratic community's assumptions about liberty and authority by asserting that nothing that is natural is wrong" (p. 118). The community, however, politically defeats Hester's notion and forces her to wear the scarlet letter and to live apart from them. In her isolation, she converts, Ziff contends, her "experience into theory," thus defeating her own heart: "Hester translated the heart's truth into an intellectual doctrine." Even after the community relents and attempts "to resume association with her," she chooses to maintain her isolation (pp. 119-20). Hawthorne recognizes that the community takes a long time to come to Hester, but Ziff feels that "they are not so tardy as
Hester herself," and that she will not "surrender her commitment to her new, desexed, intellectual self" (p.120).

Hester Prynne thus loses her heart to the interests of her head and, in doing so, ignores the feelings of humanity which the members of her community share with each other and eventually offer to her. Ziff goes so far as to state that Hester's "aspiration becomes cerebralized and leaves the abandoned heart to turn to stone" (p. 121)

To give Ziff credit, he admits to the emotional appeal to be found in the strength of Hester Prynne and to her as a "splendid, free individual who courageously allows into her field of comprehension all the complexities that life presents her. . . . These dealings, moreover, are conducted as she also negotiates her way within a society marked by the strong feelings of the populace and the iron reasoning of authority" (p. 121). Despite the reader's recognition that Hawthorne asks us to admire and respect Hester, that same reader also understands, in Ziff's reading, that Hawthorne is "ruthlessly democratic in his insistence that she will not prevail, because change must come from one who shares in the heart of the people" (p. 120). He goes on, in fact, to aver that this "need to adhere to the common heart of humanity was, for Hawthorne, the basic condition for the creation of an American literature. His fictions took their key from this common
democratic denominator and reinforced its conservative instinct to retain a pattern of life beneath the flux of political theories and material changes" (p. 121).

Hester Prynne, in other words, comes to understand that, although Americans had the opportunity to discover and proffer progressive ideas, feelings steeped in traditional communal values prevail. The traditional head/heart dichotomy in Hawthorne's fiction is, in Ziff, manifested in the tension that Hawthorne's characters feel about past history and present democracy. Those whose ideas become too progressive or communally unacceptable, within the framework of democratic ideals, are punished as "head-characters"; those who learn to have their lives shaped by traditional values and feelings—those, in other words, whose hearts beat in time with their environment and with humanity—survive in Hawthorne's fiction. "'The great conservative,' Hawthorne said, 'is the heart which remains the same in all ages'" (from English Notebooks, quoted by Ziff on p. 123).

Ziff's reading, thus, explains, for his purposes, a major character in Hawthorne's most popular work and reveals the influence of the culture on that work, as it was filtered through this author. Ziff's own question about how culture influences literature, then, is answered insofar as it relates to one aspect of one character in one literary work of one author. For Ziff, however, the
answer he discovers in Hester Prynne is so far reaching that, for him, the meaning of *The Scarlet Letter* lies in what he has said about her.

In a second chapter on Hawthorne, "Sexual Insight and Social Criticism," Ziff discusses another aspect of Hester Prynne's failure to conform to her society and her attempt to turn the yearnings of her heart into intellectual theorizing. He claims that the "theme of the novel is the exploration of Hester's perception that nothing natural is wrong, and, of course, the efficient cause of her contention was sexual desire" (p. 136). Ziff feels that the "act of fornication" between Dimmesdale and Hester remains "as a matter of continuing public interest," and that the act is repeated symbolically in the forest (p. 136). Hester is forced to keep secret her socially and sexually revolutionary ideas because they attack and attempt to reform society. Ziff thus argues that

in Hawthorne sexual attitudes are frequently symbolic of other aspects of the secret self at odds with society. . . . Hester's self-discovery through her realization of her sexual nature . . . does not attain its greatest meaning when one recognizes the images in the novel that symbolize sex . . . but rather when one recognizes that her sexual self is a synecdoche for her fuller private self: she seeks to surpass Chillingworth in the power of psychological dominance and to surpass Dimmesdale in the power of spiritual and intellectual leadership (p. 137).

Hawthorne's understanding, then, of an inherent problem in American culture, was deep and personal:
The principal area of the private self in America that is compelled to remain locked into secrecy is, most obviously, sexual desire. There is good reason to conjecture that Hawthorne's simultaneous discovery as a boy of exhilaration (freedom) and a curse (solitude) stems from his first experience of masturbation, although to note this is in no way to undervalue the larger social perceptions he built upon these conceptual terms. . . . But whatever part masturbation played in Hawthorne's first recognitions and subsequent dramatizations of the self that is hidden from public view, his dramatization of the division was the dramatization of a complicated truth about his society, not an extended rationalization of a secret sexual act (pp. 15-36).

Thus, in Ziff's terms, Hawthorne understood the problem of the culture because it was a part of his own experience. He realized that the knowledge gained from the secret sexual acts, however, could not be used to attack the culture which created the atmosphere in which one must perform secret sexual acts and feel guilty about them. The knowledge Hawthorne gleaned from his own experience, and from the perception of the way in which that experience fit into his society, could be used, at best, as insight into the culture. These insights could serve as a backdrop for his fictional characters; their secret experiences would be like Hawthorne's secret experiences, and their discoveries would be similar to his. His own inherent conservatism, also a part of his particular perception of his position in his hometown of Salem, did not allow him to use his insights to change society; thus, as Ziff sees it, any character in
Hawthorne's fiction who makes that step toward rebellion and reform is punished.

Although Ziff does not discuss Dimmesdale as he might fit into Hawthorne's secretly sexual and socially conservative scheme of American culture, I would like to consider what results might emerge if he had. Arthur has, both by his act of passion with Hester and by denying his participation, committed sins against his conscience, his community, and his religion. The freedom that results from his respected position in the community does not include sexual freedom; his act of love and passion must be kept forever hidden, like the masturbative acts of young males.

Dimmesdale is more difficult to explain, using Ziff's methodology, than Hester because, superficially at least, it appears that Dimmesdale follows Hawthorne's personal guidelines of keeping the sexual nature secret and by living a life that is conservative and conformative. In fact, not only does Dimmesdale appear to love and respect his community and his parishioners and to follow all rules, but also he is revered by that community beyond anyone else. Nevertheless, Dimmesdale must be punished and die because his guilt does not allow him to reconnect to humanity through his love for Hester and Pearl and through his love for his community. By denying his partnership with Hester and his paternity of Pearl, he
lies to his community, believing that his intellectual powers can save him, but instead he becomes a victim of Chillingworth and actually seeks his own punishment.

In other words, by following Ziff's reasoning, we conclude that Hawthorne must punish Dimmesdale because he denies the power of the Puritan Bostonian society which requires his adherence to its communal and religious rules; by succumbing to his own human passion, first with Hester before the novel begins and again in the forest, Dimmesdale allows his secret sexual appetite to determine his feelings about the community. Unlike Hester, Dimmesdale does not overtly flaunt his stand against the community's rules, but he, nonetheless, denies them by his thoughts and actions. Both Arthur and Hester attempt to circumvent their culture's norms by intellectualizing their own actions and to change their culture radically by living lives which were different from the others in the community. Hester rejects the belated gestures of the community for her to rejoin their fold; Arthur appears never to have left the fold but is not able to maintain a secret human, sexual life, either through masturbation or sexual acts with others, and to fit into the community as well. The laws he breaks he sees as too damning of his soul to continue to live normatively.

The scene in the forest, then, is the climactic act for Dimmesdale; his apparent reassimilation into the
community's norms is forever severed when he decides to leave Boston with Hester. Hester, too, takes a step in the forest which will deny her admittance to any Puritan society by tempting the minister from his communal duties. Ziff would argue that in Hawthorne's terms these two, who love each other, cannot act out this love if it denies the culture's norms.

Dimmesdale thus denies the history of his position as a Puritan minister; he denies, too, the beliefs of his profession by crouching behind its facade of purity and respectability. That facade hides his guilt, but he is weakened physically and emotionally. His physical self becomes a symbol of the decay within him—the decay which results from the fragile intellectual approach to life in America and from the impossibility of trying to escape from or to change that society. His confession on the scaffold, then, is not an act of love for Hester and Pearl nor a reconnective gesture to his community, but an act of emotional release before death, an expiation of guilt.

In Ziff's discussion of Hester Prynne and in my version of a Ziffian discussion of Arthur Dimmesdale, we see how critical "discoveries" about Hawthorne's divided self as it functions politically and sexually provide a thematic shaping for The Scarlet Letter. Such shaping
might allow for the revelation of themes intended by Hawthorne but more often reveals themes that a critic can claim Hawthorne unconsciously embedded. In other words, as Ziff would argue, these themes were not intended but are nonetheless present.

Thematic shaping also determines our understanding of characters, as we have seen with Prynne and Dimmesdale: we are aware of some of their attitudes and attributes, but only those which work in the service of the imposed themes. Others are omitted, or—like any part of a text—they can be explained away once the particular critical theme is in place. In other words, the critic—in this case, Larzer Ziff—rewrites the text and its parts because of what he sees as more important than that text: his psychological "discoveries" about Nathaniel Hawthorne. Even if the text doesn't appear to reveal information supportive of that "discovery," pieces of the text can be manipulated and/or rewritten to make them fit.

Given Ziff's argument that Hawthorne condemned and punished characters who stand-in for himself, we can easily continue to substitute characters and to use the details of the literary work to reveal the process of authorial punishment on the basis of some secret. We could, for example, move on to Chillingworth, who can be viewed as an even more extreme version of the divided self. Finally, the only complication that Ziff adds to
the typical method of the cultural critic is the process which leads Ziff through the localized culture to an author's psychology. The trouble with Ziff's paradigm is that, like the dialectical paradigms of other cultural critics, it easily manipulates and inevitably reduces and distorts the literature it purports to explicate.

The question which I must now answer is why we should avoid such manipulation and its inevitable consequences of reduction and distortion. Furthermore, I need to make clear what I see as an alternative theoretical base and critical practice. Although my concern about cultural criticism is that we gain some critical awareness at the expense of all textual knowledge, I see no reason to remain trapped in the opposition between these critical stances. I want to avoid the merely competitive stance of substituting my reading for the readings of Ziff and the other cultural critics and therefore engaging in yet another dialectic; I also want to avoid simply collapsing the oppositions to find a critical "comfort zone." I want to show that there are several possible outcomes to what seems only another dialectical dilemma.

One possibility is that, as critics, we need not compete, instead recognizing that we may have different theoretical purposes and thus different critical
practices. I want, however, to maintain that, even with this understanding of different approaches in mind, we must make our critical standards "live up to" our theories. In other words, if we work out of a theoretical base which posits cultural knowledge as its purpose, we have certain responsibilities as institutional critics, as scholars, and as teachers to meet our own standards, particularly when those standards are often used as critical weapons against those whose theoretical and critical approaches are different. Thus, my admission that there are differences in purpose, focus, and method between critics does not deny me the right to evaluate his work nor does it deny him—or any other critic—the right to assess the powers and limits of my work.

Therefore, if I want to gain cultural knowledge when I read literature and/or bring my knowledge of the culture to my study of the literature, I may ask the same critical question Ziff and the other cultural critics ask, but I will revise the methodology so that the question can be answered. I want to return to *The Scarlet Letter* to show how these revisions of Ziff and the other cultural critics would work. The most noticeable difference is, I think, that there are no binary oppositions.

Ziff makes his judgments about Hester as though he is a member of the Puritan community which sees her as shameful and guilty; he justifies his position because he
saying that Hawthorne’s own heart was with these communal urges. Whether that is "provable" or not is questionable, although we can, I think, when we study Hawthorne’s letters and journals, recognize his commitment to democratic ideals. Despite that recognition, however, we can also see that, from the beginning of the novel, Hawthorne asks for our sympathy for his character, Hester Prynne. The community, while not completely condemned by Hawthorne is not completely viewed with approbation, either. As readers, we meet some of these community members before we meet Hester, and their rigidity and harshness is apparent; Hawthorne even goes so far as to make their physical features displeasing. Hester, on the other hand, is portrayed in this first scaffold-scene as beautiful and courageous, in contrast to them:

Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fiber in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding . . . The women who were now standing at the prison-door stood within less than half a century of the period when the man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of the sex. They were her countrywomen; and the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet not a whit more refined, entered largely into their composition . . . There was . . . a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons . . . that would startle us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone. 'Goodwives,' said a hard-featured dame of fifty, 'I'll tell ye a piece of my mind . . . If the hussy [Hester Prynne] stood up for judgment before us five . . . would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!' . . . 'What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead?' cried another female, the ugliest as
well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. 'This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die' . . . the young woman . . . [who] stood fully revealed before the crowd . . . was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy and abundant that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity . . . her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped . . . (pp. 50-53).

Leaving aside for the moment the question of sexism here, we can see how we are pulled to the side of Hester Prynne and away from the judgments of these other women through conventional narrative means such as giving sympathetic characters strength as well as physical beauty and making less sympathetic characters ugly—or wizened, as Hawthorne will do later with Chillingworth.

In fact, at no time in the novel are we distanced from Hester or asked to view her as a character who is deservedly punished because she continues her isolation from the community. We are always, in fact, aware that she knows that she is an outcast from this community, and that no matter what she does, she will never be accepted without reservation.

She uses her skill as a seamstress to make a living for herself and Pearl. In this way she comes into contact with many in the community:
In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind. She stood apart from mortal interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside, and can no longer make itself seen or felt (p. 84).

Although Ziff might agree that we are to see Hester as making the best of a difficult situation, he would add that she continues what begins as forced isolation and ends as her choice. However, if we look at what is happening midway through the novel, we see that Hester is still fighting to keep Pearl and that her position in the community has changed little; it is still they who choose to keep her away. We are, of course, aware by this point, that Hester will survive despite her banished position; her strength will allow her to fight for what she believes is hers, to find sources of income and interest, and to care for Pearl in fact and Arthur Dimmesdale in her heart. Hawthorne's narrator has assured the reader of this and thus can leave Hester for several chapters so that we can explore the relationship between Roger Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. We see that as Hester's strength grows, Dimmesdale's has waned.

Knowing Hester as we do, we are not surprised when, after the scaffold scene in the night, she decides she must tell him the secret she has kept about
Chillingworth's identity. Pearl is, by this time in the novel, seven years old, and Hester's position in the community has changed slightly. She has, without overtly battling these Puritans, gained "a species of general regard." The narrator goes on in this chapter, "Another View of Hester," to point out that Hester "was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man" (p. 160-61). He further notes the following:

None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty; even though the bitter-hearted pauper threw back a gibe in requital of the food brought regularly to his door, or the garments wrought for him by the fingers that could have embroidered a monarch's robe. None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town. In all seasons of calamity, indeed whether general or of individuals, the outcast of society at once found her place. She came, not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble . . . . Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest (p.161).

The narrator admits, though, that when Hester is not ministering to these people in times of trouble, she does not socialize with them: "Meeting them in the street, she never raised her head to receive their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on" (p. 162). The community members interpret Hester's gesture as humility; they, in some measure, "had begun to look on the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin, for which she had born so
long and dreary a penance, but of her many good deeds since" (p. 162). The leaders of Boston, however, are not so quick to forgive.

It is the next section of this chapter that, I think, Ziff focuses on when he accuses Hester of intellectualizing her position and of refusing to come back to the fold of the community. She is pictured here as one who, without benefit of human relationships--save Pearl, of course--is able to transcend the typical thoughts of women, who are content to exist within the confines of a marriage and society. Freed from any such constraints, Hester's mind is free to speculate "boldly." Yet the narrator is quick to admit that the atmosphere of isolation which produces this kind of speculation makes a woman sad; it also makes her aware that the only way that changes can come for women is a total break-down of her society and a change in the attitudes of males. Further, the narrator contends that women themselves will have to change:

Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish (p. 165-66).

This dichotomy presents a dilemma for one, like Hester, whose heart, according to the narrator, has been denied
love and thus is forced into the speculative, intellectual life, which may be unnatural for her. "Thus," he says, "Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind . . ." He next notes that the "scarlet letter had not done its office" (p. 166).

Here, the implication could be, as it is for Ziff, that Hester has refused to see herself as a sinner and to accept the community's condemnation of her, and thus she remains isolated and in turn condemns them. If, however, we follow the narrative with regard to Hester and her place in the community, we can see that the narrator is rather suggesting that she, without love and with her personal strength of character and naturally passionate nature, could have come to no other place. The scarlet letter did not destroy her individuality, he implies; it in fact enhanced it. The narrator has admitted, in earlier paragraphs in this chapter, that such individuality would have been considered a worse crime than adultery by the community leaders, had they been aware of it. However, he goes on to say that it "is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. So its seemed to be with Hester" (p. 164-65).
Ziff's notion, then, that individuals in America often had secret lives, with regard to sex or other culturally unacceptable ideas of personal freedom, but conformed to societal norms seems to be mirrored here in Hester. Yet he chooses to minimize this cultural insight and, instead, sees Hester as punished by Hawthorne and, I would assume, by the narrative voice of The Scarlet Letter. This narrator, rather than punishing Hester, is instead referring to her as an individual character at the same time he is generalizing about any or all women; he is thematizing some aspects of Hester's character that we have previously accepted as peculiar and particular to her. Thus, we can see that Ziff's paradigm impairs his critical vision, obscuring the very cultural insights he seeks.

Thus, a cultural critic (or a critic who reads with a cultural perspective) can find in this chapter a rich vein of cultural information—not only about this Puritan community of Boston and its fictional inhabitants but also about Hawthorne as he relates to that community and as he relates to his own time. For example, as we have seen, in Hawthorne's version of a Puritan community its members are not free to engage in mental speculation but instead must adhere to the communal and theological philosophy. So strong, in fact, is this rule that those who oppose it are alienated, even punished. Hawthorne emphasizes such a
situation by creating characters who, within this community, rebel against its strictures; Hester Prynne has not been in Boston long enough to be socialized to the point that she will engage in self-punishment or change her naturally strong nature to fit that community's needs. She is punished, not by Hawthorne, but by the community. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, is perfectly socialized as well as a minister of the community's religious truths; he doesn't need to be overtly punished because he punishes himself beyond anything they might have imposed. Hawthorne is exploring what happens to human desires and mental speculations that go beyond communal rules, especially when the rules deny those desires and mental activities.

Some of what is revealed about Hawthorne's own time is intended, and some we can see because of our distance from that time. For example, Hawthorne had to avoid any description of the sexual relationship between Hester and Arthur; he never uses the word "adultery" yet writes a story about it. Given the atmosphere of the 1850's in America, he trod on thin social and religious ice by asking his readers to care about a "scarlet" woman and further to have sympathy for a minister who fails to keep the rules he espouses, who abandons her, and who continues to preach. Unintentionally, Hawthorne reveals his own limited views of women by giving his readers a character
like Hester Prynne, whose strength and intelligence make her appealing and sympathetic, yet also suggesting, as he does in this chapter, that women cannot both love and boldly speculate. We are to admire Hester yet see that it is possible that her "truest life" is with a man.

The narrator leaves open the possibility that Hester's individual tenderness and passion have not been crushed so deeply into her heart that it can never show itself more . . . She who has once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration. We shall see whether Hester Prynne were ever afterwards so touched, and so transfigured" (p. 164).

He says that Hester is no longer beautiful; she has become stiff, and no love shows in her face:

. . . nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statue-like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom to make it ever again the pillow of Affection. Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman (p.163).

However, the narrator has told us earlier in the chapter that none in the town is as devoted as she when anyone suffers hardships:

In such emergencies, Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for that head that needed one (p.161).

Thus, the narrator separates Hester's compassion from her passion; in the one case her breast is a pillow and in the other it can't be a pillow ever again. These apparently
again. These apparently contradictory remarks—although not contradictory to Hawthorne and his narrator—suggest on Hawthorne's part difficulty in envisioning the power of the very character he creates. He wants, in other words, to give her strength, boldness, and compassion and at the same time reveal her as passionless and physically unappealing without a male partner. He thus reveals in the forest that Hester's tenderness and passion remain; as she sheds her cap and letter, she reveals the emotions she has kept hidden. As readers we are alerted to the cultural situation in which Nathaniel Hawthorne lived and worked and to what cultural attitudes shaped his presentation of characters and events in his fiction.

In the forest, Dimmesdale, too, yields to the possibility of happiness, by planning to escape with Hester to Europe. As he returns to the town, he is almost obsessed with the need to publicly reveal what he feels is a wicked decision. He worries, in fact, that he has sold himself to the devil. For Dimmesdale an escape is impossible, because he cannot escape from his own self-punishment. As long as he continues to deny publicly his partnership with Hester, he will see himself as a sinner; as long as he sees himself as a sinner, he cannot escape. His condemnation is a self-condemnation; Hester has been publicly condemned but has found a way to live with herself and to rescue what she feels is good about herself
from the community's attempt to destroy her individual notions. She does not condemn herself; she can escape this society in reality because she escaped it mentally long before. Her love for Dimmesdale is greater than her need to belong to a community; his love for Hester has been weakened by his belief that he is morally wrong. Since he has consistently lied to this community, in his own estimation, because he has not announced his sin, he must ask their forgiveness before he can forgive himself. He is seemingly, then, more tied to the power of the community than to the power of God. Admitting his sin to God is not good enough for him; he cannot be forgiven until he tells the community. He cannot see that he has been a minister who, by understanding human needs and "sinful" tendencies, has been able to relate with his parishoners in ways no other Puritan minister who demands purity can do. Because of his own solipsistic self-flagellation, he fails to perceive the extent of his own power: that he touches all those to whom he speaks and that they respond to him and, through him, learn about God.

We are aware that Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale act in accordance with the traits given to them by Hawthorne; neither is condemned by this author. He allows them to react individually to an act, complicated by the appearance of Pearl, that began in love but, once
publicized, is interpreted differently by each of them, as they stand in their positions in the community. We are given as well the interpretations of the community, both those of the leaders of the society and those community members who do not wield political or religious power, but who nonetheless stand in moral judgment and have enough power collectively to attempt to destroy Hester's individuality. This community, for all its familiarity with Hester's shame and its sometime acceptance of her goodness, even at the Election Day festivities continues to torment her

with their cool, well-acquainted gaze at her familiar shame. Hester saw and recognized the self-same faces of that group of matrons, who had awaited her forthcoming from the prison door seven years ago; all save one, the youngest and only compassionate among them, whose burial-robe she had since made. At the final hour, when she was so soon to fling aside the burning letter, it had strangely become the centre of more remark and excitement, and was thus made to sear her breast more painfully than at any time since the first day she put it on (p. 246).

To the end of the text, then, Hawthorne's narrator is judging this community somewhat negatively. Thus, the textual data refutes strongly Ziff's claim that Hawthorne punishes characters who hold themselves aloof from the community and his claim that Hawthorne was "in his fictions a vigorous defender of the mob . . ." (p. 115). The textual data supports the interpretation that the community punishes Hester, and Ziff seems to be confusing that with the author. By judging the community
negatively, Hawthorne is holding Hester up for admiration, not punishment.

By attending to the data of the text we feel that it is necessary and appropriate for Dimmesdale to confess on the scaffold, and it is predictable that, once he does, he will die, for he is debilitated both emotionally and physically. What has kept him alive, apparently, is his distress about his secret, which, once revealed, cannot continue to keep him alive. It is also appropriate and consistent with what we know of Hester that she lives on, that she and Pearl return to Europe, where, it is rumored, Pearl finds happiness, and that Hester returns to Boston. We have been told in "The Custom-House" sketch, prefatory to this novel, that we are tied to places where we have a past history and that we sometimes must return to those places, even when we hate them or were shamed in some way there. Hester's individuality, too, places her back in the New World, where her speculative life began. The narrator suggests that Hester understands that she cannot serve as a prophetess for a new life for women because she is stained with public shame and personal sorrow, but what we see is that Hester's strength and individuality have forced an entire community to view her differently and to see the scarlet A as meaning something completely different from what they originally intended. She has brought dignity to what they meant as a symbol of sin and
shame. She cannot, of course, erase the actions she has taken which defy the standards of her religion and community, but she does what other Puritans had not done—live in such a way that the sin becomes less important than the person. Hawthorne does not punish Dimmesdale, nor does he punish Hester Prynne.

What I am suggesting here in my brief revision of Ziff is that he can accomplish what he fails to accomplish with his method: he can bring cultural studies to the novel and he can gain understanding of the culture portrayed in the novel as well as the culture of the author without reducing and distorting the text. He can avoid manipulation because his method becomes a posteriori rather than a priori. In other words, he looks at the text to see what it reveals rather than bringing to the text sets of binary oppositions which, when applied, obscure the very text he sets out to explicate. The revised method thus takes him outside the influence of the paradigm of American-ness and provide a special kind of knowledge about the text. That knowledge—of the culture—can never help us get at everything a text is about or everything that we as a culture are about, but, done responsibly and well, it can provide valuable insights into the ways in which literature reflects and affects cultural values.
In the pens of Ziff and the other cultural critics of this chapter, however, the power of the cultural critical framework remains a potential one, and they remain trapped in the Americanist paradigm. The power of this paradigm of American-ness goes beyond the methods and conclusions of cultural critics, and in the next chapter I want to explore the consequences of this paradigm in the work of biographical critics.
NOTES


As in our discussions of Ziff and Brooks, we can recognize the pattern that is really at work here: that of the "ruling hypothesis." See R. S. Crane, "The High Priori Road," The Idea of the Humanities and Other Essays Critical and Historical (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p.29.


See my chapter four for a discussion of feminist criticism of *The Scarlet Letter* and other American literary texts.
CHAPTER II

American-ness Personalized: The Biographical Critics

We might expect that the questions, methods, and answers of critics who are concerned with authors' biographies—in so far as they serve exegetical needs for literary works—would be different from those of the cultural critics in the first chapter. For some, that is the case; their concern is for the individual author and his/her literature, using each to understand the other or using neither as an interpretive tool for the other. For certain biographical critics in America, however, thematic issues of American-ness prevail, and the lives and writings of individual authors are examined as they reflect and reveal these issues. Within the group, even those who do not explicitly claim to look for what is American in American literature imply American-ness by examining the ways in which an author understands, conforms to, or resists the culture and thus exemplifies, in varying degrees, the American way of life.

The American themes of these particular biographical critics, like those of the cultural critics, often spring from the intersection of opposing binaries, ones grounded in the culture such as the author vs. society, "blackness"
vs. "whiteness," head vs. heart, solitude vs. societal integration, past vs. present, transcendental idealism vs. pragmatism, and so forth. For example, Alfred Kazin, in *An American Procession* (1985) examines the ways in which American writers from 1830 to 1930—beginning with Emerson and ending with Hemingway—extend, modify or resist the ideal of the Emersonian individual who embodies the "astonishing sense of self" that "created many a writer's confidence that the individual in America is by himself equal to anything." This "sense of self in America" is not only, as Kazin states, "a principal character in my narrative," but is also the basis of his concept of American-ness: individuality vs. whatever cultural, religious, or personal forces which seek, consciously or unconsciously, to undermine the power of the self in a democracy (p. xiv). In other words, those writers who modify or resist Emerson's notion of self also oppose what is American, and their literary and personal fates will be seen from that perspective. For example, if a writer, such as Poe or Hawthorne, fails to capture the imagination of the American public or to continue his own creative pursuits, his failure can be explained because of his refusal or inability to join the ranks of those who believe in the Emersonian idealism of the individual.

In the first two chapters of his book, Kazin traces the influence of Emerson's beliefs on such men as William
James, Thoreau, and Whitman; he shows both the extent of Emerson's influence and the individualization of Emersonian philosophy in these men who followed him. Emerson's own ideas, Kazin says, synthesize those of Plato, the neo-Platonists, Kant, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. Kazin ends the section with an account of what he feels is Emerson's greatest achievement:

The thrill, the positive exultation in all the early writings, lies not in the delusion of intellectual originality but in the primacy that he shared with Nature and America itself. America itself was the original. The confrontation with it by even the most seasoned men . . . made things new . . . the first men of literary genius--Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville--characteristically turned their raid on Nature into a book, the world at large into a fable. In their own mythology they acted out the role of primal man (p. 40).2

Kazin divides his procession into three parts, the first of which, "The Self as Power: America When Young, 1830-1865," includes his analysis of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Poe, and Whitman. Thoreau, Kazin claims, destroyed himself through his fanatical interpretation of the power of the self; he was driven, in other words, to imagine what the individual in America should be and then to live that life: Kazin says, "His journal became the most unflagging example . . . of a man's having to write his life in order to convince himself that he had lived it. . . . The work of art he was seeking to create was himself. . . . Nature [was] the American God . . . [but]
Nature would not live up to Thoreau's visionary demands" (pp. 66-67). Hawthorne and Poe, Kazin claims, were "virtuoso[s] in the fiction of the inner life," but a life very different from that of Emerson and Thoreau (p. 94). Their "inner" lives, according to Kazin, revealed obsession and a concern with the dark, negative side of life, though the sources of this preoccupation were different. Poe was a convert to "esthetic medievalism, an apologist for slavery, order, and hierarchy . . . who saw the power of blackness as personal damnation"; Hawthorne, too, felt damned but because, Kazin asserts, he "remained a child of Puritanism, rooted in the village, the theocracy, the rule of law, the numbing force of convention" (p. 94). Both men, unlike Emerson and Thoreau, looked more to the past than to the future in America and more to the constraints of society than to the power of the individual.

Whitman initially "excites" Emerson by his celebration of the self, his understanding of nature, his affirmation of death, and his belief that the knowledge and power of the self is available to everyone; "no other American made America so resonant a character and inspiration" (p. 109). Both Emerson and Thoreau, however, eventually responded to Whitman by asking him to censure his sensuality; "Whitman was out of step," and eventually became, Kazin argues, the most alienated of these
pre-Civil War writers, yet he understood the country in its transition and firmly believed that only in a democratic country could any version of the self be realized.

The second group of writers in the procession appear in a section called, "Modern Times, 1865-1900"; the group includes Melville, Dickinson, Mark Twain, James, Dreiser, and Crane. Melville, Kazin claims, viewed the American individual as heroic but as constantly struggling—against self, Nature, and society—and finally as alienated. He understood that the literary selves in America were often at odds with the concerns of society for power: "The reader is caught up by these different sides of Melville—the androgyny that American writing suffers in respect to American power" (p. 145).

The other writers in this section also represent the alienated, isolated, sometimes angrily cynical selves in a world which had lost its Emersonian idealism (if indeed that world outside literary circles ever existed) and had moved to an interest in the "getting and spending" of capitalism. The forms of alienation vary from Dickinson's total isolation and preoccupation with death to Mark Twain's scepticism and scorn to Dreiser's fatalistic view that people are constructed by society to Crane's "sense of the ominous" (p. 260).
Kazin calls his last major section, "Ruling by Style: History and the Moderns, 1900-1929." What Kazin means by style for the authors he includes in this section—Adams, Eliot, Pound, Dreiser, Faulkner, and Hemingway—is a personal, panoramic understanding and synthesis of an historical period: "To see history as style, one must begin with a sense of command . . . [to] easily see 'the whole picture'. . . Style divines the kinship between different sets of material . . ." (p. 304). For example, Pound represents the concept of modernism "by restricting it to style" (p. 325), Dreiser's American Tragedy is a "triumph of method" (p. 345), and Faulkner conveys the whole sense of the South and its traditions and failures through his particular style. Kazin admires the styles of these authors, and he sees them as having moved far from—but not as having contradicted—the concerns of Emerson and his American individualism.

Kazin adds a final retrospect to his book—about Dos Passos and Fitzgerald—and calls it "The Twenties and the Great American Thing." Kazin feels that Dos Passos "made it clear that although the subject of [U.S.A.] was democracy itself, democracy had meaning for him only through the superior man, the intellectual-elect, the poet who can never value what the crowd does." This belief, however, put Dos Passos's narrative "at variance with its natural interest, its subject matter . . . U.S.A. turned
out to be a book at war with itself. . . . Its America was finally all external. . . . Dos Passos wrote like a stranger in his own country” (p. 387). However, when Kazin discusses Fitzgerald, he takes us full circle to the Emersonian belief in the power of the self, in "unlimitedness." Fitzgerald loved America and attached himself to its myths . . . At the same time, he had this extraordinary and perhaps self-destructive gift of feeling himself to be the center of the universe . . . Fitzgerald the perfect 'representative man' of the twenties accomplished something that no one else did at the time: he included America in his romanticism . . . American writing is personal . . . (pp. 393-97).

For Kazin, then, the writer who embodies Emerson's sense of self—even in an alienated world quite different from the one in which Emerson conceived his notions about the individual—is able to resist the alienation and isolation, critique such problems for the reader, and avoid the ideological and political insofar as it is destructive to literature. He feels that a writer like Dos Passos cannot "function with two contradictory ideas in his mind at the same time," but that a writer with imagination like Fitzgerald can (p. xvi). For Kazin, such imagination never loses sight of the kind of idealism that engendered Emerson's ideas of the self and society.

Kazin's early critical work focuses similarly on the writer in America. In On Native Grounds (1942), he sets his lifelong critical agenda by reacting specifically
against the New Critical method of examining the text instrinsically and against the cultural critics who believe literature is produced by society and should be studied extrinsically. Kazin claims,

We have seen the relation of the writer to society either ignored or simplified, though it can never be ignored and is never simple. We have seen the life taken out of criticism, the human grace, the simple all-enveloping knowledge that there are no separate 'uses' in literature, but only its relevance to the propagandists, the scientists of metaphor (p. xi).

His own project is to examine—and find methods to evaluate critically—American authors from 1890 to 1940, whose patterns of writing reveal the tragedy of American life, the alienation of the individual, which came after the "emergence of modern America" (p. ix).

Even Kazin's introduction to the Riverside edition of Moby Dick, (1956) reflects this continuing interest in the relationship of a writer to his/her work in America when he asks why Ishmael feels so alone. His answer follows the paths of Melville's own life and those of Americans in general who cannot come to any conclusion about anything. .. one journey ends only to begin another .....

Ishmael's loneliness, doubt, and uncertainty are "distinctly modern ... For [him] there are no satisfactory conclusions to anything; no final philosophy is ever possible" (p. 116).

Looking at Kazin in the tradition of biographical criticism will help us assess not only the powers and
limits of his critical approach but also those of the tradition in general. A biographical work published in 1966, in the years between Kazin's *On Native Grounds* and his *An American Procession*, but which operates in ways similar to both, is Newton Arvin's *American Pantheon*, a collection of his essays and reviews on various American writers and thinkers. Although it differs from Kazin's books in that it is not intended to present a particular unifying theme for all the authors included, its essays reveal similar methodologies, using binary oppositions. For example, within Emerson there was a split between his devotion to optimism and his sense of natural evil or in Whitman a conflict between his beliefs in individualism and radical socialism.

It also argues that Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, "[w]hatever their specific themes, . . . are a dramatization of all those social and psychological forces that lead to disunion, fragmentation, dispersion, incoherence . . . numerous as are the forms which estrangement takes in this drama, it is clear that they all have their roots in an error for which there is no better single word than pride" (p. 63). During the years of solitary estrangement in his "dismal chamber," Hawthorne came to understand what happens when one loses "hold of 'the magnetic chain of humanity,'" and Arvin
that this understanding represents both the "thematic unity of Hawthorne's imaginative treatment of human life" and his position in the great chain of American thinkers and writers who have understood that isolation, alienation, self-seeking pride, and guilt have "hindered Americans from achieving creative integrity as a people" (p. 67).

Arvin admits that his understanding and his methodology may elicit accusations that he is "reading far too much into the stories of Hester Prynne and Hepzibah Pyncheon and Hollingsworth--stories that are full of a hundred other elements than this" (p. 67-68). Yet Arvin's tendency to see Hawthorne as symbolic both of the isolation felt by the writers who followed him and of the life of Americans is so strong that, for him, the symbolic force, as a way of reading and understanding the stories, is the only tenable critical stance.

Another "biographer of American-ness" whose work is both representative and influential is Harry Levin. In his well known book, The Power of Blackness (1960), he traces "configurations of symbolism" that he thinks best reveal the unique themes of American literature, but that may not appear in all American writing. He sees this uniqueness in the specific and individual ways in which some authors--particularly Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville--resist the societal tendencies to be cheerful and
unrelentingly materialistic and to ignore the underbelly of human nature as it manifests itself in a democratic society based on a powerful and rigid theology. These authors dialectically oppose the cheerful "whiteness" (whitewash) with their sense of "blackness," but in doing so, reflect their own bruised and guilty psyches and their struggles with the continuing process of self-reification within the society they prod. Furthermore, in addition to objectifying the cultural practices and themselves, these authors are trying to reconcile themselves with that culture. Thus, Levin believes that it is difficult to separate a writer from his/her ideas and from his/her characters: "Any personage conceived by any writer must—to a certain extent—be an alter ego, a personal surrogate, a composite figure standing somewhere between a writer's experience and his impression of others" (p. 5).

The way this works out in Levin's book can be seen in his chapter on Hawthorne. He discusses Hawthorne's beliefs and the events of his life, interpreting and thematizing, then pointing to the beliefs and events as he sees them embodied in the personal iconology of Hawthorne's fiction. Levin makes psychological inferences, too, which he says "can hardly be avoided." For example, Hawthorne practiced the "cult of the antithesis," which is inherent in American thought: "The union of opposites, after all, is the very basis of the American outlook . . . ."
For Hawthorne specifically, the "questions of moving onward—or not moving onward—sets the rhythm of [his] development, regulating the outward flights and the homeward impulses of his art, and wavering between ideas of progress on the one hand and pieties of tradition on the other" (p. 36-37). Hawthorne was finely tuned to recognize, respond to, and be preoccupied with the blackness—the "Puritanic gloom," as Melville called it—in Americans because it was in his own life. He discovered and objectified this understanding and vision of the world during the twelve years in his "dismal chamber," where his mind "became a camera obscura" (p. 36). Although he could never completely exorcise the terror of his own Puritan conscience, he continued to try to exorcise it in his fiction, understanding the inner world of guilt and secret sin:

Hawthorne was well aware that the sense of sin is more intimately related to inhibition than to indulgence; that the most exquisite consciences are the ones that suffer most; that guilt is a by-product of that very compunction which aims at goodness and acknowledges higher laws; and that lesser evils seem blacker to the innocent than to the experienced (p. 40).

Frederick Crews, however, offers a method (although he later repudiates this work, he nonetheless stands as a representative and still influential critic of his kind) by which a critic can make use of the life and fiction of an author such as Hawthorne. This method, however, is
based in psychoanalysis rather than in biography per se. Crews's method is one we need to consider at this point for two reasons: one, that criticism based in either psychology or biography intends to understand a person and his/her text as they explain each other; and, two, that through his turn to psychoanalysis Crews at least appears to extend or complicate biographical criticism, both in terms of his method and the validity of his conclusions.

Crews argues in *Sins of the Fathers* (1966) that Hawthorne's "keynote was neither piety nor impiety, but ambivalence . . . Hawthorne was emotionally engaged in his fiction, and the emotions he displays are those of a self-divided, self-tormented man." Crews asserts that Hawthorne's ambiguity, rather than indicating an allegorical "didactic-strategy" as critics have claimed, is "a sign of powerful tension between his attraction to and his fear of his deepest themes" (p. 8). Crews claims that his examination of themes is not a search for some "overriding thematic idea," an "independent controlling principle," used to read Hawthorne's works, as Kazin, Arvin, and Levin would do, but as a means to Hawthorne's ambivalence, which is "most strikingly discernible in his stated views about the nature and quality of his art" (p. 10).

Examining the sub-text, Crews says that Hawthorne's penetration into secret guilt is compromised not only by
his celebrated ambiguities of technique but by reluctance and distaste. He was aware that in exposing our common nature he was drawing largely upon his own nature, and he was "disturbed by what he found" (p. 11).

The combination of these secret personal fears, his worry of self-revelation through language, and his domestication by Sophia's tender sensibilities help explain Hawthorne's "balance between confession and evasion" and his "lecherous" iconography, which is nonetheless compromised with "persisting human features" (p. 21-22). Crews's description of the fictional plots of this divided author is that of "inadmissible fantasies . . . unleashed in an inhibited, decadent form and then further checked by a resurgence of authority . . . [which] always takes a more or less openly paternal form . . ." (p. 25). In Crews's examination of individual texts of Hawthorne he pursues his argument that "a definable, indeed classic, conflict of wishes lies at the heart of Hawthorne's ambivalence and provides the inmost configuration of his plots" (p. 26).

For all of Crews's claims and defenses about his critical approach, however, he finally, after examining character-types, ambiguous passages, difficult images, and narratorial suggestions, finds a thematic pattern driving all of Hawthorne's fiction: "Hawthorne's insistent distinction between surface appearances and buried
reality" (p. 262). In fact, Crews argues that all of Hawthorne's serious fiction "amounts to versions of the same unconscious challenge; not one of his characters stands apart from the endless and finally suffocating debate about the gratification of forbidden wishes" (p. 280). "Mental peace" in Hawthorne's fiction comes from an absence of guilt, which is never achieved, because Hawthorne's heroes are "doomed to abnormality from the moment [they] entertain any rebellious thoughts." Thus, Crews claims, Hawthorne is Freudian in his inherent understanding of repression, but is not like Freud in "therapeutic application of the non-repressive ideal," in which one develops "normally" when one adjusts to the "inevitable traumas" of life (p. 266).

Crews charts Hawthorne's decline, both artistically and emotionally, "not with the presence or absence of his obsessive theme, but with the degree of deviousness he finds necessary to avoid bringing that theme into consciousness. . . ." (p. 267). He fails, finally, when he is "forced into inconsistent characterization, embarrassed apology and digression, and incomplete plotting. What happens to his fiction after 1850 is, in simplest terms, a lapse of illusion . . ." (p. 270).

Thus, Arvin, Levin, and Crews--like Kazin--value the larger thematic concerns--insofar as they reflect authorial habits and beliefs--of the whole body of a
writer's works over an individual text and its particular themes, characters, events, narrative strategy, and language. Arvin, Levin, and Kazin privilege the thematic by making one pole of the binary some aspect of Americanness, or, at least, attach one pole of the binary to some generalization about America. Thus, an author like Hawthorne can always be seen in opposition to his culture and his literature as nothing more than a continuing struggle to work out that opposition. Crews is less involved than the others with the idea of Americanness, yet he finds in Hawthorne the divided self as they do and collapses the distinctions between fictionalized characters and events and the real-life of an author.

Yet, these critics—and the others whose work they represent—use methods which, although allowing them to privilege themes, are different. The themes that Kazin finds in the authors he examines are informed first by the fiction and then by the life, each side giving credence to the other, back and forth and finally "begging the question" of the other. In Arvin's and Levin's work, the life informs the fiction, minimizing its unique power, and allowing it to be generalized into authorial thematic concerns, such as Hawthorne's solitary existence and his fears of alienation and guilt. Crews searches for and examines the sub-text, using his knowledge of Freudian
principles and the methodology of psychoanalysis to reach conclusions about themes and their privileged position which are amazingly similar to those of these other three critics. In the work of all these men, those themes represent—perhaps set precedent for—the thematic concerns of all American writers, and their critical questions are about how this thematic context is reflected in American literature. That the themes exist and reflect some version of American-ness is never questioned.

Kazin's thematic context in American Procession—his notion of American-ness, in other words, as revealed through Emerson's transcendental philosophy of the individual—becomes the paradigm which controls his interpretation of the various authors; for example, the "Hawthorne-ness" he is at pains to define in his discussion of the author of The Scarlet Letter is actually just a variation of the previously defined American-ness. 8 Hawthorne-ness turns out to be anti-Emersonian-ness.

Kazin argues that Hawthorne resists both Emersonian notions of individualism and definitions of American-ness:

Utterly opposed to Emerson, Hawthorne did not believe that in the absence of the church, man's natural faith asserts itself. Personally indifferent to religion, Hawthorne kept the old Puritan distrust of society and Nature . . . Moreover, New England Democrats were never aroused by democracy as the promise of equality. Few things were less to
Hawthorne’s taste than Emerson’s blithe assurance to his listeners that any farmer or small trader was potentially a genius like himself. Hawthorne distrusted the American people politically and excluded most American types from his fiction. He did not think that literature consisted of personal ideals . . . " (p. 87).

Hawthorne resists these ideas as a man in a culture which is perhaps more attuned to Emerson than to himself and as an author whose characters, action, and themes turn the reader back to a Puritan past rather than to "morning in America . . . that sustains our sense of self in our very different world. The world is always new to those who can see themselves in a new light . . . " (p. xv).

Hawthorne’s stories are American, according to Kazin, only in the sense that they are set in New England, and the past is American, not European, but Kazin claims that the optimistic idealism and individualism of Emerson/America cannot be embodied in the stories of one who believed "that we are determined, located in ourselves forever, by the past as human sinfulness, acting on us as second nature . . . Hawthorne felt the past, not the future, was opening to the imagination. He did not trust the future in America; the buoyancy and thrust of the nineteenth-century never interfered with his creative bent" (p. 88).

Hawthorne’s preoccupation with the past, Kazin claims, causes his own breakdown as a writer and as a man; his incessant moralizing was always accomplished through
symbols and allegory, but when they no longer carried the force of his beliefs, the romances that contained them became "personal obsessions, failed attempts to put the past in order . . . Unable to separate himself from his own symbols, he felt haunted as a man and humiliated as an artist" (p. 81). Kazin views Hawthorne's opposition to Emerson as a destructive force in Hawthorne's writing and life. His "totally interior life" was of a kind different from Emerson's lofty mental searches.

Like some of the cultural critics in the first chapter, Kazin follows a narrative progression. His version of Hawthorne-ness, for example, progresses narratively rather than logically: he offers the assumptions on which to build his argument—or several arguments—but does not move the argument forward. Instead, he repeats the generalized assumptions. For example, he assumes that Hawthorne outlived his imaginative capabilities and, mentally and emotionally debilitated, tried to write romances, using themes which he embodied in old, contrived symbols such as spiders, bloody footprints, and corpses. Kazin begins his discussion of Hawthorne near the end of his life, when this imaginative loss had already occurred: "Hawthorne continued to live in the country of his imagination long after he had written himself out. . . . Hawthorne was living out his last years as a Hawthorne character. . . .
The mysterious breakdown of Hawthorne's imaginative capacity suggests the ominousness of a Hawthorne story" (p. 83).

This picture of Hawthorne is supported by other assumptions: that Hawthorne was an isolated man, enamored of solitude—at best "fractitious" and at worst misanthropic, that the ideas controlling his fiction were manifested in themes which transcend the boundaries of any one short story or novel, and that he ordered the historical past of America, his own past, and his fears through the symbols he used to illustrate his thematic interests. Thus, Kazin offers his readers a primary generalization which is supported by other generalizations. These supporting generalizations are themselves grounded only in his interpretation of Hawthorne's fiction, but the interpretations are of course largely determined by the primary generalization. In this way Kazin's arguments are circular. He also moves with equal ease from fiction to biography or biography to fiction, for example:

... consciousness could become an infliction. It finally did to Hawthorne, an artist who had to balance his characters' incessant mental striving against their high sense of purpose. He was entirely matter-of-fact about a world that was legendary. The crux of the matter was that his people were always so alone; they felt damned. And so did he... (p. 86-87).

The support Kazin offers for this generalized commentary
on Hawthorne's work and life is a quotation of Emerson's, when he heard of Hawthorne's death: "'I thought there was a tragic element in the event, that might be more truly rendered--in the painful solitude of the man, which, I suppose, could no longer be endured and he died of it'" (p. 87). The quotation, which purports to act as supportive evidence, instead offers only another romanticized and generalized opinion, that of Emerson, who is important here because we are asked to infer that Hawthorne's personal and authorial problems were, in large part, because of his failure to free himself from the burden of the past, to view life optimistically, and to see in democracy the potential for limitless human development. Like Emerson, Kazin offers us his synthesis and conclusions as self-evident truths, and, unlike Emerson, Kazin claims that Nathaniel Hawthorne failed to understand or transcend his personal limitations.

Kazin's problems at the stylistic level also cause difficulties for the reader who is asked to make inferences about Hawthorne's life; for example, transitions between sentences and paragraphs and sections of chapters are often inadequate, and terms, which are carelessly defined, mean differently at different times, for example, Kazin's use of "themes" and their functions. Despite these problems, however, the reader is asked to draw the conclusion that the failure of Hawthorne's
imagination was the predictable end of a life of ideas, formed and contemplated in isolation and then protected until, finally, the ideas failed him.

Kazin also asks his readers to make a connection between what he calls Hawthorne's natural subject-matter—New England and its remoteness and religious fervor—and human isolation under the burden of the past and to use that connection as support for the larger assumption about Hawthorne's imaginative failure. He claims, "Almost everything in Hawthorne turns on old legends, myths, and chronicles . . ." (p. 88). He is right that New England and its history appear in Hawthorne's works, but it is less obvious that "everything turns" on them, because it is also possible to see them functioning as a backdrop against which Hawthorne sets his more pressing concerns about human psychology. Although that assertion can, like Kazin's, be challenged, the point is that he never challenges it, and, instead, focuses his attention only on the past as a burden on the characters and setting and thus "proves" his contention about Hawthorne's obsession. This obsession is then seen as the cause of the death of an imagination, and thus the death of an author, followed swiftly and inevitably by the physical death of a man. The whole explanation is built on the meager foundation of the initial a priori generalization which is itself
generated by Kazin’s decision to read Hawthorne as Emerson’s opposite.

Before further consideration of the powers and limits of biographical criticism, I want to examine Kazin’s discussion of a specific text. In his view *The Scarlet Letter* represents the work of an author who had several specific themes which haunted him, and recognizing them as discrete, but related themes is meant to move readers to an understanding of the man behind the book—not the implied author—but the real Hawthorne. For example, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale give us access to Hawthorne because they "struggle to love"; this love, the "heart" in Hawthorne as opposed to the "head," is a "guide" in the forest, which is an impressionistic rendering of human, specifically Hawthornian, attempts to impose moral order on the burden of the past and the chaos of the present (p. 88). In Hawthorne’s own life, his guide, at least for awhile, through the forest was his love for Sophia, but even she couldn’t protect him against himself and his fears, so that finally, alone and damned, he died, first as an artist and then as a man.

We can see that Kazin has drawn a theme from *The Scarlet Letter*—stated in terms of a binary opposition: head vs. heart. Included in this primary theme are the
related binaries of past vs. present and the individual vs. the community. The Hawthorne-ness of this view lies in his use of the forest to represent the burden of the past and the chaos of the present; this view specifically opposes Emerson-ness/American-ness which embraces Nature and optimistically works through it to the power of the individual. Hawthorne's use of doomed characters, his setting in the Puritan past, his symbol of the scarlet A, and his dependence on what is supposed to be an old legend reveal to Kazin a picture of an author whose pessimism and anti-American attitude are slowly destroying him.

Believing as he does that fictional characters are surrogates for an author's beliefs and personal struggles, Kazin could see in Dimmesdale a Hawthorne bent on his own destruction.

Although Kazin does not mention Dimmesdale specifically, we can infer Dimmesdale as one of the characters Kazin mentions generally. We can apply Kazin's general principles to this character and thus infer Kazin's method of extracting fictional themes to apply to Hawthorne's life. Dimmesdale carries the burden of the New England Puritan past; he not only believes in the religious and communal system, but he also has chosen to teach it to others as the way to heaven. His human side, his passionate heart, which "stands for the loneliness of sexual love and its attendant affections," is foregrounded
prior to the opening of the novel in his relationship with Hester Prynne. It represents an unconscious attempt to break the bonds with the past and with the rigidity of Puritanism; for that time love is stronger than those ties, but Dimmesdale can't maintain that position. He is "constrained by the spell of the past that . . . makes many of the living unable to love" (p. 88). The guilt he feels isolates him, and he becomes more and more lonely, living in his "dismal chamber," haunted and taunted by the devilish Chillingworth. In his loneliness and in his sense of feeling "endlessly accountable . . . [he] knew that his aloneness was of supreme interest to God" (p. 86). Dimmesdale begins to self-destruct because he knows he is damned; he has not, like Hester, been able to focus primarily on love and thus to see the Puritan way of life and its traditions and conventions as less important.

We then take what we know about Dimmesdale and apply it to Hawthorne:

The solitude of Hawthorne's characters was more than physical in the bare, still unchartered world of Boston in The Scarlet Letter, caught between the sea and the wilderness. . . . Solitude was not exclusion from society but the condition of a life incessantly moralized. The individual was always deliberating, inspecting, and challenging to make sure that a highly suspicious divinity would in fact not exclude him. . . So much solitude lived in anxious self-confrontation and self-study meant a totally interior life. Consciousness could become an infliction. It finally did to Hawthorne, an artist who had to balance his characters' incessant mental striving against their high sense of purpose . . .
The crux of the matter was that his people were always so alone; they felt damned. And so did he (p. 86-87).

Although Hester Prynne does not fit this picture of the self-conscious Puritan, Kazin can make her fit into his scheme because she offers Arthur Dimmesdale the love that would guide him through the destruction of the forest, as Sophia offered it to Hawthorne. In Kazin's scheme, however, Hester Prynne cannot escape "the burden of the past" any more than Dimmesdale; in fact, her attempt to love Dimmesdale is punished by the Puritans. Even later in her life, after she goes to Europe with Pearl, she eventually returns to Boston. In other words, as with all a priori methods, Kazin can manipulate the details of the text to "prove" his conclusions.

His method is also problematic because it can allow for competing readings simply by privileging another theme. For example, I could decide that Hawthorne's primary theme is "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred." I can state that theme in terms of the binary opposition of secret guilt vs. public repentance. I can also decide that an author who would privilege such a theme understands the moral necessity of public repentance, that individuals even owe the community that kind of confession. In such a view the Puritan past
becomes less of a burden and more of a moral guide and a protection against the chaos of untried ideas which force individuals to secret, guilt-producing actions.

I could note that Hawthorne emphasizes the importance of this theme by directing the reader's attention to it near the end of his text, calling it "one of the many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience" (p. 260). I could then focus on Hester Prynne as the character whose public exposure has freed her from secret guilt, allowing her to escape its destruction, shown of course in Arthur Dimmesdale, and develop her individualism. Puritan beliefs, thus, become the theoretical base for the transcendentalism budding in Hester Prynne.

The forest, in such a reading, can come close to the view of nature held by Transcendentalism, Emerson's pantheistic philosophy. For Dimmesdale the forest is a fearful place, indicative of evil and sin, because of his personal, secret guilt: "The great black forest . . . showed itself [stern] to those who brought the guilt and troubles of the world into its bosom . . ." (p. 204). Hester, however, while waiting for Arthur, finds a section of the forest—a protected "little dell . . . with a leaf-strewn bank rising gently on either side, and a brook flowing through the midst, over a bed of fallen and drowned leaves . . ." (p. 186). Once Dimmesdale arrives,
the forest takes on a gloomy cast; then, when he decides to go away with Hester, his spirits rise. She casts away the scarlet letter and loosens her hair:

All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the gray trunks of the solemn trees. The objects that had made a shadow hitherto, embodied the brightness now. The course of the little brook might be traced by its merry gleam afar into the wood's heart of mystery, which had become a mystery of joy. Such was the sympathy of Nature... with the bliss of these two spirits! (p. 202-03).

This relationship of their spirits with Nature, then, has been an untapped potential in these two characters, but it has taken Hester Prynne to bring it out of Arthur Dimmesdale. However, as soon as he begins his walk back to Boston, he reverts to his former guilty state. Hester's full awakening, however, is not diminished by that kind of guilt. She does resume wearing the scarlet A but with the knowledge that they can escape. In this reading, I could also point to Pearl's naturally transcendental relationship with Nature; the forest "... became the playmate of the lonely infant ... [and] put on the kindest of its moods to welcome her" (p.204). She communes with it and its creatures.

Taken, then, to Hawthorne-the-man we can surmise that his life and writing were enhanced by his encounters with Nature and his understanding of the supremacy of its power. From the time he was a child, he loved the sea and
its sandy environs; in fact, during the last years of his life, when physical ailments were closing in, Sophia insisted that Hawthorne, sometimes accompanied by his son Julian, leave land-bound Concord to spend time near the sea. During these visits, like Pearl, Julian's affinity for Nature was exposed and his individualism encouraged. When in Concord, Hawthorne took daily walks in Sleepy Hollow and spent daily, solitary time in the woods behind their home, The Wayside. In earlier years of his life—particularly during the Old Manse period, Hawthorne was an avid gardener and understood the relationship between the growing life in his garden and human life and growth.

Hawthorne's life also exemplifies individualism. Foregoing the family tradition of a life as a sea-captain and in disregard of conventional professions of his time, he chose to be a writer. Even when his choice made him financially insecure, he could not abandon it for more than short periods of time when he worked in various custom houses as a surveyor. Even in the last years of his life when he was ill, he continued to write, in his tower (where he could see the beauty of the surrounding countryside), producing Our Old Home, a series of essays based on his experiences in England.

Not only is it possible to offer this oppositional reading, using Kazin's own method, by the privileging of a new theme, but it is also possible to undo his reading of
Dimmesdale—within the parameters of his first theme, head vs. heart. Briefly, such a refutation would claim Arthur Dimmesdale as a negative example of Hawthorne's endorsement of American/Emersonian values; his failure is that he is unable to hold onto these values. In other words, Hawthorne's didactic purpose would reveal himself as a man who is not like his self-destructive character, Dimmesdale.

Such a reading would reflect something more like the authorial punishment of Ziff's criticism. In order for Hawthorne to be able to punish his characters, he has to have emotional distance on them. Kazin's own reading, which equates Dimmesdale with Hawthorne, implies that Hawthorne, in his personal pain, had little sense of audience, writing, instead, to cleanse his soul and to purge his psyche of pain for a short time. Kazin's tendency to see no distinction between implied author and real author reveals an artist who is almost unconscious as he writes--he has no control over what he says; he understands nothing about his effect on others.

Interestingly, however, even without positing a didactic aim on the part of Hawthorne, Kazin's conflating of implied and real author can be refuted by his own assumptions: he concludes that Hawthorne's obsession with symbols and legends reflected his sense of the burden of the past, that Hawthorne felt "[self-]consciousness could
become an infliction," and that such consciousness was finally an infliction for Hawthorne, "an artist who had to balance his characters' incessant mental striving against their high sense of purpose. He was entirely matter-of-fact about a world that was legendary. The crux of the matter was that his people were always so alone; they felt damned. And so did he . . ." (p. 87). These conclusions, however, indicate that Hawthorne did understand what was happening to him, that he was not "in the country of his imagination," (p. 83) but was specifically encoding themes that reflected his world-view and his own philosophy, balancing, as it were, "his characters' incessant mental striving against their high sense of purpose" (p. 87). Thus, it seems that Kazin— and other biographical critics (and, similarly, the cultural critics) want to have a relationship with the text both as the place where they can discern an author's consciously intended themes and as the place where they can discern cultural influences and biographical background through the tracing of an author's unconscious yearnings and fears; if the text refutes their claims about intended themes, they can claim unintended, unconscious ones.

Although the work of biographical critics leads to their a priori conclusions, it also can uncover
information about the author's other writings and about the way s/he reflects culture and history—the context of the text, in other words—which offers knowledge of that author. The distortion occurs, to my way of thinking, when that contextual and extra-textual material is used, not to complicate and empower, but to overpower all other aspects of the text.

The limits of biographical criticism as it is practiced by the critics in this chapter as well as the ones they represent, then, are similar to the limits of the cultural critics: they rely on single themes to explain complex literary texts and complex authors within a complex culture. Moreover, those themes are always stated in terms of a binary opposition, which reduces even the power of the privileged theme. The biographical critics, also like the cultural ones, set up methods which fail to answer the questions they ask, or at least to do more than to provide an answer that can be refuted from within their own frameworks as well as by critics with similar questions. The power of biographical questions of the text thus remains untapped, and I would like to end this chapter by suggesting ways to tap into that power by revising the methods of Kazin and the others.

One way to begin such a revision is to divide biographical criticism into two categories: one, which we
might call "pre-constructionist" biographical criticism, offers knowledge of the creative process of an author by looking at particular textual details and matching them with particular biographical details, then drawing conclusions about them; the other, a "post-constructionist" biographical criticism, offers knowledge of an author's beliefs and philosophies that are induced from an examination of texts themselves. Kazin's method, of course, is of the first category.

Taking our second category of biographical criticism first, I will briefly demonstrate it on some parts of The Scarlet Letter, implying that the method will work for the rest of that text as well as any other text. For example, recognizing, as we must from many of his texts, that Hawthorne had an interest in Puritanism, we are led outside the text to Hawthorne's letters, journals, and family documents to discover that he had an ancestor who participated as a judge in the Salem witch-trials, something that made Hawthorne not a little uncomfortable. However, not merely satisfied with the one-to-one correspondence suggested by these two pieces of information, we are forced back to the texts to see how and to what extent Puritanism--and Hawthorne's discomfort about it and about his ancestor--make their way into the literature. We would also be forced to consider the
consequences of such an examination for the reading of The Scarlet Letter as well as for our category of biographical criticism.

One of those consequences could be that more light is shed on Hawthorne's harsh authorial judgment against Governor Bellingham, who is one of the few characters for whom Hawthorne asks us to have little or no sympathy; even Chillingworth is humanized at the end of the text. Although we must temper the following account of Hawthorne's Puritan ancestors in "The Custom-House" with our understanding that the account is filtered to us through a narrator, we can get some sense of his reaction to them and, by extension, perhaps, to the Puritans in The Scarlet Letter:

... this grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor,—who came so early, with his Bible and his sword, and trod the unworn street with such a stately port ... He was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a rule in the Church; he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bitter persecutor, as witness the Quakers, who have remembered him in their histories ... His son, too, inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him (p. 9).

That interest in the Puritans may also make us take more notice of Hawthorne's treatment of Arthur Dimmesdale and his position in the text as a character who, prior to the opening of the story, has committed an act which will be his undoing. If we have read other works by Hawthorne,
we may also focus more carefully on Arthur Dimmesdale because we will be aware of Hawthorne's many other alienated, sensitive, artistic, male protagonists. We will thus take more notice than many readers/critics do when, in the middle of the book, Hawthorne abandons his focus on Hester Prynne and examines carefully the anguish of this man, Arthur Dimmesdale. We will, of course, make judgments—probably negative ones—about Dimmesdale's failure to "own up to" his partnership with Hester Prynne and his inability to perceive his power as a minister who leads more souls to heaven after he has loved her than before. His parishioners feel the reverberations of his sympathy and concern for them. His pain makes theirs legitimate, and his "sin," if he could only know it, makes their path to heaven more accessible. Hawthorne's own personal and public writings about obsession, isolation and alienation may make Dimmesdale more important, more mimetic—and thus more complicated—to readers.

Reading the text in a way which attempts to take into account all the information about Arthur Dimmesdale (his thoughts, dialogue, and actions, what other characters say about him, and the themes he carries), and which takes into account contextual and extra-textual knowledge—but without unduly privileging certain thematic issues—makes it difficult to conjecture about Hawthorne's personal problems. We can, however, infer some of Hawthorne's
beliefs about the way human nature works and some of his concerns about humans who must live in rigid social and religious conditions. We may also infer that the author of this text believed in the power of love and that he had strong moral and ethical codes of his own. He does not, through his narrator, denigrate Puritanism completely, for he makes the individuals in the community relent their stern judgments of Hester Prynne and accept her on some level; he shows us that she earns this acceptance through acts of kindness and personal strength. Neither does he embrace Puritanism, however, nor are his own particular religious views available from the text of The Scarlet Letter. We can, however, conjecture more successfully about his personal problems and pain when we look at all his writings, including letters and journals, and also have a working knowledge of psychology.

The other category—the "pre-constructionist" biographical criticism—is even more difficult to do well, but perhaps I can suggest ways it might work. For one thing, I would want to begin the work of this category of criticism with the work of the "post-constructionist" criticism as underpinnings. For example, we discovered that Hawthorne was more than a little interested in the Puritans and that, as well, he seems to create male characters who are artistic, sensitive, and often isolated. Both these details of his literary texts can,
as I suggested above, take us to the documents that provide us with information about Hawthorne's life. I would argue, however, that if we are trying to construct a picture of a real man/artist, we would want to avoid other biographies which mediate the details of Hawthorne's life, shaping them to create a picture of him that, as we have seen in other biographical criticism, builds on the critical paradigm of American-ness or reduces him to a few oppositions such as his head vs. his heart. I am not suggesting that our picture could avoid interpretation, but that our picture would be built from primary materials and would not be several times removed from the literary texts and the documents of the life.

Starting with our recognition from The Scarlet Letter that Hawthorne is interested in Puritans, we can go back to the information gathered from our "post-constructionist" work, during which we would have read and examined Hawthorne's reactions to Puritans in such other stories as "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," "The Gentle Boy," "Mrs. Hutchison," and The House of the Seven Gables. The connections may have to remain loose between Hawthorne's ancestors' persecution of others, Hawthorne's own feelings about religion in general and Puritanism in particular [footnote], his Puritan
characters, and other information, say, for example, the recognition by Herman Melville of Hawthorne’s "No! in thunder" or Hawthorne's awareness of the Puritan disdain for fiction, a belief held far into Hawthorne's own time, even by people close to him such as Horace and Mary Mann, Sophia's sister and her husband. This looseness will not allow us to present unproblematically an author so troubled by these connections that he was forced to "write them out." Neither can we equate Dimmesdale's Puritanic self-destruction with Hawthorne's physical decline in the 1860's. However, we can recognize that Nathaniel Hawthorne was the kind of man/artist to take seriously the effects of Puritanism on those who shared it as a religious and communal truth and who used its power to persecute others, those who rebelled against Puritanism, and those who, generations later, were still affected by its power.

My revision here only suggests ways we can revise a biographical criticism which, like Kazin's, is several times removed from Hawthorne-the-man, Hawthorne-the-author, and Hawthorne's literary texts. Before we move on to the next chapter, I want to suggest a further source of richness for practicing pre-constructionist criticism; using our example of Hawthorne, we would want to pay attention to his Prefaces which, like "The Custom-House," are a curious combination of fiction and non-fictional
accounts of his life. Comparisons with the documents of his life and the letters of others (particularly those of Sophia and those of his sisters would apply to an examination of the "Preface" to Mosses From an Old Manse), as well as a knowledge of psychology could reveal the composing artist in rich and wonderful ways.

In summary, then, as in the case of the cultural critics we examined in the first chapter, the agendas of many practicing, Americanist biographical critics short-circuit legitimate critical inquiry into American texts. Their critical questions, springing from their interest in how texts reveal their authors and how authors' lives explain their texts, are interesting and potentially rewarding, and sometimes they situate the lives and the writings in ways which complement each other. The short-circuiting, however, occurs when the focus on some details of the life of an author overpowers the literary work or the work reenvisions an author's life in terms of a few themes and reduces the complexity of a human being to a literary character. These critics substitute a theme or a few themes for the incredibly complex conclusions possible with a critical inquiry not bound by a predetermined notion--such as the typical binaries of Americanness.
The kinds of approaches we have examined so far—cultural and biographical, and the revisions of them which reassert the importance of the literature as well as its context—share some assumptions about texts as rhetorical acts of communication between writer and reader and about the determinancy of history, culture, and language. In the next chapter, however, I want to take up a critical approach—deconstruction—which challenges all those assumptions. Particularly at risk, when examined from the point of view of the deconstructionists, is any approach which argues for the value and importance of a text, although all the assumptions we have examined so far will be seriously called into question.
NOTES


2 This primal man in America is similar to what we have seen in cultural criticism, particularly in R. W. B. Lewis's American Adam, Hoffman's American hero, and Fiedler's American "boys." These male characters are caught between societal constraints and the freedom of nature. Left unfettered, men would return to the primacy of nature, these critics suggest. In order to operate within society's constraints, they must embody the dialectic of the two worlds as they conflict. The concept of the primal man further suggests the Emersonian "newness" and optimism. In the terms of the cultural critics, however, that newness becomes failure to learn from the past and the optimism, by the end of the nineteenth century is replaced with cynicism and, finally, alienation.


8 Thus, in a sense Kazin reproduces the problem Plato sees in literature—it is two removes from the thing itself. In other words, Kazin gives us an Emerson defined by binary opposition, then reads Hawthorne in light of this "copy" of Emerson. We move further and further away from the primary data upon which such a judgment ought to be based.


CHAPTER III

Americanness Radicalized: The Perspective of Deconstruction

In the first two chapters, Ziff's and Kazin's critical roles, as self-defined, are to extend the perspectives of cultural and biographical critics of American literature. What we have seen is that they do less to extend than to perpetuate these traditional perspectives which have solidified into an institutional hermeneutics. The paradigm underpinning the hermeneutics is based in opposing binaries taken from the critical obsession with defining Americanism or American-ness.

In this chapter I will take up a critic, Joseph Kronick, who purports to do more than extend American criticism: he claims to assume a radical position by sharing the ideology of critics and philosophers whose work has "challenged the traditional concepts of literary history," most notably, Jacques Derrida. Kronick's radical methodology, however, does not allow him finally to challenge or resist the paradigm of American-ness. Kronick's failure results, in part, because he fails even to question--let alone examine--these paradigmatic assumptions, the very nature of which undermine his stated position. Furthermore, Kronick's method fails internally,
as we saw with Kazin, allowing for oppositional
deconstructionist readings.

In *American Poetics of History* (1984), Kronick
proposes a method of answering a long standing, critical
question: how is the history of American inscribed in
American literature? His question, of course, presupposes
that our national literature does reflect its history, and
that presupposition places him, he claims, in opposition
to critics who focus on style. According to Kronick,
Richard Poirier, for example, believes that history "is
the environment created within the text . . . sealed off
from what might be called 'objective' history and can only
be entered momentarily as a fiction" (pp. 3-5).

Even critics like Roy Harvey Pearce who seek to
reconcile literature and history by offering "an
alternative to the impasse that arose between formalist
criticism and literary history," instead invert "that
hierarchical relation wherein the literary work is
subordinate to its historical background." Pearce's
inversion thus "proves to be as metaphysical and
ahistorical as anything proposed by the formalists or
Adamists, for the values Pearce finds in literature are
ultimately nonlinguistic and, thus, transcend history" (p.
2-3). From Matthiessen on, Kronick claims, a "symbolic
theory of language has held ground . . . [leading] critics
to insist that the American writer has no interest in
history... Through style, so these critics tell us, the writer resolves the conflicts between a desire to be original and the uncertain cultural, social, and political status of an emergent nation conscious of its foreign origin" (p. 2).

Briefly, Kronick claims to diverge from these traditional historical and stylistic critics not only by sharing space with radical critical thinkers who are his contemporaries, but also by following the often eccentric thinking of the American writers he examines. He focuses on various metaphors which he says contain American history: these tropes are not "founded upon a rejection of the past; the turn away from Europe is a re-turning—a troping—of the tropes that constitute history" (p. 6). Specifically, Kronick claims to trace the interlineations and intertextuality of certain representative metaphors, examining Emerson's economic metaphors, Thoreau's architectural ones, Whitman's philological and geological tropes, Adams's thermodynamic tropes, Pound's translation of history, using mechanistic and economic metaphors, Williams's "metaphors of physical contact," Crane's use of the trope of the bridge, and Stevens's genealogical metaphors.

His deconstructive method rests on some important assumptions about history as well as about the hierarchies of reading and writing, assumptions which move our
understanding of history as epistemological to an understanding of it as a "rhetorical interplay that poses history as a problematic of reading wherein temporal relations are generated by a linguistic process of exchange." Thus, Kronick's "poetics" of history is also a "poetics" of reading and writing in which "the reader and author exist neither as opponents in a dialectic nor as complementary halves in a mutual process of creation" (p. 6). Instead, for Kronick, they are both ultimately folded into language and the problematics of its interpretation.

Kronick claims, too, that American authors, who share an anxiety about a literature that is uniquely American, are obsessed with history and thus attempt to rethink [it] and thereby rewrite their genealogy, because the American writer can never forget his belatedness [which is] . . . a condition of language--the poet piles up the fragments conveying history as an inscription, a foreign language that resists translation. The problem of 'American' identity, therefore, is one of reading, that is, of mapping the exchange of tropes between texts . . . Thus America has always been inscribed in the metaphor of a poetics of history (p. 7).

Despite his avowed departure from Poirier, Pearce, and other Americanists, Kronick shares with them certain assumptions about American literature--for example, this obsession of American authors to inscribe American identity in their writings. Although Kronick's methodology, borrowed and slightly revised from that of Derrida and other deconstructionists, focuses on tropes as
a way to deconstruct the notion of a history outside language; his assumptions about what to focus on, what problems to pursue, and what questions to ask come from traditional Americanist criticism. Thus, I want to pay particular attention to two Americanists, who as representative critics of style and history, Kronick claims to resist or overturn, and then later to examine the deconstructionists whose methods he claims to synthesize. In other words, I want to understand Kronick's process: how his radical methodology can rest primarily on traditional paradigms and how he draws conclusions, given this apparent conflict in his critical practice.

Kronick's argument with Richard Poirier primarily involves Poirier's insistence, in A World Elsewhere, that any notion of history is individually inscribed in a text's interiority; in other words, an author's individual style determines the environment created within a text in which the characters move. These "invented environments" provide freedom for heroic maneuverability, which is not present in the world outside the text, the "provided environment" in other words, in which social, biological, and historical forces are often the "undoing of American heroes" (p. 5). Thus, Poirier carefully distinguishes between romantic novels, where the presentation of this
expanded self seeks to "displace" existing environments, and realistic novels which critique the real world though a mimetic rendering of it. It is possible, according to Poirier, to examine the environments, the metaphors, the grammar and syntax of sentences of a writer to find a "phenomenon in style, in the rhythm and sounds of sentences, where it has an energy the more intense because of the writer's usually unprogrammatic involvement with the only materials--language--with which he can try to 'build' a world" (p. viii).

These two critics focus on different genres (other than Emerson's and Thoreau's essays)--Kronick on poetry and Poirier on romantic novels--to make their points about language and history. Kronick believes history is inscribed in literary works through language; Poirier believes that personal, expansive, extravagant language, apparent to us as it defies convention, ignores objective history as it creates "a world elsewhere." Although both agree on the centrality of metaphors of building, tropes, for Kronick, are the inscriptions of history, and collectively these tropes offer us a sense of a intellectually radical American who understands that history cannot exist outside language. Tropes, for Poirier, are merely windows to the individual style, and he would identify the American in terms of the hero created by the author as one who resists society and
history, and the lengths to which an author goes with his/her own style in turn reveals the extent to which that author will resist. Each American author posits a slightly different kind of hero but all search for freedom from convention and stifling tradition, hence revealing a collective American identity. For Kronick this resistance would be revealed in such beliefs as those of Transcendentalism as the "search for an original relationship with God and nature (p. 12), or in the writers' persistent scarifying of earlier texts and ideas, or in their understanding that they must turn "away from the dream of the total book and produce fragments and drafts" (p. 88).

Each critic, then, seeks to show the resistance of American writers to their own culture, history, and literature, and, perhaps more importantly, to that of Europe, at the same time each critic understands the impossibility of achieving true originality. The methods of Kronick and Poirier are different as are the principles about language which underlie their methods. The larger issues about American literature on which their projects rest, however, are strikingly similar: that American writers share this obsession with uniqueness, that Emerson somehow provides the soil from which American literature grows--Poirier states it strongly, "Emerson in many respects is American literature . . ." (p. 69)--that
American writers "promote eccentricity" [p. 65-66], and that all writing is a quotation. How each of these principles operates is differently perceived by Kronick and Poirier, of course, which defines and determines their methodologies, one based in deconstruction and one in traditional stylistic analysis.

Yet, both of these critics work deductively from principles, which they supposedly have induced from a study of the literature they examine. What seems a more compelling source of their principles, however, is previous criticism which seeks to posit dialectics of interpretation: for example, historical underpinnings vs. absence of history, cultural significance vs. textual meaning, and collective American identity vs. individuality (although sometimes individuality becomes the collective American identity). Furthermore, rather than having principles concluded from empirical research, these critics have a priori paradigms, based in unprovable critical conjecture, as both the guiding principles and the conclusions. Their work then looks like this: American literature is unique; Emerson pleads for uniqueness; other writers mention American uniqueness; all American writers thus follow Emerson; therefore, American literature is unique. In other words, American literature is unique because it is; Emerson is the father of American literature because he is. Kronick's evocation of Poirier
as a critic to whom he re-turns and then resists is, as we can see, problematic because it does not serve as a wholly reliable account of their differences.

My claim is not that either of these critics—any I have examined so far, in fact—are fully aware of their dependence on the paradigms which underpin their work, and thus they describe their own work as adding to our understanding of the literature and as extending and expanding the criticism. But what is especially remarkable about Kronick's description of his work is his claim that he resists all the paradigms and methods based in epistemology or ontology, yet it is apparent he has never questioned or examined the paradigms on which his own work rests. His argument with these stylistic and historical critics comes down finally to a disagreement about how encompassing one should make the definition of language and about the methods one should use to uncover history in literature and language.

I want to examine more completely Kronick's methodological dependence on a series of deductive proofs when I discuss the deconstructionists, but for now I would like to focus briefly on Roy Harvey Pearce, from whom Kronick professes to have gained a kind of critical independence as he has embraced a post-structuralist approach to the literature and history of America.
To Kronick, Pearce represents a bridge—albeit an unfinished one—between New Criticism and post-structuralism. As I mentioned above, he praises Pearce for offering a form of historicism as an alternative to intrinsic criticism and to the traditional literary historians. He criticizes Pearce, however, for recognizing nonlinguistic values in literature and finally for transcending history. Like Poirier, Pearce is interested in the way in which a self is incorporated into literature, although for Pearce that self is less collectively cultural than Poirier's and more particular to an author in a culture; it is, as Kronick notices, a Hegelian self. Unlike Poirier (or Kronick), Pearce is interested in the whole of a literary work and the self of the author as it is available through an understanding of that aesthetic whole. Poirier, as we saw, does not share with Kronick the principle that history is always present as an influence on a literary work; Pearce, however, does share with Kronick the assumption that, inevitably, history is always, already inscribed in literature. The manner in which it is inscribed and the way in which readers understand history in literature, however, is different for the two critics—as is their discourse about it. Pearce writes rhapsodically of aesthetics, emotions, and freedom; "real" history he sees as a limitation on the pure freedom of an author. Kronick, too, sees history as
an imposition on any authorial attempts to achieve freedom from it or from his culture. Pearce, however, would claim the possibility of originality, whereas Kronick admits to no such possibility. In other words, Pearce would say that through the constraints history puts on literature, we see history in literature, and Kronick would claim that history is literature and literature is history.

Pearce claims that readers/critics understand that an author is situated in his/her culture, which has been affected by history. History would reveal itself in the values of a literary work and would engender such questions as these:

What was it like to live then? How was it possible to live authentically in and through the forms (repressive and expressive) peculiar to that civilization? What sort of vital structure does [an author] create and how does its vitality partake of the vitality of his own culture and that earlier one which his own gave him to envisage? A larger question would follow automatically—a question to which one could propose a private answer precisely because a novel, a work of art, had let him conceive of asking it: how is it possible to live authentically in and through the form peculiar to our civilization? Studying the Then, making us know it as literature gives it to us, would help us free ourselves to study and know the Now (pp. 38-39).

Kronick resists this humanistic epistemology to focus instead on tropology; he leans heavily on the belief that "the poet reveals that nature and the past do not exist outside of language: history is generated by metaphors of representation" (p. 7).
Nevertheless, both critics base their critical work on the dialectic of historicism vs. absence of history and move to the principle that "the past . . . becomes an aspect of the present," and that in the study of literature we cannot escape history; as Pearce says, "the past is just there, absolutely given" (p. 7). Pearce's historicism, in fact, "assumes that the past, by virtue of its very pastness, becomes an aspect of the present. In effect, a literary work carries the past into the present . . . " (p. 4-5). Similarly, Kronick says that the "present only exists by virtue of the memory giving continuity to isolated events. If we subordinate the past to the present by quoting, then we also reinstate the past under the name of the present" (p. 22).

Although these two critics resist each other at methodological points along they way and draw different conclusions ultimately, they share some important assumptions about history and its relationship to literature and about how the inscription of history proposes a notion of an American self. In addition to the limitations imposed by a dialectic base, then, these critics also fail to examine the assumptions on which their critical work rests. For Pearce that disregard of his underpinnings may be somewhat problematic, but for Kronick the failure to understand that he cannot
successfully base a radical approach on traditional notions fully undermines his critical framework.

At this point it would be helpful to explain more fully Kronick's methodology in order to understand the consequences of his position for the critical theory/practice of American literature. Kronick's reliance on several theorists, philosophers, historians, and psychologists is apparent in his first representative chapter, "Originality and Authority in Emerson and Thoreau," where he establishes the principles which guide his theory and sets the pattern for the method he will follow. Kronick begins with Whitman's scarifying of Emerson's texts to find his own place and metaphor. Yet Whitman's words turn against him because as he breaks open Emerson's texts to find his independence, he, in Freudian terms, slays himself as he slays the father, and thus deifies Emersonianism as he "kills" Emerson:

... Whitman recognizes that Emerson invites his readers to destroy his texts and to be their own begetters. It is particularly appropriate that Whitman sees this tradition of discontinuity ... in terms of reading. For in this he recognizes what deprives him of originality. The reader always stands in debt to his predecessors, most particularly to a predecessor who makes possible the illusion of his independence ... (p. 10).

Kronick says that Emerson fully realized the impossibility of originality when he said that "Every book
is a quotation" (p. 11). In the next paragraph Kronick moves from the statements of this principle that originality is impossible to his method, which I call the "Kronick slide," following Derrida's sense that one can read the concepts of general writing by subjecting them to a schematization which will "make sense slide, to denounced it or to deviate from it." This "slide" is often indicated by "If-then" clauses:

"If all books are quotations, then originality disappears as a criterion for judging a book's value. In place of originality, use determines value. In Emerson's terms, the more a book is quoted, the better it is. Therefore, reading must share an equal place with writing in his theory of literature. In defining this aesthetic of use, Emerson frequently employs metaphors drawn from economics. For books are like paper money--having no intrinsic worth, they are valued as signs that stand in place of things. Unlike paper money, which ideally does not exceed the gold held in reserve, books are always excessive--they represent nothing, neither nature nor the self; both have been displaced by quotation (p. 11).

What happens here is complicated, and it is easy to slide right along with Kronick. He begins with a paraphrase of Emerson's epigraph to "Quotation and Originality," ("Every book is a quotation") apparently making more credible the assertions which follow; in other words, we feel more compelled to accept this opening assertion, coming as it does from Emerson. Once it is accepted, the "then" clause is easier to accept. We can see that it could be argued that the "then" clause is an implication of "All books are quotations." It is not, of course, the only
implication, as I will indicate later when I "slide" to a conclusion different from Kronick's. We, of course, are already aware of Kronick's assumption that originality is impossible because it has been the implicit force behind his discussion of Whitman and his evocation of Melville's Pierre.

His next slide is a short one: "In Emerson's terms, the more a book is quoted, the better it is." Emerson does not say this exactly; what he says is that when a book is quoted, it takes on a new value, because the "profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader." It is what the reader does with the words of the book—quote them, use them, live them—that is important. In addition, Emerson says, "Observe also that a writer appears to more advantage in the pages of another book than in his own. In his own he waits as a candidate for your approbation; in another's he is a lawgiver" (VIII, p. 195).

Kronick follows with a "Therefore" clause, giving the appearance of some logical progression, but what he says, "reading must share an equal place with writing in his theory of literature," is neither logical nor true. It does not necessarily follow that reading and writing are equated even if we believe that all books are quotations. Even if we buy the use-value aspect of this notion, reading and writing do not have to be equals. It would
still be possible to value, say, writing over reading, but to recognize the need for writing to be read to be quoted. This sentence which equates reading and writing is not true of Emerson's essay or Emersonianism. Emerson always values writing over reading; he would say that I, for example, should write even if no one reads me, because in writing I am attempting to be original, in so far as I can. I am synthesizing all I have assimilated and am giving it back to the world in a new form, which is ME: "When a man thinks happily, he finds no foot-track in the field he travers. All spontaneous thought is irrespective of all else . . ." (VIII, p. 190).

To continue analyzing our paragraph: "In defining this aesthetic of use, Emerson frequently employs metaphors drawn from economics. For books are like paper-money--having no intrinsic worth, they are valued as signs that stand in place of things. . . books are always excessive--they represent nothing, neither nature nor the self; both have been displaced by quotation." It would seem that these thoughts are Emerson's, but they are, instead, Kronick's. Nowhere in this essay does Emerson say that "books are always excessive," of that they "represent nothing," or that they have been displaced by quotation." In fact, in one of Emerson's economic metaphors, he posits a transaction between reader and writer, each side viewing the exchange as equal,
honorable, and valuable. In addition, he writes:

He that comes second must needs quotes him that comes first . . . We cannot overstate our debt to the Past, but the moment has the supreme claim. The Past is for us; but the sole terms on which it can become ours are its subordination to the Present. Only an inventor knows how to borrow, and every man is or should be an inventor. We must not tamper with the organic motion of the soul. 'Tis certain that thought has its own proper motion, and the hints which flash from it, the words overheard at unawares by the free mind, are trustworthy and fertile when obeyed and not perverted to low and selfish account. This vast memory is only raw material. The divine gift is ever the instant life, which receives and uses and creates, and can well bury the old in the omnipotency with which Nature decomposes all her harvest for recomposition (VIII, p. 204).

Kronick, however, claims, following Derrida, that once a writer writes, the books s/he creates become a crypt, holding the nothingness of death, and once a reader reads, s/he gives up any idea of originality. Derrida would say that in reading we incorporate (in Freud's terms), then introject (assimilate) the reading, forgetting that it is a quotation, and in doing so, are able to write, although not in a literal sense. When books are produced, they are crypts; instead, writing is to be understood in a radical, non-logocentric sense, indicating as follows:

. . . all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing.' One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even greater certainty of military or political writing . . . All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these
activities but the essence and content of these activities themselves . . . The paradox to which attention must be paid is this: natural and universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing, is . . . named by metaphor. A writing that is sensible, finite, and so on, is designated as writing in the literal sense; it is . . . technique, and artifice; a human procedure, the ruse of being accidentally incarnated or of a finite creature. Of course, this metaphor remains enigmatic and refers to a 'literal' meaning of writing as the first metaphor . . . It is not, therefore, a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning but of determining the 'literal' meaning of writing as metaphoricity itself . . . 9

Kronick's slide—his basic method for deconstructing ideas and texts—can be seen again in the following example, in which he reiterates the way he believes we can achieve Derrida's notion of writing:

Reading implies inferiority; therefore we must scarify books [a slide]. Whenever we 'break ground' in search of direct contact with nature, we encounter the remains of our ancestors instead. Hence we must scratch out our ancestor's books beyond all recognition [does not logically follow previous assertion, yet he uses "hence" as a signal for logical movement]. Out of these mangled texts we will construct a new literature [It's possible but not a direct conclusion]. Emerson stands as the major American theorist of the complicity between reading, writing, and death. [new assertion] His denial of origins, let alone originality [a slide], severs man from God and nature (pp. 12-13).

The problem with sliding, however, is that one can slide to any desired conclusion. For example, starting with Emerson's epigraph: "Every book is a quotation . . . ." and moving to Kronick's paraphrase of it, "If all books are quotations," I can slide to a conclusion different from Kronick's—and, more importantly, to an opposing
one. My slide would work something like this: If all books are quotations, then to define originality as the quality of perfect newness is inappropriate and impossible. In Emerson's terms, "All things wear a lustre which is the gift of the present, and a tarnish of time" (VIII, p. 191). Therefore, originality is the application of contemporary, individual intuition and understanding to the collective knowledge of humankind to create original texts which are also quotations of the past. Thus, to be original is to quote in individual ways. By reading one would gain knowledge of the past, but writing would be valued over reading because of its individuality and originality. The written texts of these original quoters would thus be the treasured repositories of historical and cultural knowledge, each text different and new as well as the same and old.

We could also slide, in the second example, from "Reading implies inferiority" to a conclusion opposed to a "denial of origins [as severing] man from God and nature." We could, for instance, slide again, beginning with the idea that if reading implies inferiority, then we must transcend it. We can accomplish this by writing [logocentric sense] and writing [writing in Derrida's radical sense] ourselves into and on top of all that we have read, finally achieving Emerson's notion of originality in the only possible way: through a profound
understanding of and relationship to nature and thus to God, by extending the natural symbols to those of language.

In other words, Kronick's method allows for so many different Emersons that, finally, there is little contact with any Emerson. Furthermore, the Emerson of Kronick's reading profoundly violates what has long been considered the tenor of Emerson's essays and the ethos of Emerson—his affective quality, in other words. Reading Kronick's Emerson leaves one with the impression that Emerson professes a "nonidealistic aesthetic of repetition." As Derrida denies a Hegelian idealism, so Emerson denies the humanistic and idealistic impulse to preserve the past. One would also believe that Emerson implies that "Like the book, the reader becomes a 'funerary monument' marking the absence of natural presence." One of Kronick's slides takes us to this kind of conclusion; he says that since, in "Self-Reliance," Emerson likens memory to a corpse, "the art into which memory casts itself—the book—must be a kind of crypt" [my emphasis] (p. 14). At a later point in his text Kronick says about Emerson that, "Intent upon denying the existence of originality, he grants a role to the reader that subverts the authority of the text, which is not only derivative but a veritable tomb without the reader" (p. 21). Instead, Emerson is deploring the lack
of originality and gives rather than denies, authority to
the text.

Kronick thus posits an Emerson, one unknown in
traditional literary history, who "insists upon the
violence of intertextuality whereby the solid ground is
disfigured by the seeker" (p. 13), and who "reveals his
hostility to his literary ancestors by using the
catachresis 'protest' in place of 'writing'" (p. 19). The
coaopted Emerson of American history and American literary
history has been scarified and deconstructed by Joseph
10
Kronick.

Kronick's method depends not only on a deductive
logic that is often invalid, but also on the binary
oppositions of traditional, critical approaches to
American literature such as those examined in the previous
chapters. Like Ziff, Kazin, and others, he can make one
side of the binary win, collapse them both, or maintain
the tension between them. Because of his a priori
commitment to history as transcending language, Kronick's
agenda requires that in the binary of history/language,
history wins; and his agenda requires that in the binary
of quotation/originality, quotation wins. In other
words, if he grants originality, he denies the inscription
of history as always, already present in writing.
Furthermore, Kronick is no less interested than Richard Poirier, Roy Harvey Pearce, or any of the Americanist critics I have discussed in my first two chapters in locating a national literature for America, yet understanding that it is one which is necessarily bound to its European past. The tension produced from the awareness of this past produces endless dialectics American-ness—whether it be R.W.B. Lewis's American Adam or the American identity implicitly revealed by Joseph Kronick's method of setting terms in play against each other and allowing selected tropes to deconstruct the notion of a history outside of language. Yet, no less paradigmatic and no less powerful is the sense in Kronick's book, as in all the critical works of Americanists examined so far, that Ralph Waldo Emerson is the source of American religion (as Harold Bloom claims), American individualism (even as Emerson's notion had to be distorted to fit the capitalist dream), and, most importantly, of American literature.

Kronick claims, in his Introduction, that he finds it "characteristic of American writers to treat history as a question of intertextuality, of reading and writing" (p. 6). With that as a starting point (if one can have such a thing as a starting point), I want to take Kronick's
principles and method to another genre, that of a 19th-century American novel/romance, *The Scarlet Letter*, in order to examine further Kronick's claims and methodology and thus to assess more fully the powers and limits of his poetics. Kronick mentions, in his chapter called "Emerson's Encyclopedia," Melville/Ishmael's admission that his/their sources are "plagiarized in the writing of his book," *Moby Dick*:

And Melville continues his jokes on his plagiarism... [however] The book must of necessity remain incomplete: '...', I am the architect, not the builder.' Melville shares with Emerson a distrust of completed texts. The similarity also extends to their mutual claims to be only the proposers of future works rather than the authors of completed books... completion means death... Melville's fascination with the incomplete book... cannot be separated from his denial that either a writer or a nation can be original. History remains a series of mutilated texts which the author assembles willy-nilly into a narrative that draws attention to its own textuality (pp. 88-89).

I want to push this idea of incomplete texts further and to follow Derrida's question, stemming from his notion of "the problematic of beginnings and endings of systems," about Hegel's preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*: "Does the preface stand outside or inside philosophy? Does it produce philosophy or does philosophy produce it?... The preface that introduces the work is at once the end of the work. The cycle of knowledge begins where it ends--in a self-engendering circle" (*W & D*, p. 80). Paul Bove likewise emphasizes that "the potential priority of a
'pre-face' must be thrown instantaneously into doubt by its very fictional existence as a 'beginning.'" This "self-engendering circle," of course, complicates our notion of the impossibility of originality, one implicitly understood by Nathaniel Hawthorne in the Custom-House sketch and his narrative, The Scarlet Letter.

Like Emerson's insistence on the impossibility of originality, as well as on the impossibility of escaping history, and on the necessity of doing violence to texts, Hawthorne's "Custom-House" reveals plagiarism, insists on the never-closed circle of incomplete texts, and uses the prefatory sketch as encompassing the narrative and as engendered by it. Hawthorne's metaphor in "The Custom-House" for this notion of writing is his return to his hometown of Salem and his work as a surveyor.

Hawthorne says, "... there is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghost-like, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime ... Hester Prynne ... did not flee" (p. 79-80). Nathaniel Hawthorne did not flee either; he stayed, haunted by the specter of his ancestors who eliminated any opportunity of his being known as an "original" man in his community. The acts of writing [in its Derridian sense] by these "fathers" and by the
previous surveyors and employees of the Custom-House on
the history of Salem also eliminate the possibility that
Hawthorne's writing or writing can be more than a
quotation of all these predecessors. Hawthorne represents
them, he cries out, and takes "shame upon myself for their
sakes, and pray[s] that any curse incurred by them . . .
may now and henceforth be removed." This act of reading
them does not allow him to destroy their writing, nor can
he scarify their work because they did not entomb them in
the crypts of books. By writing them in the logocentric
tradition Hawthorne deifies them, further relegating
himself to quoting. Surveyor Pue's manuscript, found in
the Custom-House, reveals a traditionally written text on
which Hawthorne can hope to place his tracks, but again,
in the act of "killing" off Pue, he kills himself:

I must not be understood as affirming that, in the
dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives
and modes of passion that influenced the characters
who figure in it, I have invariably confined myself
within the limits of the old Surveyor's half a dozen
sheets of foolscap. On the contrary, I have allowed
myself, as to such point, nearly or altogether as
much license as if the facts had been entirely of my
own invention. What I contend for is the
authenticity of the outline (p. 33).

Hawthorne does not complete the incomplete text of
Surveyor Pue, and in his own belatedness, acknowledges the
voice of Pue: "With his own ghostly voice, he had exhorted
me, on the sacred consideration of my filial duty and
reverence toward him,—who might reasonably regard himself
as my official ancestor,—to bring his moldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public" (p. 33). Hawthorne plagiarizes the narrative and its incompleteness and refuses to complete it. His minor attempt to scarify it instead increases its incompleteness; the circle doesn't close, because Hawthorne keeps the book open, knowing that he has no truth and no epistemology for finding it. Thus, the difference he makes in the narrative is the difference between the differences of a closed, dead text and a text which never finishes the circle, hence, Hawthorne's use of a preface to begin and end the narrative of The Scarlet Letter without ending it. As Melville and Emerson—and Hawthorne—knew, "completion is death."

Hawthorne increases his reader's awareness of his textuality (thus freeing himself from the logocentric constraints of romantic narrative tradition and refusing to use the traditional metaphor of romance); he does this by employing the prefatory sketch to reveal itself as quotation rather than as original and to reveal itself as incomplete while simultaneously incorporating its revelations into the narrative of Hester Prynne. He further argues for the incompleteness of his text by deconstructing his own symbol of the Scarlet letter A. When he finds it in the Custom-House, it is little more than a rag, but held to his chest, its power seems undiminished. It seems to be the signifier of the
signified "adultery," although the word never appears in the text, and it stands both for the power of the Puritan community as it controls language—and thus history—and, as William Carlos Williams says, for the Puritan's refusal to read. Their failure to read allows Hester Prynne/Hawthorne to write/write new meanings for the A, endlessly playing on the differences between its intended meaning by the fathers of the community and her resistance to it, at the same time she outwardly complies with the "letter" of their punishment.

In his preface Hawthorne says of Hester that "she gained from many people the reverence due an angel . . ." in her capacity as a "kind of voluntary nurse" (p. 32). As the Puritan women stand outside the door of the prison house at the beginning of the narrative, they vie for the harshest reading of the A, all mired in the prisons of their community's discourse. Yet one young woman knows the A will burn into Hester, a reminder of her punishment. Her emergence from the prison signals the beginnings of her deconstruction of the letter—the word, the logos. She has embroidered the A, adorned it with the play of meaning outside of their reading skill. By the middle of The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne/narrator says, "The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the
scarlet A by its original significance. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (p. 161). Even with their expansion of the meaning of the A, we are aware, as is Hawthorne, that meanings are endlessly available, and that it is not Hester Prynne who elicits these new interpretations but rather recognition of the impossibility of centering the text and locating a univocal reading of it.

This 'A' remains the focus of Hawthorne's narrative as it tropes not only the history of American theology and language but of the entire logocentric tradition, yet carrying its own deconstructive power, which reveals resistance to this tradition. Pearl incorporates the A and her mother, reading them as one, and scarifying their play of meaning to write her own escape, but that escape is back to Europe.

Although the deconstructionist reading works always to prove its primary point of the indeterminancy of texts, Kronick's readings of American authors are complicated by his other methodological goals: he wants to reveal, through the post-structuralist principle of metaphor as the rupture in the text, the impossibility of escaping history as well as the impossibility of a history that transcends language. Furthermore, the history is American, as the authors who wrote the texts obsessively resisted their European past; as Kronick says, "American
poets have long been engaged in a search for a national language—an American language." Yet, these authors understood the impossibility of accomplishing their goal because they knew, inherently, and incorporated into their texts, explicitly or metaphorically, the notion that originality is impossible. Thus, although deconstructionists always claim that texts contain their own deconstruction, Kronick tries to show that these American texts knowingly contained their own deconstruction, as they relied on certain representative metaphors.

Beginning with this claim that American texts knowingly contained their own deconstruction, I want, now, to show that, using Kronick's method of a partial reading, it is possible to deconstruct The Scarlet Letter in another direction. Kronick claims that in opposition to Emerson's denial of originality, Thoreau "refuses to admit that originality is impossible--a refusal so opposed to Emerson's philosophy that it may be the most Emersonian act of all" (p. 22). Unlike Melville who says, "I am the architect, not the builder," Thoreau is both: he "will be his own architect, or technician of the arche (that is, the maker of origins), and lay the ruins for future generations" (p. 26). Although Thoreau distrusted and disliked institutions of all sorts, he used the metaphor of building to stand for the possibility of
originality: "Thoreau desires . . . to translate the book into a house and thereby leave a sturdy edifice" (p. 25). In Derrida's terms, even attempting to be original means that one kills the father, but in doing so, deifies that father and become him. Thoreau does not, however, become the father; rather, "by writing, he gains mastery of the pen, which we might call a phallus, and in rewriting history he inscribes his own origin. The master of the pen/phallus becomes his own father" (p. 31).

Metaphorically, Thoreau represents this writing as furrowing the ground in a spot untouched by previous builders, especially foreign architects. On that spot one sends down roots and constructs a sturdy edifice above.

For Nathaniel Hawthorne, however, in the town of Salem, there were no places uncluttered by buildings; by the 1850's some of the constructions were even in decay: "wooden warehouses . . . [and a] dilapidated wharf" (p. 4). Imposing on all, however, was the "spacious edifice of brick" of the Custom-House, "ornamented with a portico of half a dozen wooden pillars, supporting a balcony, beneath which a flight of wide granite steps descends toward the street" (p. 5). From inside this building, Hawthorne can view the other buildings of Salem: "shops of grocers, block-makers, slop-sellers, and ship-chandlers . . . [a] flat, unvaried surface, covered chiefly with wooden houses, few or none of which pretended
to architectural beauty . . ." (p. 7). Thus, Hawthorne's only chance of rupturing/furrowing must be, not in new clean ground, but within the traditional boundaries already established by others. Hawthorne's Heideggerian "presencing" and his Thoreauian point d'appui occur within the Custom-House which is his metaphor for the constraints of the past and of the beliefs/practices of a society whose corruption is apparent in its religion and politics.

Hawthorne also populates his Custom-House with those he must metaphorically "kill off" before he can write. They, in turn, stand for his ancestors who wrote the history of Salem as magistrates and other officials of the communal government and as representatives of the Puritan doctrine. As he moves through the rooms of the Custom-House making each his own, he finds the bundle of Surveyor Pue, who stands, finally, for all those writers of the past whose work must be ruptured and on whose ruins Hawthorne will build a new edifice. His originality is deeper and richer than Thoreau's because as he ruptures and destroys the past, he absorbs it; his version of originality, building as it does on the past, opposes Emerson's denial of even the possibility of individuality and originality. Hawthorne scarifies those who work in the Custom-House. He violates the past by imposing his own imagination on it and making it his own. The scarlet letter he holds to his chest burns the past into him;
then he drops it, reads the story of Hester Prynne, and makes it his own: "I must not be understood as affirming that, in the dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in it, I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the old Surveyor's half a dozen sheets of foolscap. On the contrary, I have allowed myself . . . nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention" (p. 33).

Hawthorne paces the floors of the Custom-House, thinking and rethinking, reimagining and rewriting Hester Prynne. His steps, like Thoreau's furrows, prepare the ground for his imagination, his intuition, his individuality—all of which form his originality. As Hawthorne writes the story, he gains mastery over the past, inscribing his own origin. He not only rewrites and then writes the story, but also he recasts it in his own original version of the romantic tradition. At the end of his preface he speaks to those of the future who will read his writings; then he moves back into a dim past and into the story of Hester Prynne. As soon as that move is made, the Custom-House disappears and is replaced by another edifice, this time, however, one entirely out of Hawthorne's imagination. Yet, Hawthorne deconstructs it as well through his character, Hester Prynne, whose aspect
and behavior, metaphorically bring down the walls of the jail and the Puritan society it represents. She rewrites them with one letter, the scarlet A, and her own version of the pen/the phallus—her needle, inscribing her own story onto the letter of their laws. She is not changed by them; her isolation, in fact, makes her more radical and different, and they change as they come to accept her.

I could go on here to accomplish my task of revealing that Hawthorne did not do what I claimed in my first deconstructive "reading" of him, when I revealed that he understood the impossibility of originality and, in his own texts, planted the seeds for the deconstruction of his work. In this second one, I have been able, in part by focusing on different parts of the work and in part by using the same ones used in the first reading, to show that Hawthorne believed strongly in the notion of originality. To emphasize that belief, apparent in his story, I could also discuss Dimmesdale, whose adherence and allegiance to the structures of Puritanism and whose self-denial result in his own destruction—just as Puritanism itself was finally deconstructed by other religions. I could add further emphasis by discussing Hawthorne's preface which moves his story of Hester Prynne, set in the past, to his own time and allows him to
deconstruct the very edifices which he faced as a man in order to assert his originality as an author.

I would claim further that I could do any number of these "readings," each time discovering a different Hawthorne and a different version of "The Custom-House" and of The Scarlet Letter. Kronick's method allows me this play, which he might admit to, yet this allowance for variation undermines Kronick's own assertions and ultimately his whole book. This interpretative play and its consequent versions of an author's work prove to be problematic even for Kronick, for example, in chapter 1 when he says:

In the early pages of 'Quotation and Originality,' Emerson sketches a theory of reading permeated by hostility toward the past. Intent upon denying the existence of originality, he grants a role to the reader that subverts the authority of the text, which is not only derivative but a veritable tomb without the reader . . . the past provides the raw material . . . 'We cannot overstate our debt to the Past, but the moment has the supreme claim . . . the sole terms on which [the past] can become ours are its subordination to the Present' . . . we can say we subordinate by quoting. But this cannot be—quotation declares that what we write or speak does not belong to us. Quotation entombs the past in the self, thereby cutting the speaker off from both the past and present. All is quotation; the past, let alone the present, is never present to itself. A quotation refers to what can only be another quotation (p. 21).

Then, noting that Emerson excepts God from this rule, Kronick accuses him of an "abrupt about-face" from his theory of reading by affirming "divine and human
presence." Kronick must, then, claim that Emerson's "theory of reading undercuts his affirmation of the authority of the self and the immediacy of perception" (See pp. 20-21). However, Emerson's words, "And what is Originality? It is being, being one's self, and reporting accurately what we see and are," instead undercut Kronick's version of Emerson as one who knowingly deconstructed his own work because of his awareness of the impossibility of originality. Thus, once Kronick is compelled to make one part of Emerson's work contradict or undercut another part, he can no longer use Emerson to make his own case. My two deconstructive readings of The Scarlet Letter suffer the same problems, for if one is true, it undercuts completely the principles on which the other rests; yet both are possible, using Kronick's methodology.

Kronick's question of how American history is inscribed in American literature—or, for that matter, all history—reveals another limitation of his poetics because that question slides like his method. His question, in other words, can vary or completely change as he discusses the various concerns of the post-structuralists or of the authors he examines. Or, perhaps a more accurate description of this slide would be that what he posits as his question is not really what he is after at all. Instead, he wants to "prove" his own points. So, if he
doesn't finally have a "real" question and he fails to make a "real" inquiry of any of the literature he purports to examine, the powers of his method are minimal.

In my discussions of The Scarlet Letter my questions are determined by the conclusions I want my version of Kronick's deconstructive method to reach. The first question could be stated as this: How does Hawthorne reveal his belief that originality is impossible and thus that everything is a quotation? It can be answered by saying that he reveals it in his incomplete text, in his use of the preface on the Custom-House, in his metaphor of his return to Salem and the consequences of his work and life there, in his use of what he claims is an old Puritan legend about Hester Prynne, and in the symbol of the scarlet A. The second reading--completely opposed to the first--is based on the following question: How does Hawthorne reveal his belief in and commitment to the possibility of individual originality? I could answer it in various ways, but the one I have chosen focuses on the tropes of architecture and building, through which ruptures we can recognize the attempt to master the father/ancestors by re-writing. In both cases, I have ignored most of the text, especially the parts that would contradict my claims.

The powers of Kronick's project are thus limited by his particular agenda of deconstruction, which further
diminishes what is already a reductive stance. Like Ziff's equation of culture and literature, discussed in my first chapter, Kronick reduces history and literature by apparently rescuing them from an imagined binary opposition and making them equally important; yet what he really does is to subjugate both as he makes them tools for the purpose of deconstructing the notion that history can exist outside language.

Diminished, too, by a Kronick reading are the many thematic issues of this text which reflect or inscribe history. Kronick's *a priori* method, with a pretense of complication through deconstruction, reveals, like the method of the old New Critics, only certain themes which, according to Kronick's claims, aren't centered or determinate (but which really are). All other themes are lost, and *The Scarlet Letter* becomes, not *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, but, like the picture on the old Morton salt box, a picture in a picture in a picture in a picture . . . and I am lost in ideas about the infinite possibilities of that way of presenting a picture, and the picture itself is no longer important.

For example, in my first reading, the preface to *The Scarlet Letter* is foregrounded as it introduces and keeps alive its issues, beginning and ending the circle of the uncompleted text. In my second reading the focus is on tropes of building and architecture as they prove points
about Hawthorne's belief in originality. Kronick's desire to prove his principles (e.g. that there is or isn't any originality) determines which tropes he uses as a focus and which parts of the text are eliminated from consideration.

Although we see that Kronick's deconstructive method does not take into account more than the metaphors of a literary work, we must also see that his critical intention is not to recreate a literary text in its wholeness or to respond to its appeals and effects. In other words, his critical agenda is profoundly different from that of a poetics which would, according to Paul Bove, "maintain habitual aesthetic constructs as defenses against the potential for disorder which exist in the relationship among texts" (p. xii).

The power in Kronick's method comes from the attention to language that, say, a poetics of aesthetics might ignore or relegate to a status below that of character, action, and thought. Moreover, there is power implicit in his question about how history is inscribed in language and thus ineluctably in all texts. Further, he has the power that deconstruction can offer. He has, however, tapped none of these sources of power, instead, reducing history, language, literary texts, and deconstruction. Like my corrective responses to the
critics of the previous two chapters, I want to offer a revision to his methodology without changing his critical question, the answer to which offers knowledge about language and history in literary texts. My revision will take into account those sources of power that Kronick reduces: deconstruction, language, history, and American literature.

The power of deconstruction lies in its insistence on recognition that language is already situated logocentrically and phallocentrically; thus, deconstruction provides the kind of awareness and knowledge necessary for an examination of the assumptions and values encoded in language. As a revision of Kronick, I want to propose a two-step method. The first step deconstructs the language of the text and the ways in which it creates and perpetuates a value system and an epistemology. However, this awareness results, not in indeterminacy or the chaos of aporia, but in the second step which has underpinnings in both deconstruction and historicism. This step examines the text for evidence of the inscription of history and the ways in which we discern history in the language of literature. Although this second step rests on the assumption that history is inscribed in literature, its method of investigation need not be a priori, nor does it need to be trapped in the paradigm of an American self.
However, before I ground this methodological revision in a reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, I want to account for the ways I have revised deconstruction. As we have seen with other *a priori* methods, the principles and the conclusions are identical. The deconstruction, or decoding, of encoded language results in the conclusion that language (and thus texts) are indeterminate because deconstructionists go to the text with that belief as a motivating principle. Thus, for them, language is either limited by encoding or, because of their deconstructive decoding, language has no limits—and is thus indeterminate—when it is stripped of the referentiality of signifier to signified. Indeterminacy, paradoxically, has become the determining principle of deconstruction.

Rather than seeing decoded language as indeterminant, I see it as containing limitless possibilities and power because of its "revisability" and potentiality; yet it is limited in any given context by shared meanings or the shared agreement to come to understanding by learning new meanings or more subtle distinctions. The "revisability" does not produce chaos, in other words, but forces continual awareness and revision. For example, language offers deconstructionists a means by which to present its case, which revises logocentrism. Then, I seek through language to revise deconstruction. In either case—or in any case—despite
the fact that language can be revised, we can determine—
and understand—the limitations of the already situated
language as well as the revisions to that situatedness.
Finally, I want to revise deconstruction further and
expand its limitations as a partial criticism by examining
more of the language of the text than metaphors and more
than the ruptures of intertextuality.

I want to begin revising Kronick's method by
referring to my two "Kronicized" readings of The Scarlet
Letter, but, as I mention above, I will not revise
Kronick's question about how American literature inscribes
history. My two-step method, as you will recall, will
first deconstruct the text in order to understand the ways
in which history is inscribed in it. The primary
differences between the revised reading and the others are
as follows: the revision will not allow for oppositional
readings which undermine its own principles, the revised
reading is a posteriori rather than a priori so that the
data of the text is considered even as the language is
deconstructed (thus, the revision is not bound by
Kronick's a priori principles), the revision does not
seek to find binaries, nor is it bound by the criticism of
the tradition of American-ness. In fact, the first order
of deconstruction in this revised method is to deconstruct
the Americanist tradition, creating awareness of its
influence and power and thus resisting and revising it.
One of Kronick's a priori principles—and thus also one of his conclusions—that no longer need determine a reading of *The Scarlet Letter* is that American authors deconstructed their own works or planted the seeds for deconstruction. Instead, we can discern from Hawthorne’s text that he carefully layered and unfolded the information about each character, revealing details in such a way as to try to control his readers' reactions to the characters and their actions.

For example, we suspect that Dimmesdale is Pearl's father long before it is confirmed; thus, we can see that Hawthorne is requesting our understanding of the character before we make negative judgments. If he were to have revealed Dimmesdale's guilt while Hester Prynne stood on the scaffold, the reader would have little sympathy for him. Hawthorne's agenda is greater than creating suspense about the identity of Pearl's father; he is exploring the effects of guilt on this one man, Arthur Dimmesdale as well as thematizing about its effects on anyone as s/he stands estranged from religion and community.

While I am claiming it is possible to discern Hawthorne's narrative strategies—such as withholding details—and his purpose that we maintain a level of sympathy for Dimmesdale even as we see his weakness (which increases our sympathy), I am also claiming that we can, as deconstruction workers, recognize the strategies and
purposes as ones which appear to be radical since they ask our sympathy for a man who opposes the rules and as ones which appear to be very modern in that these strategies and purposes reveal an author who understands the workings of human psychology in terms of guilt, obsession, self-punishment and repression.

At the same time, we know that Arthur Dimmesdale is destroyed by his guilt, and, thus, Hawthorne seems to be suggesting that a confession would have served Dimmesdale well. Deconstruction allows us, then, to see that, despite the modernity and radicality of Hawthorne, he is caught, at least on some level, in the kind of traditional beliefs that empower, through language, groups like the Puritans. Hawthorne, in other words, doesn’t deconstruct the Puritans, nor does he denounce them or completely denounce their ideology which can destroy a man who served that ideology well. Our use of deconstructive techniques, then, exposes how Hawthorne’s text inevitably inscribes history: Puritanism is more than a backdrop or setting for the story of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale and it is more than a complication in the love between them. Puritanism is inscribed in the language of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and thus Puritan beliefs as American history are inscribed in The Scarlet Letter. It would be easy here to construct a version of American-ness and state it in terms of a binary opposition such as the individual
(and his beliefs, passions, love, etc.) versus society
(its particularization in Puritan Boston).

Similarly we can deconstruct Hawthorne's attempts, in
"The Custom-House," to distance himself as author of the
text by claiming that the "Inmost Me" remains veiled, that
the story of the discovery of the scarlet A is a non-
fictional account, and that his text is romantic, an
attempt to "dream strange things, and make them look like
truth." Thus, his language reveals that he is asking
readers not to have certain kinds of expectations, thus
apparently giving them freedom from authorial and
narratorial control when, in fact, he is attempting to
control their reaction not only to that sketch but also to
Hester Prynne when she appears at the door of the prison.

Thus, the language and the lines it creates between
fiction and non-fiction in the sketch need to be
deconstructed. For example, Hawthorne's descriptions of
his co-workers have the agenda of venting his anger at his
firing from the Custom-House, at living in Salem, and at
having to depend on the American political system. Yet he
covers this anger with the language characteristic of his
narrators in all of his Prefaces, language which reveals
an amused, ironic speaker who views himself as the
"decapitated surveyor."

Furthermore, by deconstructing the metaphor of the
narrator's discovery of the scarlet A as fictional exposes
Hawthorne's own belief that he can retell American legends, and thus he implicitly posits an American history. On a deeper level of implication, by interweaving the fictional account with the account of his life at the Custom-House, we recognize the inevitability of history in this text. At the level of the text, in terms of my earlier example, Hawthorne seems to be positing inescapability only as it applies to personal attachment to a place where one has had a profound experience. Even that attachment, however, is mitigated on the surface of his text by his own words about his firing:

Peace be with all the world! My blessing on my friends! my forgiveness to my enemies! For I am in the realm of quiet? The life of the Custom-House lies like a dream behind me . . . how little time has it required to disconnect me from them all, not merely in act, but recollection . . . Soon, likewise, my old native town will loom upon me through the haze of memory . . . Henceforth it ceases to be a reality of my life (p. 44).

Yet, by deconstructing Hawthorne's apparent emotional control and by placing the text of *The Scarlet Letter* against the text of "The Custom-House," we get a sense of Hawthorne's continuing frustration with societal rules, such as those imposed by the American political system. Further deconstruction takes us to the same place we arrived with our examination of Arthur Dimmesdale—that Hawthorne is deeply entrenched in those societal notions.
he appears to overturn. His methods of overturning them, however, frustrate him because they are ineffectual and, ultimately, conservative.

We can continue to deconstruct various layers of the text, further exposing the inscription of history in it, but will briefly show only one last example. The notion—which arises from using Kronick's agenda—that Hawthorne deconstructs his own symbol of the scarlet A has some appeal, given the critical tradition of symbolists and thematists to place all meaning in it. However, Hawthorne instead stabilized the meaning of the symbol as the signifier for the signified of adultery. The only destabilizing forces are the perspectives of the characters who act or react in terms of the scarlet letter. Hawthorne's primary focus is not on the symbol but on Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale; the scarlet letter is important as it distinguishes them from the community as defiers--or at least disregards--of its rules. Deconstructing the "A" allows us an awareness that it stands for more than these two people and more the power of a fictionalized Puritan community against them; the "A" is the inscription of history on the text and in the narrative of Hester Prynne. The deconstructed "A" stretches beyond the text to the history of America as it impinges on the words of Hawthorne's literary text, each
folding the other into itself, until neither is recognizable without the traces of the other.

Furthermore, I want to suggest that I could construct a methodology which would allow Kronick's question to be answered which would not marry deconstruction and historicism—would, in fact, leave deconstruction out all together. This historicist method would allow me to glean knowledge from the text which would reveal history and history through language. It, too, would work in an *a posteriori* fashion, taking into account the data of the text, refusing to privilege one, or only a few, themes, especially ones stated in terms of binary oppositions.

The examination in this chapter supports my general hypothesis that the critical paradigms of Americanist critics have become the hermeneutics of American literature—and thus that the literature itself is obscured, limited, distorted, contorted—even lost. I find Kronick's claims to be extravagant insofar as their actual achievements and find his poetics to be, at best, a "local hermeneutics" and, at worst, a profound distortion of American literature. More specifically, I can, as I have done throughout this chapter, recognize that Kronick is trapped in his own tautology, which represents little more than the paradigms of the traditional American
critics with whom he argues and seeks to overturn. It seems that he tries to have it both ways; but, despite Derrida's admission that the concepts of the deconstructionists may not be new or distinguishable from traditional/classical concepts, either we can determine the meaning of texts or we cannot. By relying on these old paradigms Kronick is implicitly consenting to some notion of determinate meaning because these paradigms, however limiting and reductive they may be, come from critics who posit them as determinate. In addition, Kronick's adherence to some sense of American identity as it comes through intertextuality again locates, if only for moments, a self that he attempts to deny.

We now turn to a chapter on feminist criticism, again examining the power of the paradigm of American-ness, but our assessment of the powers and limits of a method based in deconstruction has implications for feminist criticism, which often must overturn the situatedness of phallocentric language. The methods of the cultural critics also come to bear on our examination and evaluation of feminist criticism of American literary texts.
NOTES

1 Joseph G. Kronick. *American Poetics of History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p. 34. All further references to this work appear in the text.

2 Kronick would say of tropes, as does Paul deMan, that the "tropological patterns reenter the system in the guise of such formal categories as polarity, recurrence, normative economy, or in such grammatical tropes as negation and interrogation," Paul deMan, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 27.


Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Complete Works of Ralph W. Emerson, 12 vols., ed. E. W. Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-04), vol. VIII, p. 176. All further references to these volumes will hereafter be cited in the text with volume number and page reference.


Press, 1980), p. xvii. All further references to this work appear in the text.

14 E. D. Hirsch discusses "local hermeneutics" as follows: "An interpretive model or methodology that is not correctly descriptive or normative for all textual interpretation is also not correctly descriptive or normative for smaller groupings of texts . . . [No] method of interpretation [has] been devised that would always yield correct results for any one "class" of texts. Every example of local hermeneutics known to me . . . exists in the realm of what Bacon called 'middle axioms,' which is to say the realm of probabilities rather than universals. Local hermeneutics consists of rules of thumb rather than rules. As a system of middle axioms, local hermeneutics can indeed provide models and methods that are reliable most of the time. General hermeneutics lays claim to principles that hold true all of the time in textual interpretation. That is why general hermeneutics is, so far, the only aspect of interpretation that has earned the right to be named a 'theory.'" E. D. Hirsch, Aims of Interpretation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 17-18.
CHAPTER IV
American-ness Revised: The Perspective of Feminism

Annette Kolodny explains in "Dancing Through the Minefield," that "Under [feminist criticism's] wide umbrella, everything has been thrown into question: our established canons, our aesthetic criteria, our interpretative strategies, our reading habits, and most of all, ourselves as critics and teachers." Thus, with Adrienne Rich's notion of "revision" in mind, feminist theorists and critics nudge other academicians to examine their own critical assumptions, asking them to turn clearer eyes on texts they teach as well as to focus on texts never before seriously considered.

In this chapter I will examine feminist revisions to the criticism of American literature, assessing the powers and limits of their critical frameworks. Unlike the critics of the previous three chapters, some of these feminist critics are aware that they are resisting and revising specifically the paradigm of American-ness; other feminist critics resist a more general notion of a national literary canon and its attendant criticism, which they see mired in the interests of white males. This feminist challenge attempts to accomplish its several

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purposes by various means. In other words, different projects in feminist criticism adopt different principles or conclusions. They mingle these tenets of the general feminist theory with principles of literary criticism to construct their particular frameworks. Recognizing multiple goals and methods forces me to pay attention to the many differences among feminist re-visionists and to the problems involved in doing justice to those differences. Thus, it will be difficult—and inappropriate—to make generalized judgments about the powers and limits of feminist criticism without first looking at specific critics, examining the underpinnings, agendas, and consequences of their work.

Two ways that feminist theorists and critics accomplish their revisions are by focusing on a feminist hermeneutics and on a canon which does not exclude women. A feminist hermeneutics—represented in this chapter by the work of Annette Kolodny and Judith Fetterley—often depends on uncovering covert texts which speak to and about women by reading "against" the grain of overt texts and their traditional interpretations. Goals which seek to open up the traditionally male canon or, more radically, blow away the idea of a canon, can be achieved, in part, by discovering and recovering texts written for and by women who are ignored or marginalized by the male
hegemony of the academy. This feminist work will be represented by Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins.

These four well-known feminist critics work exclusively on American texts. I will attend to the kinds of questions they ask, the methods used to answer them, the conclusions drawn, and the implications of their conclusions for the goals of feminist criticism as it relates to American literature and as it relates more generally to feminist ideology. I will, as well, determine the ways these women resist or extend the powerful paradigms to which we have paid attention in the previous three chapters and the ways in which they extend or complement each other's work.

The first of the four feminists I will examine is Annette Kolodny, whose critical agenda, established in *The Lay of the Land* (1975), is, by reading against the grain, to expose the metaphors of the pastoral literature of America as powerful enough "to shape and structure experience." The justification for her project rests on the principle that we have lost our self-consciousness about "the feminine in the landscape, but that does not mean we have ceased to experience it or act in such a way that our behavior apparently manifests such experience at its deepest level of motivation" (p. 149).

Moreover, her other principles, which combine feminist theory and Jungian psychology, insist that this
pastoral impulse is part of human development, particularly of males. Not only on the level of a collective unconscious but also on the more accessible level of their own past, males struggle to achieve freedom and autonomy from the helplessness and innocence of childhood—in which a mother-figure looms large, or in which there is the absence of one. At the same time they seek always to return to that maternal embrace, especially as they encounter the very real difficulties of everyday life. Their desires to return to the protection of a mother-figure are transferred to the land. Thwarted again by a reality that forces them to work and use the land, they transform their desires into artistic representations, in other words, codifying it "as part of the culture's shared dream" (p. 7).

To see how this aspect of male psychology is transformed, Kolodny's method is to examine the images of the land in various American documents, beginning with the earliest writings about colonization and ending in the 1970's. She locates in the early writings a discomfort, both about "raping the land" and about the kind of images used to depict the land. She recognizes in these images the implicit exercise of masculine power over the feminine—a feminine, moreover, that was being experienced as at once Mother and Virgin, with all the confusions possible between the two. In short . . . the new American continent had become the focus for both
continent had become the focus for both personalized and transpersonalized (or culturally shared) expressions of filial homage and erotic desire (p. 22).

She argues further that

possibly as a direct result of these uneasy images of violation, so precarious appeared the maintenance of pastoral possibilities that, barely a hundred years after colonization first began, its frailty had entered the nation's dream life—as it was, a century later, to structure its fiction (p. 22).

Kolodny illustrates the pastoral impulse in American life and letters, analyzing such writers as Freneau, deCrevecoeur, and Irving in the eighteenth century; the more self-conscious writers of the nineteenth century—particularly James Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms; and finally Faulkner and Fitzgerald of the twentieth century.

For example, in her chapter on nineteenth century writers she says that Cooper's Leatherstocking stories show how "Natty Bumpo can maintain the pastoral embrace that the other whites in these novels are so determined to escape or open to the daylight; in short, how he alone can enjoy the darkened forest recesses without threatening to become either destructive or intrusive" (p. 89). Since only Natty can achieve such an embrace, his "sexual tension and infantile regression" are strongly suggested.

To make Natty's choices acceptable, Cooper must make the other characters in the novel represent society as it
is bent on destruction of the wilderness. In a pattern Kolodny claims is typical of the American pastoral, what follows is punishment, "maternal retribution," in the form of natural causes such as fire, animals, storms, or in "enclosed and engulfing spaces" (p. 93). Natty's suffering "parallels the maternal response of nature," when he uses natural means, such as fire, to fight the aggression of other characters or when he mourns for dead animals or destruction of the landscape. Although Cooper's attempt to present a man who can "serve both as a spokesperson for civilization and as a protector of the natural world proved unworkable," Natty Bumpo, Kolodny argues, "remains, in many ways, an embodiment of the American Dream" (p. 115).

We are reminded of Leslie Fiedler's contention in Love and Death in the American Novel that American males are often at odds with society's expectation that they grow up. In his study, Fiedler claims that men desire to live outdoors and in the company of each other. The feminine is dichotomized, as it so often is, in terms of the symbols of Mother-Wife/Whore. Society represents the restraints imposed by mother, and the land offers the possibility of unrestrained fulfillment of desire—the whore. Kolodny complicates this relationship with her notions of the pastoral impulse—the desire to return to
the land in reality or metaphorically—as containing the idea of Mother/Whore in itself.

Yet—like Fiedler, Ziff, Marx, and the other cultural critics we examined in the first chapter as well as Kazin and the biographical critics—Kolodny's complication is no more than another binary opposition. All her critical work, in fact, is determined by binary oppositions, although her feminist agenda makes those binaries different or at least perceived differently. This agenda, in 1975—although not as explicit as current feminist agendas, including her own—is to ask males to examine their own desires and to allow women to understand their positions in the male conflict about women. Further, and in accordance with the decade in which she writes, Kolodny urges an awareness of ecology. She considers both her psychological and ecological concerns to be important and worries about the consequences of unexamined adherence to a way of life that perpetuates either or both.

Kolodny's version of Americanness is one below our level of awareness, but is in place, nonetheless, making her part of the critical tradition of understanding American literature as a particularly American manifestation of the human condition. Her version exists, she thinks, only because America has offered possibilities of freedom previously given up in other parts of the world. She differs from traditional Americanists in that
she exposes this version of Americanness not to celebrate it, but to understand it as male and as potentially destructive. Making us aware of it, she hopes will give us the chance to change it—on the metaphoric level as well as its manifestations in life. While that goal is unquestionably admirable and empowering, we also see the limitations. As we have seen in the other chapters, the pointing out of binary oppositions that serve as definitions of American-ness often substitute for examination and analysis; the critic is left with an argument which can only move toward conclusions by either maintaining the oppositions or collapsing the distinctions between them.

For example, in her chapter on the Leatherstocking saga, Kolodny points to the oppositions between civilization and wilderness, between Natty and society, and between sexual maturity and infantile regression and thus can only conclude that Cooper is unable to achieve his intention since, in her terms, it is impossible to collapse the oppositions or to make Natty speak for both sides. Once the stories of Natty Bumpo have been placed inside her critical agenda, whatever textual details might refute her binaries are ignored as she "proves" her case.

Thus, like the readings produced by Ziff, Kazin, and Kronick, Kolodny's readings are resisted by the very texts she purports to explain, and her feminist hermeneutics is
limited as a means of interpreting American literature. Even acknowledging her project as a feminist one of reading against the grain of these literary texts and the traditional criticism to expose male attitudes toward women, we are aware that the agenda has overpowered the texts, using its preconceived notions to manipulate the details of these texts. We must also be aware of her claims, in addition to the feminist ones, that the male impulse toward the pastoral is part of human development. Thus, she has commitments to two a priori principles, making her work manipulative and reductive on both counts.

Like Kolodny, Judith Fetterley, in The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (1978), assumes that some version of male Americanness is operating in the literary works she examines. She, too, notices that the versions are rooted in the male desire to exercise power over women and ultimately to escape from them or destroy them. Her critical framework combines Americanist principles with feminist ones, for example:

1. American literature is male; 2. "the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is . . . required to identify against herself"; 3. to be an American is to be male although America is considered to be female--but the "quintessential American experience is betrayal by women"
(this is Fetterley's version of Americanness); 4. "power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else"; 5. the "drama of power in American literature is often disguised"; 6. consciousness is a form of female power. That consciousness, Fetterley claims, derives from recognizing and "making palpable" the covert texts of American male writers (pp. xi-xvii).

Her selected texts— which reveal the "enactment of the drama of male power over women"— are "Rip Van Winkle," "I Want to Know Why," "The Birthmark," "A Rose for Emily," A Farewell to Arms, The Great Gatsby, The Bostonians, and An American Dream. To help us understand her method, I will focus on her chapter on Hawthorne's short story, "The Birthmark," to make palpable Fetterley's working methodology. In doing so, I will attempt a much more detailed analysis than I did with Kolodny, but I hope that some of what I say about Fetterley will be pertinent to my concerns about Kolodny, especially with regard to the imposition of her feminist agenda, her commitment to an interpretation pre-determined by binary oppositions, the problematic use of covert-text readings and the ways in which literary texts resist all three.

Fetterley's method is to read the overt text first to show the differences between it and the covert one and, thus, to teach women how to read with resistance to male paradigms, authorial or critical. The existence of a
covert text, however, depends on a hostile reading of the overt text; thus, neither necessarily reflects the intentions of the author, although both readings lay claim to discovering intention. She uses her hostile reaction as the basis for her "rearrangement" of the overt text so that it carries out its alleged designs on women and therefore deserves resistance.

In other words, her project appears to be a version of meaning and significance—authorial intention or the meaning in the text, on the one hand, and the text's relationship to extrinsic considerations or the meaning to women, on the other—but, instead, both the overt and covert readings are renderings of the "meaning to" women. For example, in her section on Hawthorne, Fetterley begins with the idea that this is a story of how to kill your wife with impunity; she gives a nod toward the possibility of reading the story as one of "misguided idealism," but insists that such a reading "ignores the significance of the form idealism takes in the story" (p. 22). Instead, "killing one's wife with impunity" is the "meaning to" women rather than the "meaning in" the text. She claims further that the significance of that significance is that women are asked to identify against themselves, to see all women as deficient and thus in need of transformation by men steeped in knowledge. Thus, she reads against the grain twice, finally substituting female paradigms for
male ones. However, since the validity of the significance depends on the validity of the meaning, and since her covert story doesn't arise legitimately out of the text's meaning, as she claims, there is no such significance, at least in her terms.

In this story, the form in which Aylmer's scientific goal works out is in his obsessive attempt to perfect his wife, and Fetterley insists that Georgiana's death is not accidental. We see, she claims, the working of "mechanisms whereby hatred can be disguised as love, neurosis can be disguised as science, murder can be disguised as idealization, and success can be disguised as failure." Thus, Hawthorne's use of the "metaphor of disguise serves as both warning and clue to a feminist reading" (p. 23). She further claims that such a story would not be likely to happen in reverse and that it "is a woman, and specifically woman as wife, who elicits the obsession with imperfection and the compulsion to achieve perfection, just as it is man, and specifically man as husband, who is thus obsessed and compelled" (p. 23).

In such a story, Fetterley sees the traditional, American hostility toward woman revealed in a kind of idealism. We see this work out in Aylmer's increasing revulsion for Georgiana's source of imperfection--her birthmark, which Fetterley sees as having implications for her whole female physical system. The birthmark becomes
"redolent with references to the particular nature of female sexuality." She argues further that what "repels Aylmer is Georgiana's sexuality; what is imperfect in her is the fact that she is female . . ." (p. 25). Georgiana is co-opted into a negative view of herself to the point that she repulses herself and comes to share in his obsession to be rid of the birthmark. She eventually sees death as preferable to life with a husband who shudders when he looks at her. Further, Fetterley claims that women readers are co-opted as well into negative views of themselves by identifying with Georgiana.

If Fetterley reads the overt story as intended, she must take into account Hawthorne's lack of sympathy with Aylmer and his project. Hawthorne is not merely indicting Aylmer for his misguided idealism but for his tampering with nature and for his failure to recognize the needs of the human heart. As with Hawthorne's other villains--Chillingworth, Brand, Hollingsworth, Pyncheon, and so on--Aylmer fails to be human. His intellectual concern obscures his understanding of his own and Georgiana's need for compassion and love. In the case of all the villains, their intellects isolate them, even alienate some, and they lose touch with humanity.

Aylmer, Hawthorne shows, victimizes Georgiana, who obviously feels she has no alternative. Implicitly, then, Hawthorne indict a society in which women have no
alternatives other than allowing obsessed husbands to tamper with their lives. The ending of "The Birthmark" leaves ambiguous Aylmer's understanding of the consequences of his actions, but the reader knows exactly where the author and narrator stand:

... had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present (p. 56).

Even in the first few paragraphs of the story, Hawthorne's narrator makes clear that the marriage of Aylmer and Georgiana "was attended with truly remarkable consequences and a deeply impressive moral" (p. 37).

If that is at least part of the meaning in Hawthorne's story there is also significance to women readers. Partly, that significance is Hawthorne's implicit disagreement with using women—or men, for that matter—as objects of intellectual pursuits. More to the point for modern women readers, however, are Fetterley's own concerns about women resisting male notions of them. A reader can recognize in Aylmer's obsession a frightening extreme of the paradigm of defining the identity of women in male terms and then transforming those women who do not measure up. Hawthorne would agree, I think, that such an extreme should be as abhorrent to men as to women, and all
should beware it. The resisting reader can thus recognize failures in Aylmer and in Georgiana, ones both self-imposed and societally imposed. While Georgiana's own identity is gradually lost to her recognition of Aylmer's shudder, implicit in the movement from identity to loss of identity is that she had an identity in the first place.

The reader, however, can see significance in her identity that Hawthorne might not have seen as significant, given his own attitudes and those of males of his time. Georgiana's identity has only to do with external beauty; her inner peace, in fact, comes from the knowledge that she is beautiful and accepted by the many men who have courted her. She comes so completely to identify with Aylmer's version of her as defective—as needing to be perfect, in fact, that she prefers death to the retention of the birthmark: "... whenever she dared to look into the mirror, there she beheld herself pale as white rose and with the crimson birthmark stamped upon her cheek. Not even Aylmer now hated it so much as she" (p. 48). She comes to see his desire for her perfection as an extension of his "pure and lofty" love for her.

Although Hawthorne suggests Georgiana's victimization, his narrator reports Aylmer's extolling of her nobility in self-sacrifice and does not counter it, nor do the details of the story allow us to see that
Hawthorne as author viewed her nobility as less than a desirable—and an inevitable, for "good" women—reaction to a situation beyond Georgianna's control. We, as resisting readers, then, expose Hawthorne's sympathy for Georgiana as a product of his own idealization of women, and his characterization of her as a noble victim we recognize as his failure to understand the implications of co-optation and noble sacrifice.

Thus, we have been able to read as feminists—exposing the author's lack of awareness of his sexist attitudes, laying bare the context in which a female character is co-opted, resisting the temptation to sympathize with that female character in a way which results in a female reader's co-optation, and understanding the power of the males in the story—yet we have been resisting readers without reducing or distorting the story Hawthorne wrote. In fact, our resistance is more powerful because we are able to avoid such tactics. We have also established a method which allows us to answer more adequately the important question that Fetterley initially asks: how are the form and content of American literary texts shaped by their attitudes toward women?

Nina Baym extends the work of Judith Fetterley by contending that the literature of America is apparently male because male critics make decisions about the canon;
she argues that not only are women readers omitted from American experiences, as Fetterly has argued, but women authors are omitted from them as well and thus are eliminated from the canon. In her article, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors" (1981), Baym's question is, simply: why are women authors excluded from the canon of American works? She posits three reasons, the first two of which are "simple bias" and the possibility that "women have not written the kind of that work we call excellent."

However, she pursues only the third reason: because of critical theories, we have a literature which is essentially male. "These theories may follow naturally from cultural realities pertinent to their own time, but they impose their concerns anachronistically, after the fact, on an earlier period" (p. 65).

Baym argues that American literary critics have assumed that American literature is unique, but that "what is American is no more than an idea, needing demonstration" (p. 66). Some works, then, seem more American than others, and the critic is "as busy excluding" as including. Despite the subjectivity inherent in such decisions, Baym thinks that critics often agree about the textual requirements for Americanness:

... America as a nation must be the ultimate subject of the work. The author must be writing about aspects of experience and character that are American only ... The author must be writing his
story specifically to display these aspects, to meditate on them, and to derive from them some generalizations and conclusions about 'the' American experience" (p. 67).

Next, she claims the critics (especially Trilling) have created a special version of Americanness—a "cultural essence"—located only in certain authors who are both a part of their culture and outside it. Their distance on it comes, in part, from their decision to take up writing as a career, and in their writing they critique their own culture, an example of what Trilling calls "a consensus criticism of the consensus." These authors are white, male, and usually of Anglo-Saxon descent; the women who were writing—and selling—books at the same time were also white, middle-class, and Anglo-Saxon. In order to exclude these women from the canon and to deny their Americanness—their cultural essence—Baym argues that the critics have assumed that women, because of their gender, were a "part of the consensus in a way that prevented them from partaking in the criticism" (p. 69).

She believes further that these women and their works . . . [were] an impediment and obstacle, that which the essential American literature had to criticize as its chief task . . . [Thus,] personally beset in a way that epitomizes the tensions of our culture, the male author produces his melodramatic testimony to our culture's essence . . . (pp. 65-66).

A group of Americanists found this essential American-ness in nonrealistic or romantic fiction, where they
identified a predominant myth of America, the individual vs. society. Concerned that this myth is outside the reach of women, Baym thinks that the problem is "not to be located in the protagonist or his gender per se; the problem is with the other participants in the story—the entrapping society and the promising landscape." Moving into the territory of Kolodny, Baym further contends that:

... both of these are depicted in unmistakably feminine terms, and this gives a sexual character to the protagonist's story which does, indeed limit its applicability to women. And this sexual definition has melodramatic, misogynist implications. In these stories, the encroaching, constricting, destroying society is represented with particular urgency in the figure of one or more women ... It is not likely that women will write books in which women play this part; and it is by no means the case that most novels by American men reproduce such a scheme ... In fact, many books by women ... project a version of the particular myth we are speaking of but cast the main character as a woman. When a woman takes the central role, it follows naturally that the socializer and domesticator will be a man. This is the situation in The Scarlet Letter ... [But these women] are said to be untrue to the imperatives of their gender ... Instead of being read as a woman's version of the myth, such novels are read as stories of the frustration of female nature ... and ... we do not find them in the canon ... Also the role of the beckoning wilderness, the attractive landscape, is given a deeply feminine quality ... women ... are even less likely to cast themselves as virgin land ... (pp. 72-73).

Baym also contends that the notion of the American writer as hero excludes women absolutely: "Fundamentally, the idea that the artist is writing a story of this essential American kind is engaging in a task very much
like the one performed by his mythic hero . . . [t]he implicit union of creator and protagonist . . . " (p. 76).

Ending with Harold Bloom's idea that "to author" is "to father," she acknowledges the absurdity implicit in American criticism that if " . . . literature is the attempt to father oneself . . . then every act of writing by a woman is . . . bound to fail . . . Ironically, just at the time that feminist critics are discovering more and more important women, the critical theorists have seized upon a theory that allows women less and less presence. This observation points up just how significantly the critic is engaged in the act of creating literature" (p. 78).

I, of course, agree with Baym's argument that the critics have imposed the notion of Americanness on American literature and that the critical version of Americanness is male, but, despite the powers inherent in her inquiry, I'll show, for one thing, that she eventually is also guilty of imposing a version of American-ness on American literature. Furthermore, she slips her own unexamined assumptions into her argument, undercutting her power. She also fails to catch the subtle implications of her claims; for example, she argues that critics agree America must be the subject of canonized works, but she does not acknowledge that the critics often make the claim that any work written by an American is about America. In
fact, what we have seen in the previous three chapters is that, indeed, these paradigms are flexible enough to fit any work and to make the literary work flexible enough to fit the paradigms. For example, we have so far seen The Scarlet Letter serve as exemplar for the particular binaries of American-ness of the cultural critics and for those opposing selves of the biographical and psychological critics. Even in the deconstructed version of The Scarlet Letter, underlying it all was a version of American-ness, an author vainly searching for originality in a deconstructed world. Because these critics work in an a priori fashion, the work fits into their interpretive scheme; thus, since their a priori notions are their particular versions of Americanness, the text will reveal that version. In R.W.B. Lewis's work, The American Adam, we discovered that he had to resort to subtextual claims in order to make his notion of Adamic innocence paradigmatic. He does this, interestingly, after he has already admitted that the Adamic image does not occur in all texts of American literature and that when it does appear, it often does so only in the final work of an author.

The recognition of the power and flexibility of the Americanist paradigm makes Baym's argument about the exclusion of women from the canon even more damning of these male critics than she realizes. Since the
flexibility would easily allow women's texts to be considered "American" and thus be canonized, the fact that the male critics have not even bothered to make them fit points less to the male-bias of the paradigm of American-ness than to the male-bias of Americanist criticism as a whole.

The next part of Baym's argument emphasizes the insidious exclusion of women from the canon. After claiming that critics exclude work that is not American enough, she focuses on the more narrow interests of Lionel Trilling and argues that American-ness in American literature is only a male critique of the culture. Women are excluded by virtue of being too strongly entrenched in it. Thus, following Baym's thinking, women move from not being American enough to being too American. Again, Baym fails to follow the implications of her argument: male critics have found ways—even inconsistent ones—to continue to exclude women from the canon.

She fails, too, to see that she posits one version of Americanness for another and thus falls victim to her arguments against the male critical community. Decrying the particular binary oppositions of Americanists—without explicitly recognizing the reductiveness of such oppositions in general—she finally chooses her own binary with which to do battle: males vs. females. For instance, identifying the predominant critical myth as the
peculiarly American fantasy that the individual, freed from the constraints of society, can find freedom, Baym asks whether the myth is "outside women's reach, rather than pursuing her earlier questioning of such paradigms as critical impositions. She deplores the misogyny implicit in the myth because both "entrappeling society" and the "promising landscape" are "depicted in unmistakably feminine terms," but then fails to notice her own unexamined assumptions as she explores the oppositions between male and female novelists and between male critics and female writers (p. 72).

Referring to Annette Kolodny's work, Baym says, "Whether one accepts all the Freudian or Jungian implications of [Kolodny's] argument, one cannot deny the way in which heroes of American myth turn to nature as sweetheart and nurturer" (p. 75). Women writers who conform to the myth are denied access to the canon because male critics believe only males can write about this kind of heroic American experience, and those who fail to conform to the myth are considered to be writing "minor or trivial literature." Tying this idea to the aims of criticism outside American literature, Baym argues that by pursuing American-ness to the extreme, Americanists have "arrived at a place where American-ness has vanished into the depths of what is alleged to be the universal male psyche," from which women are excluded absolutely. Baym's
thus emphasizes further the inconsistency of the criticism which excludes women: it has moved from saying that women fail to be American enough, then are too American, and then fail to be male. Thus, Baym shows that American-ness is only maleness, after all, whatever version one wants to posit or whatever method one wants to use to prove it. Although she says that their reasons for excluding women don’t hold up because women have written works with female protagonists, Baym’s adherence to the myth weakens her important work.

An earlier work of Nina Baym, Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870 (1978), is the base on which rests the article we have just examined, and it bears a short discussion because it is also opens the door for the work of Jane Tompkins. In this text, Baym carefully explores the women writers whose works were extremely popular in the nineteenth century, filling the gap in the literary history of America. At the same time she discovers that these books were all of a kind; all of them, in other words,

tell, with variations, a single tale. In essence, it is the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her way in the world . . . her story exemplifies the difficult but successful negotiation of the undifferentiated child through the trials of adolescence into the individuation of sound adulthood. The happy marriages with which most—though not all—of this fiction concludes are symbols of successful accomplishment of the required task and resolutions of the basic problems raised in the
story, which is in the most primitive terms the story of the formation and assertion of a feminine ego (p. 11-12).

For Baym, not only is the examination of such texts a feminist activity, but also the texts "represent . . . a moderate, or limited, or pragmatic feminism, which is not in the least covert, but quite obvious, needing only to be reassessed in mid-nineteenth-century terms . . . " (p. 18). This feminism, thus, must be examined in light of its underlying assumptions, for example, that individual experience was more important than that of classes of groups within society, that sexuality could be spiritualized, and that women were, individually and collectively, "disadvantaged compared to men." Such a state, however, resulted in means and methods by which to transcend it--to reform it only on a personal level by taking herself seriously and self-developing and thus creating space for happy domesticity. "Politics and professions . . . were part of the exploitive structure" and thus to be avoided, although the authors of woman's fiction did not overtly argue with more radical feminists of their time nor with working women, although, interesting enough, these authors wrote because they needed money themselves. They viewed themselves as practical and functional rather than artistic.

Although Baym admits that these works may not meet academic standards of excellence, for example, "aesthetic,
intellectual, and moral complexity and artistry," she recognizes that such standards "have inevitably had a bias in favor of things male," and that she would like "at least to begin to correct such a bias by taking their content seriously. And it is time, perhaps—though this task lies outside my scope here—to reexamine the ground upon which certain hallowed American classics have been called great" (pp. 14-15).

Jane Tompkins takes up this challenge in her book, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860 (1985), and argues for the recovery of previously ignored, but contemporaneously popular works. Only two of her chapters have specifically feminist agendas, however, her theoretical principles and her practical criticism have implications, generally, for all women and, specifically, for women as writers. Her chapter on Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, extends specifically the work of Nina Baym and Judith Fetterley. Tompkins agrees that the American canon is male and that male critics are its guardians. She would argue, too, that these male critics determine the criteria by which canonized books are judged and then use the accepted, canonized books as arbiters for any books which follow. The value of a text, thus, is imposed by the critical community. Further, if the critical community changes its values, the canon changes.
Using Hawthorne as an example, Tompkins says that the "intrinsic" merit of his works was real because his work became the

touchstone by which literary excellence could be defined . . . To put it another way, the fact that an author's reputation depends upon the context within which his or her work is read does not empty the work of value; it is the context--which eventually includes the work itself--that creates the value its readers 'discover' there (p. 33).

Thus, the argument that durability measures the quality of a literary work breaks down, Tompkins claims, when we realize that what

endures is the literary and cultural tradition that believes in the idea of a classic, and that perpetuates that belief from day to day and from year to year by reading and rereading, publishing and republishing, teaching and recommending for teaching, and writing books and articles about a small group of works whose 'durability' is thereby assured (pp. 36-37).

In analyzing a text, Tompkins asks, not what do these text mean, but what were these texts trying to do? Answering her question requires eliminating such canonical evaluative criteria as verisimilitude, developed and delineated characters, powerful plots, "distinguished prose style," and "a concern with the unities and economies of formal construction" (p. xii). She claims that each of the texts she examines is "engaged in solving a problem or a set of problems specific to the time in which it was written" (p. 38).
Tompkins, then, agrees implicitly with Baym's claims about the power of the critical community, but Tompkins is not as interested as Baym is in gathering some literary women into the canonical fold as in changing our ways of judging texts. Of course, both Baym and Tompkins deplore the absence of women from the kind of American experience that is deemed to be the worthy subject of narrative. Baym, as we discovered, believes that women have been excluded from the canon because, in the distorted view of male critics, they represent the cultural status quo in such a way that they are incapable of critiquing it. Tompkins, however, argues that the immense contemporary popularity of women writers was due to their effort "to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view," in other words, to change the evils of society. Their work is thus complex, ambitious, and resourceful, Tompkins contends, and offers "a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville" (p. 124).

Tompkins examines Harriet Beecher Stowe's text, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

[It is] . . . the most important book of the century . . . [the] first American novel to sell over a million copies . . . it also belongs to a genre, the sentimental novel, whose chief characteristic is that it is written by, for, and about women . . . Out of the ideological materials at their disposal, the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in
the culture, and of these efforts Uncle Tom's Cabin is the most dazzling exemplar . . . a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time (p. 125).

Tompkins scrutinizes the death of Little Eva because it is the part of the text most often dismissed as Victorian sentimentalism. Critics have long argued that such emotion in general cannot serve as motivation to change a system and that Eva's death in particular does not change the system of slavery or any of the characters in the book. Tompkins's argument, however, is that Stowe understood and made use of her reader's acceptance of the Christian belief that "dying is the supreme form of heroism . . . [thus, Eva's] death is the equivalent not of defeat but of victory; it brings an access of power, not a loss of it . . . [paradoxically] it is life" (p. 127).

Under such a theory of power, the good and meek die to save the evil and corrupt; thus, change comes to the individual heart, and society changes from the inside out. Women believed that the concept of slavery could not be eliminated by enacting laws if the hearts of those who supported it did not reflect the moral change that comes from Christian love. Thus, to judge Stowe's didactic enterprise against the nineteenth century fiction of, say, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, is to do an injustice to Stowe's "typological narrative," in which the development
of characters and a strong plot movement would detract from her design.

Now, to buy Tompkins' argument about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and about nineteenth century American literature in general, we must first accept the principles which underpin her desire to expose institutional criticism's insistence on tautological thinking: a literary work is good because the critics say it is good; then other texts are judged by the critical standards of the first text, thus, slowly forming the canon of accepted works. She insists that complexity, diversity, and versimilitude are qualities demanded by critics in order for a text to be canonized. But she is asking why institutional critics should make these judgments when, clearly, the "reading public" has made others.

There are at least three problematic principles operating: one, that no value inheres in a text but is imposed upon it by the reigning critical community; two, that it follows logically, then, to substitute the values of the reading public for the values of the critics; and, three, that those values of the readers are, in fact, ones designed by the author and do inhere in the texts. These three principles contradict each other and allow Tompkins to manipulate the texts, the readers, and the critics in whatever ways necessary to advance her argument. If critical values are imposed, why aren't reader values
imposed? or if an author has designs which can be discerned in popular texts, why can't canonical authors' designs be discerned? If canonical texts do have discernible designs, then Tompkins is implying that the their designs have been replaced/camouflaged by critical values. If so, following her thinking, we might do well to abandon critical values and re-read and re-evaluate all texts.

However, Tompkins wants to recreate a contemporary, cultural context—and thus a justification—for only certain, critically unpopular, non-canonized works. She doesn't ask herself the hard questions which are implied by her arguments, and those questions don't end with the ones I have asked so far. For example, Tompkin's critical work is based in reader-response theory—that a text changes as the audience and its cultural context change. Thus, even if we can justify the popularity of certain texts at the time they were published, we can't continue, based on her own arguments, to justify keeping them for those reasons if our cultural context is different. Even if we want to find other reasons for keeping them—say, to remember their role in our history—we encounter problems. Furthermore, if we interpret out of our own cultural context and thus are continually rewriting the text, how can we even appreciate *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as it was appreciated in the nineteenth century?
Furthermore, Tompkins, like our other critics, is caught in the paradigms of the Americanists, whose insistence on an institutional hermeneutics based in issues of Americanness discovered in canonical texts forces her into complicated and distorted arguments to try to get outside their influence. She never escapes them, however, and, in fact, ends up finding Americans that she claims are more American than their Americans because hers were more popular.

The implications of Tompkins's project for feminist critical practice and theory are as multiple as the questions I ask above. To examine only a few, however, I think that in order to justify reading and teaching Uncle Tom's Cabin and similarly ignored texts of the nineteenth century, she sets up false and/or weak arguments. These weak arguments also intend to denigrate already canonized works in false ways. If she in fact believes that the power of the culture operating at any moment makes us unable to get completely outside it and if she believes in the hermeneutic power of historicizing all texts, her argument need not be elaborate or tricky. To argue falsely for the inclusion of the work of women undermines feminist theory and practice far more than it advances it or convinces non-feminists to attend to it.

Instead, recognizing the power of her own feminist agenda, she—and then we, following her important example—
can insist on teaching such texts as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and writing about them, not to replace all previously studied American texts but to enrich our study with the addition of the hitherto ignored female side of the American picture. Such a perspective does not substitute female paradigms for male ones or popular paradigms for literary ones, which keep us always in binarily opposing camps and which force feminists to take on the methods they seek to re-envision and revise.

I want now to take the questions and methods of Kolodny, Fetterley, Baym, and Tompkins to *The Scarlet Letter* to understand further the powers and limits of their frameworks. The forest scene provides a focus for an evaluation of the questions and methods of our four feminist critics, and an examination of the ways their frameworks relate to each other.

In this section of the text, Hester Prynne has decided to waylay Arthur Dimmesdale on one of his forest walks to warn him about Chillingworth, not that, the narrator assures us, Hester or Arthur would have been suspected had she gone to his study to talk to him:

But, partly that she dreaded the secret or undisguised interference of old Roger Chillingworth, and partly that her conscious heart imputed suspicions where none could have been felt, and partly that both the minister and she would need the
whole wide world to breathe in, while they walked together,—for all these reasons Hester never thought of meeting him in any narrower privacy than beneath the open sky (p. 182).

Annette Kolodny (and to some extent Nina Baym) would insist that Hester chooses the forest because she associates the natural setting with a freedom and openness unavailable in Boston or in the even narrower confines of Arthur's study. However, the text complicates Kolodny's assumption because we are told that as Hester and Pearl enter the forest to wait for him, Hester imagines it to be like "the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering," and the bleakness of the day and of the landscape is broken only by brief moments of sunshine through the dense trees. As they walk, Pearl insists that Hester tell her about the devil who haunts the forest; Hester says, "Once in my life I met the Black Man . . . This scarlet letter is his mark" (p. 185). The landscape has thus changed from Hester's imagined place of freedom to one that is bleak and confined and haunted by the devil. The spot where they wait for the minister is both inviting in its seclusion and suggestive of confinement, mystery, and evil. Even the noise of the brook is melancholy.

Hester's first glimpse of Arthur reveals his debilitated state, and the narrator notes that his feebleness and "nervous despondency," are more apparent
"in this intense seclusion of the forest, which of itself would have been a heavy trial to the spirits" (p. 188). Since the landscape reflects the misery of Hester and Arthur as they talk in the forest, the text reveals a reversal of Kolodny's assertion that American authors view America as the landscape of freedom and Europe as a landscape of restriction. In fact, Hester pleads with Arthur to return to Europe to escape Chillingworth and the "iron men," the Puritans. "Begin all anew," she tells him, by leaving America.

Hester's own sense of freedom, her position outside society, allows her to contemplate escape; she has stayed in Boston because of Arthur. As the narrator suggests, "... as regarded Hester Prynne, the whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation for this very hour" (p. 200). Such an escape is possible for Arthur Dimmesdale, however, only if Hester accompanies him, and for a moment he is exhilarated by the possibility of relief from his burden of guilt. In that moment of freedom, Hester removes the scarlet A and throws it away; her relief at the change is like Arthur's. In sympathy, the landscape changes with the sudden appearance of the sun, illuminating the previously dark trees and shadows of the forest. Thus, we see that any one view of the landscape is to simplistic to adequately describe how
Hawthorne uses it; any imposition of pastoral patterns on the text is also problematic.

Pearl, it is suggested by the narrator, is part of the nature that seems outside Hester and Arthur, and, covered with flowers, she slowly returns to her mother and the minister. As Pearl crosses the brook, the minister says to Hester, "'I have this strange fancy . . . that this brook is the boundary between two worlds, and that thou canst never meet thy Pearl again’" (p. 208). Pearl's reluctance to join them, they soon discover, is because of the disappearance of the A from Hester's dress. At Arthur's insistence she puts it back on, and with "a sense of inevitable doom upon her," Hester reaches out to Pearl. She also recaptures her hair under the cap she has removed, "and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her" (p. 211). When the minister kisses Pearl, she rushes to the brook to wash it off and remains apart from them as they make their final plans.

As Dimmesdale returns to town, he undergoes a series of internal changes. At first the excitement of his decision makes him view everything as changed and sustains him physically. But soon he begins to have "wicked" yearnings and thoughts, and he begins to fear that he is lost: "Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself, with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin. And the
infectious poison of that sin had been thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system" (p. 222).

Thus, the landscape plays an important and complex part in this section of The Scarlet Letter. For one, the narrator suggests that it mirrors the moods of Hester and Arthur, in a kind of sympathy with them. In the forest, then, Arthur changes from a downcast, enfeebled man to one who can walk without fatigue and, momentarily at least, without mental anguish, but, as he nears the town, he struggles to keep submerged that communal self—his super-ego, if you will—which is so steeped in guilt. In contrast, the new, happier self becomes reassociated with sin. The forest, which has offered freedom from his guilt, changes in his mind to a place where evil lurks. Even the path from the forest seems to him "wilder, more uncouth with its rude natural obstacles, and less trodden by the foot of man, than he remembered it on his outward journey" (p. 216).

In a pattern Kolodny and Baym would claim is typical of American fiction, Hester becomes aligned with that landscape of freedom and fulfillment of desire which is also dangerous and potentially destructive. This scene, for Kolodny, would reveal not only this conflict in understanding the American landscape—at once it is inviting and dangerous—but also would reveal the conflict of desire in American males. Arthur Dimmesdale views
Hester Prynne as his savior/mother/nurturer at the same time he views her as sexually desirable at the same time he recognizes both desires as forbidden to him as a Puritan minister.

Kolodny would also claim that the conflict within Hawthorne would be revealed, and as author, either consciously or sub-consciously, he would try to reconcile his own conflicts with the land and with females by writing this story. Having been brought up by and with women for the most part (his mother, two sisters, and aunt), he often yearned to go to Maine to stay with his uncle, where he roamed the land freely and hunted and fished. Painfully shy and reclusive at times, Nathaniel Hawthorne avoided most women and voyeuristically participated in America life, watching and recording the events of others.

However, if Hester is aligned with the land in Hawthorne’s presentation of her, then her various reactions to and reflections of nature would have to be ignored. As far as Dimmesdale is concerned, he does not so much associate Hester with evil/desire in the forest as he associates it with his own evil. The desire and love between Hester and Arthur have, by this time in the text, been replaced in Dimmesdale with his own misery at having sinned and lived hypocritically ever since. Hawthorne himself may, of course, have had psychological conflicts
in his unconscious, collective or otherwise, about the land and females, but if so, his struggles are not available to us in the text or sub-text of *The Scarlet Letter*, where he presents us with various responses to nature; for example, the responses to the forest vary from the Puritan's simplistic rendering of the forest to Hester's sense of gloom to Pearl's sense of freedom in the woods.

Baym, however, argues that this forest scene is not typical of canonized American fiction, for it reveals even more emphatically than the rest of the text that Hester Prynne is outside the society which is represented so powerfully by Arthur Dimmesdale. She thus takes a role more male-like and he one more like that of women. As Baym says, "When a woman takes the central role, it follows naturally that the socializer and domesticator will be a man. This is the situation in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester is beset by the male reigning oligarchy and by Dimmesdale, who passively tempts her and is responsible for fathering her child. Thereafter, Hester (as the myth requires) elects celibacy" (p. 74).

Baym claims that male critics want to subsume the role of Hester to that of Arthur, making him the protagonist and thus forcing *The Scarlet Letter* to fit their paradigms of American-ness. Baym claims that critics such as Leslie Fielder would insist that Hawthorne
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is authoring himself, writing out his own "melodramas of beset manhood" by creating Arthur Dimmesdale, a protagonist much like himself, tempted and taunted by women, Hawthorne's own versions of which would be the "damned mob of scribbling women." Baym finally concludes, by using Leslie Fiedler's critical work on The Scarlet Letter, that the "melodrama here is not Hawthorne's but Fiedler's--the American critic's melodrama of beset manhood" (p. 74).

Baym admits, however, in another text, The Scarlet Letter: A Reading, that "'Hawthorne in the customhouse' is interpretable, symbolically, as a representation of the situation of the artist in America." She says further that Hawthorne suggests that the democratic and commercial American nation has found no place for the artist, has indeed excluded the artist from its roll call of legitimate citizens . . . 'The Custom House' . . . becomes a passionate defense of the imagination and creativity in a country that has no use for them (pp. 105-06).

There is a connection, Baym claims, between Hawthorne-in-the-Custom House and Hester Prynne; he is in "conflict with the Puritans," and the upper-story of the Custom House is "analogous to the forest, where there is an escape from human law" (p. 104). Baym concludes her book on The Scarlet Letter by saying that "Artists serve the world, and the democratic cause, after all, by declaring their independence from majority rule" (p. 107). She sounds very much like those critics she, in the article we
have examined, felt had imposed a false notion of American-
ness—that writers/artists in America were conducting
"consensus criticism of the consensus."

Judith Fetterley's reading of the famous forest-scene
might go something like the following: the overt text,
although ostensibly about the symbolic reconsummation of
the love between Hester and Arthur—one which transcends
the constraints against such love by their society and
religion, is really about the myth of romantic love. Love
stories, she claims, "are perhaps the ultimate form of
disguise and deception" (p. 47). Arthur Dimmesdale's
needs set the agenda for the meeting; it is for him that
she would leave Boston—or stay; it is through his eyes
that she views herself. When she reveals Chillingworth's
identity to him, he is angry and hurt, but with no thought
to the suffering she has faced for seven years: "'Woman,
woman,,'" Dimmesdale cries, "'thou art accountable for
this. I cannot forgive thee!'" (p. 194). His own
suffering, he feels, has been greater because of the
pretense he lives with and because she has allowed him to
be victimized by Chillingworth. He dares to chastise her
about Chillingworth when he has not taken responsibility
as the father of Pearl; evidently absent from his mind is
the day she stood on the scaffold alone and faced the
Puritan wrath.
This story of thwarted romantic love is like those we are accustomed to reading, and women readers have been taught to respond to Arthur's pain as Hester does. We have been taught as well that it is more important for him to forgive her than for him to ask for her forgiveness or to step out of his solipsism long enough even to recognize her pain. Instead, he sees her situation as somehow easier than his: "'Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!'" (p. 192).

Hester willing admits her responsibility:

Hester Prynne was now fully sensible of the deep injury for which she was responsible to this unhappy man, in permitting him to lie for so many years, or, indeed for a single moment, at the mercy of one whose purposes could not be other than malevolent. . . . Such was the ruin to which she had brought the man, once—nay, why should we not speak it?—still so passionately loved!" (p. 193).

As readers we are asked to admit her responsibility as well, to accept her co-optation by the myth of romantic love that she owes him this loyalty which he does not return. As women readers, we, too, are co-opted; we believe that we owe similar allegiance to males, who owe us nothing. On the overt level the story professes the beauty of reconciliation between these two characters, but the covert story reveals a profound hostility toward women, not only by this character Dimmesdale but also by his creator, Nathaniel Hawthorne.
This story is not about Hester Prynne, after all; she has been the vehicle for the focus on the male. Her character is even expendable for a large section of the book, when we are asked to sympathize with Dimmesdale in his solopsistic pain. His death we are to see as heroic, having finally admitted his guilt on the scaffold. The reaction of the crowd who hears him is mainly disbelief, and Hester at the end is still the guilty one and Arthur the sympathetic one. We must as well read the covert story of her strength. Feminists have championed Hester Prynne as the first—perhaps only—strong, viable female character in nineteenth century American literature.

Instead, we must view her strength as that expected of all women in order that men may wallow in their ambition and pride. Neither her strength nor her intellectual freedom make her admirable to Hawthorne. He emphasizes the lawlessness of her mind as unfeminine and somehow unappealing. Only in the forest, her cap off and her hair loose, is she a real woman, and real women help men—always. Her strength is not her own, in other words; it is for him.

However, as a Fetterley-feminist, I would have to ignore the text as it presents not only the plight of a woman in a Puritan community but also the plight of a minister in that community—a minister so imbued with the ideas of his religion that he literally destroys himself.
because of a lapse in personal control. I would also have to ignore the far-ranging understanding of Hawthorne of the workings of guilt on the mind—an understanding in advance of the study of psychology. If I were to accuse and condemn anyone for the position of Hester Prynne, I would have to turn to the Puritans—especially the leaders. Dimmesdale does not hate women; instead, because of the communal and religious rules under which he lives, he hates himself. Thus, I would be accusing and condemning the Puritans for Dimmesdale's struggles, too.

In a Fetterley-reading, I would not be able to talk about how moved I am by the scene in the forest, even though I wish, as a resisting female reader, that Arthur Dimmesdale were stronger and that Hester Prynne did not have to bear the responsibility for herself and for him—and Pearl as well. As a reader who both responds to the text and reads with a feminist perspective, I would see that the relationship of Hester and Arthur is "romantic," but that it is one we shouldn't wish to emulate. My commitment to the text would also allow me to see that in the world of the text, I am not to make harsh judgments about Arthur; I am to feel his pain just as I am to feel Hester's when she stands on the scaffold and when she walks through the town as an outcast and when she drops to her knees in front of Dimmesdale in the forest to tell him that he cannot condemn her.
Despite Hawthorne's progressive thinking for his time—in terms of human psychology, the speculations of a woman, the impositions of religion, the power of the individual—a feminist/textual perspective allows me to see his limits. Although he can allow his character, Hester Prynne, to have incredible strength, intelligence, perseverance, kindness, and self-control, he cannot get outside of himself and his society enough to let her be a spokeswoman for other women. He must as well eventually insist that these characteristics do not reflect enough of a sense of beauty and must place her in the forest with Dimmesdale, where she can reveal her hidden physical beauty. Such awareness, however, does not destroy the power of this text, yet that power is mitigated, historically, and enriched by a feminist perspective.

Using Hawthorne's text as my test-case would no doubt underline for Tompkins the continuing power and influence of canonical works. Hawthorne's literary reputation, she would insist, is entirely "a political matter" (p. 4). She claims that

Until 1826 Hawthorne's tales not only seemed but were completely ordinary because the conditions necessary to their being perceived in any other way had not yet come into being . . . circumstances not only brought Hawthorne's tales to the attention of the critics; they also shaped critics' reactions to the tales themselves (p. 8).

For example, one link in that chain of circumstances was the first critical notice "of any length" about Twice-told
Tales, which was written by the editor of the Salem Gazette, a man "indebted to Hawthorne." Tompkins makes the strong claims that "it is never the case that a work stands or falls 'on its own merits' since the merits--or demerits--that the reader perceives will always be a function of the situation in which he or she reads" (pp. 8-9).

The Scarlet Letter, which has been, as Tompkins claims, "a great novel in 1850, in 1876, in 1904, in 1942, and in 1966," has been so each time "for different reasons:

The novel Hawthorne produced in 1850 had a specificity and a force within its own context that a different work would not have had. But as the context changed, so did the work embedded in it. Yet that very description of The Scarlet Letter as a text that invited constant redefinition might be put forward, finally as the one true basis on which to found its claim to immortality. For the hallmark of the classic work is precisely that it rewards the scrutiny of successive generations of readers, speaking with equal power to people of various persuasions . . . But . . . the readings thus produced are not mere approximations of an ungraspable, transhistorical entity, but a series of completions, wholly adequate to the text which each interpretive framework makes available . . . the text . . . is not durable at all. What endures is the literary and cultural tradition that believes in the idea of the classic and perpetuates that belief . . . (pp. 34-36).

With such critical notions determining her reading, Tompkins cannot fail to make The Scarlet Letter what she wants it to be. She assumes that she must rid the academic world of such texts in order to make room for the
neglected literature of the nineteenth century. At the same time that she claims that each interpretive community imposes meaning and value on literary texts, she argues for the validity of her position over those of other interpretive communities. She sets herself in opposition to these critical communities, attempting to undo their conclusions before they try to refute her, yet in the very act of doing so, she undoes her own conclusions.

These four feminist critics, although each with her own specific agenda, have read against the traditional grain. Their agendas sometimes overlap: Kolodny and Baym pay attention to the images of the landscape as they reflect attitudes about women; Baym's agenda also extends to an examination of the assumptions of male critics, which make it necessary that women are aware of the attitudes toward them perpetuated by the texts selected for teaching and critical work. She thus sees the work of Kolodny and Fetterley as essential to our awareness of the power of male critics and the male writers they choose to canonize. Kolodny and Fetterley, in other essays, agree with Baym's argument about the canon, but focus, instead, in their books on reading against the grain of interpretive strategies invited by texts written by male writers. Tompkins, of course, has an agenda which denies
that this invitation could even be received by modern readers. The invitation they get asks them to view such works as The Scarlet Letter as classic, but the text they revere and recanonize is very different from the one revered in 1850. Always, the context of the text determines the reading, but even if the context which made the text classic has passed, the critics and readers keep alive its privileged status in the academy.

The brief readings I have offered in refutation of the four feminist critics seek to avoid the traps we found in their frameworks—traps such as the limitations of feminist agendas which are influenced by the traditional paradigms of American-ness, the too narrow adherence to particular feminist principles, the failure to set up a method which allows a critic to answer her question (as is in the work of Kolodny, Fetterley, and Tompkins), or the failure to execute an appropriate method (as in the case of Baym). The powers that come from reading against the grain are such that the academy had been forced to examine its reverence for texts written by white males and its adherence to the critical agendas of white males. In response some members of the academy have merely entrenched into their canons and critical paradigms more completely, but others have begun to teach and write about different—sometimes female—authors and critics. And there are many texts which, after feminist critics have
read them against the grain, will never be viewed as they were before the readings. Some members of the academy have complained loudly that the aesthetic quality of such texts has been irreparably damaged, and the feminists have answered, just as loudly, "Good!"

Thus, we can admit to the power of ideological awareness that feminist criticism has brought to the academy. We can also see the respect (although sometimes grudgingly offered) and better conditions for women in the academy as a consequence of the persistence and politics of feminist critics. The theoretical and critical purposes that are engendered by the feminist ideology and the critical questions that grow from those purposes also have immense power. Yet, that power remains un plumbed, and, I want to argue, because it is unplumbed, it mitigates the power of the ideology and its consequences in the academy. Feminist theorists and critics of American literature have failed—like the cultural, biographical, and historical/deconstructionist critics—to take themselves seriously enough as scholars and teachers to set up methods worthy of their ideology, their questions, and the texts they study and teach. Thus, they remained trapped in (at least) two ways: one, they substitute their versions of American-ness for older versions of it, never seeing its immense limitations; and, two, they are still victims of the attitudes of disdain
about American literature which produced the institutional criticism of American-ness in the first place. Neither feminist critics nor any other kind of critics need to continue to adhere to such limiting beliefs. Neither do they need to fear the power of the texts which brought them to study literature in the first place. Finally, neither do they need avoid, any longer, the responsibility they have as scholars and teachers of American literature.

We move now to the evaluate the powers and limits of one form of genre criticism of American literature: the study of realism. The critical text on which we focus examines traditional theories of realism in light of recent linguistic and narratological theories.
NOTES


New Feminist Criticism, 1985). All further references to this work appear in the text.


7 Another of Annette Kolodny's essays, "A Map for Rereading" (Showalter, ed., The New Feminist Criticism,) supports Baym's argument and looks forward to Jane Tompkins. Like Baym, Kolodny examines some of Harold Bloom's tenets, most specifically his claims about intertextuality: as readers, our knowledge of all literature, of specific pieces of literature, and of authors influences our reading of any literary work. Directly refuting the New Critics, Bloom insists we interpret any work only through our experience with other works and that each critical work, like each new literary work, reenvisions earlier work--corrects its misprisions. Kolodny argues that women are left out of this experiential context and that, while women readers learn how to read the canonized texts of males, male readers have not been able to read women's texts and thus have dismissed them or, worse, intentionally excluded them from the canon because of their subject-matter and their direct appeals to women. Kolodny's own correction, then, of
Bloom and other male critics is to challenge them to experience women's texts, learn to read them, re-envision the literary context from Homer on, and thus re-envision the canon.


CHAPTER V

American-ness as "Shaping Cause": The Concept of Genre

The previous four chapters have revealed the pervasive influence of the concept of American-ness in its various forms and manifestations. In all cases, American literature has served as exemplar of the critics'/theorists' particularized versions of the concept; these critics thus postulate a body of works which are unified by their intention to define American-ness or by their sometimes unacknowledged role in revealing American-ness. Such a definition, gleaned supposedly from careful, close examination of the pages of many American literary texts, not only homogenizes the texts but also makes them uniquely American.

This chapter is also concerned with the American-ness and unique-ness of American literature, this time in the study of realism. Although admittedly not unique to American literature, the realism under our scrutiny has been carefully differentiated from the realism associated with any other national literature. Our critical text in this chapter is Janet Holmgren McKay's *Narration and Discourse in American Realistic Fiction* (1982). I selected her because she claims to complicate our
understanding of American realism by "accounting" for the narrative and discursive techniques of three "seminal" realists—James, Howells, and Twain—using recent linguistic and narratological theories and traditional considerations of realism. She argues that the three writers considered in this study represent the realistic tradition in American fiction, and their conception of realism rested as much on the presentation as on the content of their stories. . . [they subscribe to the notion of the] 'novel [as] a thing—not the authors's self-expression so much as it is an object in its own right; that this kind of objective artifact entails the notion of an impersonal artist; and, most important, that the novelist who wants to create a thing and remain impersonal will necessarily be willing to undermine, distribute, or share his own authority in order to define his meaning by the proposal of a consensus rather than by an appeal to some superior or antecedent norm' (pp. 26-27).

She does not seek to "offer a new definition of realism nor to explicate all the variations that might fall under the heading of realistic style." Instead, she is asking how three texts are realistic: The Rise of Silas Lapham, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Bostonians. Her work, she thinks, will demonstrate the truth of her arguments as well as substantiate claims made by other genre critics about realism and its techniques. It will, as well, affect the way in which these three texts are interpreted and provide "evidence for the technical skill and innovativeness of the author" (p. 30). Furthermore, indications of similarities in technique and innovativeness of these three writers support her
selection of them as "seminal" realists and imply traditional realism as a viable critical concept.

Leaving aside for now the multiplicity of meanings evoked by the term "realism," we can extract both her working definition and a number of critical principles which she shares with others who study realism, some of whom she claims to expand or depart from. For example, for McKay, the apparent objectivity or impersonality of realism results, paradoxically, only from "a commitment to subjectivity . . . the 'anti-authoritarian nature of realism' [which recognizes] that 'reality' varies from one person to the next and that even the individual point of view can and will change" (p. 27). Realists, she claims, thus avoid the appearance of omniscience, for the most part by foregrounding character and dialogue and minimizing the intrusion by the narrator and/or author. McKay believes that her questions will allow her to demonstrate this anti-omniscience more substantially than other "point-of-view" critics and, further, to evaluate its success by analyzing exactly what this critical commonplace about realism means: that American realists background author/narrator and foreground "nonauthoritative/nonomniscient voices." For example, she asks, "how does an author/narrator demonstrate his antiomniscience? How does an author represent a character's perspective? How does an author arrive at a
'common vision' . . . through the representation of individual perspectives?" [my emphasis] (p. 31).

Her efforts to talk about a "common vision" also tie her study to traditional critical views on language: "these writers [who claimed to oppose romance and the romantic tradition] inherited from their predecessors a faith in the transforming power of language to capture reality. Implicit in the realists' faith in language to articulate a common vision and demonstrate the commonality of man are Emerson's views on language." One of their tools, she says, is the "plain style," which they used "to minimize the distance between reader and fiction, to make the author/narrator less obtrusive, and to create objectivity through subjectivity" (p. 31-32).

Before I examine her specific methodology and the ways it claims to extend traditional methods, it will be useful to situate her study generally in the context of the tradition of American institutional criticism and theory, paying particular attention to the ways that American-ness functions explicitly and implicitly.

In a recent critical text, American Realism: New Essays, editor Eric Sundquist points to the difficulty of defining realism:

No genre— if it can be called a genre— is more difficult to define than realism, and this is particularly true of American realism. In material it includes the sensational, the sentimental, the vulgar, the scientific, the outrageously comic, the
desperately philosophical; in style it ranges from the exquisitely fine craft of James to the resonant colloquial idioms of Twain to the blocklike profusions of Dreiser; in purpose it approaches the cultural essay, aspires to the utility of propaganda, seeks to dramatize the theatre of social manners, cuts its own throat in deliberate parody. It is and does all these things—often at the same time (p. vii).

One might be tempted to ask why, given such diversity, there is a need to define realism, and Sundquist apparently agrees when he discusses briefly the problem of describing the work of writers who are grouped as realists, but "who virtually had no program but rather responded eclectically, and with increasing imaginative urgency, to the startling acceleration into being of a complex industrial society following the Civil War. Those responses became as varied and complex as the society itself . . ." (p. viii). Despite Sundquist's recognition of the diversity, he later reveals that the "perennial distinction between the 'romance' and the realistic 'novel' in American fiction remains a useful one" (p. 3). This kind of distinction—as well as the one between American realism and English or European realism—has formed the support system of American genre criticism.

It would of course be impossible to discuss—or even point out, for that matter—all the critical work on American realism, so I have chosen some of the most influential and representative critics: Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought; Perry
Miller, *Nature's Nation*; Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*; Harold Kolb, *The Illusion of Life*; and Michael Davitt Bell, "Mark Twain, 'Realism,' and *Huckleberry Finn*," criticism which spans the decades from 1927 to 1987 and which runs the gamut of relationships of critic to genre.

One of the earliest Americanists, Vernon L. Parrington, devotes one volume of his three-volume treatise on American intellectual history and literature to *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America* (1927). Tracing philosophical and economic movements, Parrington provides underpinnings for social changes and theorizes about the consequences for a literature produced under the various circumstances he discusses. Put simply, he sees America moving from the pessimism inherent in Puritanism to an optimism whose source is Romanticism and its sense of the individual, and back to pessimism. This last bout of American pessimism was the consequence of westward expansion, urbanization, industrialization and the loss of a fluid economy. The focus on the individual was replaced with a powerful social conscience, which could not escape the literal and the "real" and thus resulted in an awareness of environment and a developing criticism of it. Unlike many Americanists, Parrington discusses more authors than James, Howells, and Twain; in fact, his selections are wide-ranging: from essays and public
speeches to sociological, economic, and political novels. More attuned to examining content and intent of these works of realism—especially as they reflect the currents of intellectual history and as they are didactically inclined—he is not so much interested in presentation and style. Those realists considered so important in the work of other Americanists—James, Howells, and Twain—are, for Parrington, minimally realistic or not so at all. Of James, he says, "... he was never a realist. Rather he was a self-deceived romantic, the last subtle expression of the genteel, who fell in love with culture and never realized how poor a thing he worshipped" (p. 240).

Howells's realism, often critically touted as the source of all American realism, Parrington feels is, finally, derivative, simplistic, and superficial: Howells "had real gifts, of which he made the most. Refinement, humor, sympathy—fidelity to external manner and rare skill in catching the changing expression of life—a passion for truth and a jealous regard for his art; he had all these qualities, yet they were not enough to make him a great realist. . . . he lacked the sense of drama, a grasp of the rough fabric of life, the power to deal imaginatively with the great and tragic realities" (p. 252). Twain he views as a great, imaginative humorist.

Perry Miller, however, in *Nature's Nation*, paints a very different picture of the relation between American
intellectual history and so-called American realism. He claims to preserve cultural complexity as well as the integrity of the evolving American individual and to avoid generalizing about America and Americans. Such generalizations, he believes, protect us from the anxiety imposed by complexity and evolving selves, both personal and national. He, nonetheless, sets up a dialectic between "American nationalism and the concept of Nature" and explains American intellectual movements and artistic endeavors in terms of "an irreconcilable opposition between Nature and civilization—which is to say between forest and town, spontaneity and calculation, heart and head, the unconscious and the self-conscious, and innocent and the debauched." We are all, he asserts, "heirs of Natty Bumppo, and cannot escape our heritage" (p. 199). This kind of opposition, in its various forms in various countries, can be seen as allied with "forces we lump together as 'Romantic' . . . " (p. 200). Like Annette Kolodny, Miller sees a national discomfort about exploitation of the abundant natural resources and sublime beauty of America; also like her--but without her critical distance--he sees Nature as "feminine and dynamic, propelling all things . . . " (p. 201). The discomfort was analyzed and expressed in art. American artists--and perhaps all Americans--he argues wanted to maintain a fight with civilization, "in order to guard with
resolution the savagery of [their] heart[s]" (p. 202). Such an admission, then, forces an examination of the bedfellows, "natural savagery," which understands the "sinister dynamic of Nature" and Protestantism, which does not.

Miller also examines the development of what he calls an American language. The "plain style" that many critics see as a product of realism instead is shown by Miller to have been an underlying principle of Puritan discourse: "The founders had dedicated [Puritan society] irrevocably to what they called the 'plain style' . . . it was a shorthand expression for a vast body of rhetorical, psychological, and theological convictions, all of which centered on a doctrine of how the word, spoken or written, should properly be managed . . . Puritan writings are full of theoretical expositions of the plain style . . . " (p. 210-11). Such convictions about language have been so "fastened upon the literary conscience of America" that our writers, "even though they come from Mississippi rather than from Connecticut, or were brought up as Catholics rather than as Puritans, have had to contend with its consequences . . . " (p. 214).

One of those consequences—and a complicated one for American writers—is that long after the authority for plain style had disappeared, the style remained but without its previous explanatory responsibility.
According to Miller, that plain style, divorced from the societal and theological authority, has a further responsibility to "expound . . . whether there is any longer an authority to be expounded . . . [and] to insist, 'Truth hath no confines' . . . (p. 220).

This plain style and its implicit power for the writer/speaker and for the reader/listener is thus radical and subversive, and Miller claims both Thoreau and Melville understood this power, but "missed their public." They understood "how our words signify more than they say." Mark Twain, however, captured both the plain style, at its most powerful, and an audience: " . . . under the guise of protesting he had no moral and no motive, and not even a plot, he hymned the dawn over the Mississippi and allowed one beautifully sentient being to reconcile himself to going to hell" (p. 233). Thus, Miller claims that Huckleberry Finn is the "supreme victory in our literature of that ethic of the plain style which Protestants brought to colonial America and which Puritans in New England first exemplified" (p. 239).

Miller therefore sees a continuity in American writing through a language which first had to come to terms with the wildness of Nature and, later, with the attempts to subdue and exploit Nature. That language of necessity was plain and for the common persons. Elements of romance and elements of realism, then, for Miller, are
apparent at various times and to various degrees in
American literature, depending, often, on the external
circumstances of any given time, for example, wars and
"social anxieties." At the end of his third volume,
however, he admits the working power of these two
fictional elements:

Our fiction was born when the two standards, of the
novel or of the Romance, marked out the whole field
between them, when the craft of storytelling had to
grow by professing either one allegiance or the
other. To examine the ways in which the tensions
between the two have relevance for the best of our
modern fiction would become a long story, one that
for the moment I am content to leave in abeyance. I
would, however, contend that this is where the
symbolic as well as the tutelary importance of Mark
Twain resides. For it is Mark Twain, the arch-foe of
Romance, he who would blow the knight-errantry of
chivalric legend into kingdom come, who lives as the
wildest Romancer of them all (p. 280).

Richard Chase, in The American Novel and Its Tradition,
also contends that "since the earliest days the American
novel, in its most original and characteristic form, has
worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating
an element of romance." He sees a "native tradition"
different from the earlier English one because in America
there has been a "perpetual reassessment and
reconstitution of romance within the novel form" (p.
viii). Chase argues that the rise of realism is also the
"rediscovery of the uses of romance," and he describes
"how, in certain instances, this process of amalgamation
of realism and romance has been going on " (p. xii).
Although he acknowledges "the difficulty of making accurate judgments about what is especially American in American novels or American culture," he boldly asserts that the American novel "tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience. When it attempts to resolve contradictions, it does so in oblique, morally equivocal ways. As a general rule it does so either in melodramatic actions or in pastoral idylls . . ." (p. 1).

Setting the novel (realism) and romanticism in opposition—as well as English and American novels—he claims to try to understand each better. The primary difference between a novel, say of the English sort, and a romance is "in the way they view reality." This works out in an emphasis on character rather than on action and plot and in plausible events. In the romance, however, action, which is preferred over character, will be "freer . . . [with] less resistance from reality'; moreover, character may often be abstract and ideal or "two-dimensional" types who are not "complexly related to each other or to the society or to the past," and who are "shown in ideal relation--that is, they will share emotions only after these have become abstract or symbolic." If, as in Hawthorne and Melville, the characters do become deeply involved in something, Chase claims that such involvement is narrow and obsessive. Furthermore, in the romance, "astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to
have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic plausibility" (p. 12-13). Finally, Chase argues that the romance "is of loftier origin than the novel. It approximate the poem" (p. 16).

After differentiating between the novel and the romance, Chase sees two major trends in American fiction: the "main stream" of American romance includes Hawthorne, Melville, James, Mark Twain, Norris, Faulkner, and Hemingway, writers who, like Hawthorne, insisted on the necessity of the imagination of romance but also were aware that "it must not 'swerve aside from the truth of the human heart'"; the other "stream of romance, justly contemned by Mark Twain and James, is the one that descends from Scott--one with a "fatal inner falsity" (p. 20).

Like Parrington and Miller, Chase wants to view American fiction and its development as more complicated than McKay's view that several writers in the 1880's, because of their dedication to what they saw as a moral imperative--the criticizing of American society--and because of their belief in the inherent power of language to instruct and delight, imposed a "new" style and a new content on American literature. Yet, each of these critics has a personal agenda as well, and the desire of each to complicate the issues between realism and romance
and to posit a theory of language substantiates their individual arguments.

Although Parrington, Miller, and Chase—to varying degrees—examine history, culture, and literature in order to theorize about American language and American fiction, none theorize about or question the concept of genre (realism or romanticism) or examine the consequences of their theories of genre on American literature. Their categories of genre can, finally, be described as little more than convention and technique, thus creating the problem of endlessly adjustable categories which lead always to the kind of problems we see in Chase, for example. He first privileges romance over realism and then "shows" that American texts are mostly romantic. If he had decided to privilege realism over romance, he could have shown that American texts are mostly realistic. All he, or any genre critic, has to do is to change his/her mind about which conventions and techniques fall under which category. Furthermore, because there is not agreement about the categories and the conventions and techniques included in each, there is endless critical debate about which author fits in which category. In the case of Parrington, Miller, and Chase, each places Twain, James and Howells in different categories and evaluates them, depending on their final categorical resting place.
As they make decisions about the categories of realism and romanticism, Parrington, Miller, and Chase also examine our very notions of American-ness or, at least, provide what they view as underpinnings for arguing for American-ness and the uniqueness of American fiction. Their individual devotion to realism or romanticism or some combination of the two also allows them to contain the huge and diverse body of American literature—to unify it, in other words. Thus, at the very same time they are recognizing and praising American diversity in thought, action, language, and literature, they are discovering methods by which to rein in its diversity and make American literature "discussable" within the confines of a single critical text. While such discussions may not always be problematic, what these three critics do is set up boundaries and categories which result in little payoff as far as knowledge and understanding of these texts is concerned.

As we saw in the first chapter on cultural criticism, each critical text, then, must find a variation on the theme, the method, the conclusions of the other critics who work in their critical area, or to put it another way, who ask the same kinds of questions about American literary texts. In genre criticism this variation works out in questions which allows them to adjust the categories so that one is more prominent than the other
and so that the texts included in one category may fit into the other category when its conventions and techniques are revised.

Harold Kolb, Jr., in *The Illusion of Life: American Realism as a Literary Form*, is less interested than Parrington, Miller, or Chase in recognizing diversity or examining realism within the context of American genre studies or American language. He makes a curious move to create a space for himself in genre criticism by arguing that the diversity of American writers prior to the 1880's is too great to fit them into any such limiting category as romance but that the "major authors" of the 1880's--James, Howells, and Twain--"found themselves writing works stemming from shared concepts about the art of fiction. The many differences in their books cannot be ignored . . . but the variety of these works and the obvious differences in the author's personalities . . . tend to make the common elements even more striking. This convergence of major talent produced an important body which forms the core of American realism . . ." (p. xiv). He thus collapses the distinctions between these writers by claiming shared purpose and literary products. Kolb seems unaware that a critic could make a similar move with regard to "romantic" writers.

Having spotlighted his critical space, he goes on to justify his selection of authors and his narrow focus on a
single decade by claiming it as a period of prominence and "maturity in American literature." He argues, too, that his American realists are as American as those claimed by other critics who want to place Twain in the western humor category and to make James a part of genteel society. His primary argument, however, like the one we have seen in McKay's text, is that "style is an important and integral part of American realism, and that the three authors develop new techniques in fiction which constitute a coherent and definable realistic style" (p. xv). The "literary similarities" between Howells, James, and Twain are "their rejection of omniscient narrators, their experimentation with point of view and a language appropriate to the central consciousness, their anti-romanticism, their moral commitment, their humor and satire, their condemnation of American materialism ... and their ultimate faith in style and art ...." (p. 15). He refutes what he calls the "misleading ideas which have gained ... currency in discussions of American realism: 1. Realism uses realistic details ... [to produce] verisimilitude ... 2. Realism is the presentation of reality, the truth about experience ... 3. Realism is objective ... " (p. 26). He claims that romantic writers also use realistic details and that Howells, James, and Twain eschewed "mere details and one-to-one correspondence between subject and representation.
... [also a] fundamental fallacy in the doctrine of objectivity... [that the author can't] write without purpose, cause, or opinion... [but] realists... strive for the illusion of objectivity... puppeteer and the mechanism are now hidden... (pp. 28-35).

Instead, the characteristics of realism can be located, he claims, in "four areas: philosophy, subject matter, morality, and style" (p. 36), and style "is the vehicle which carries realistic philosophy, subject matter, and morality. It is the link between the theory and the narrative... (p. 56). Kolb views the "most significant aspect of realistic style" as point of view, which can be discussed either from the direction of the teller of the story or the story itself. Realists differ from other novelists, he claims, because they "present (as much as possible) the picture as seen through the filter of the consciousness of a particular character" (p. 67). Thus, the reader's awareness of the author's presence is minimized, accomplished through "dramatic representation and through the effort to present description and summary, even when it is written in the third-person... from the angle of vision of the characters" (pp. 67-71). He examines the works of his three authors to show that "three elements--character, complexity, point of view--form a tightly woven triangle which is the figure in the carpet of realistic fiction" (p. 112). Kolb also examines
the realists' use of imagery and symbols, arguing that the realists rely on short-range, mundane comparisons instead of long-range horizon-leaping symbolic analogies [the stuff of romanticism]. Realistic imagery compared experiences to other concrete experiences, a technique which restricts the dimensions of the fictive world to those of ordinary human existence. The symbols of the realists, like their similes and metaphors, are largely devoted to the revelation of character. Realistic symbols are intrinsic, specific, localized. (pp. 118-127).

In almost direct opposition to the portion of Kolb's study that focuses on Mark Twain is the argument of Michael Davitt Bell, who argues that Twain is not a realist. Unlike Parrington, Miller, and Chase, however, who view Twain as a "wild romancer," Bell does not seek to place Twain in another category. He wants, instead, to show that "whether considering Twain's literary ideas, the function of burlesque humor in [Huckleberry Finn], or the book's plot or action," neither Twain nor his best known novel can be more than tentatively connected to realism. Bell's method is to look at Twain's own writings and letters about literary methods and ideas and to examine the text of Huckleberry Finn to answer his questions about Twain's beliefs and techniques. He uses Howells's concepts of realism to determine if Huckleberry Finn can be called realism, although earlier in his essay, Bell recognizes the multiplicity of definitions of realism, arguing it as one of the reasons we can't truly place authors in the category. Since Howells and Twain were
friends, however, and since Twain praised Howells's work, Bell justifies denying *Huckleberry Finn*’s status as a work of realism because it doesn’t, on his terms, fit Howells’s notions. Mixing up the responsibility of the character/narrator Huck with the responsibility of the author Twain, Bell denies the moral intention and didactic responsibility of this text: "It is surely significant that Huck is most open to impressions when he is completely free of responsibility—'free and easy and comfortable on a raft.' In any case, the realism of such descriptions [Huck’s of life on the raft and of the Mississippi River], however we may wish to define it, has as little to do with Howellsian responsibility as does Huck’s humor" (p. 48). Even when faced with the kind of responsibility born of love that Huck learns to feel for Jim, Bell calls it "personal responsibility, not the sort of abstract social responsibility Howells would call for in *Criticism and Fiction*" (p. 51). That the social responsibility belongs to the author and that he chose to convey it to the reader through the relationship of one white boy with one black slave has escaped Bell’s line of vision.

Like James M. Cox’s argument about *Huckleberry Finn*, Bell’s claim is that a book which employs burlesque humor cannot have other intentions than entertainment. Again, he confuses the character and the author and the multiple
uses that author could have for putting such humor in the
dialogue of a character who has no idea he is parodying
those he observes.

Finally, however, Bell's adjustment of a literary
work, *Huckleberry Finn*, to the definitions of genre is not
the only problem. Like Parrington, Miller, and Chase,
Bell's work is problematic because he adjusts the
definitions of genre to fit whatever criteria he chooses
or whatever conventions and techniques he wants to
include.

Thus, these genre critics—both those discussed here
and those they represent—seek to support or explain or
illustrate the importance and relevance of the concept of
genre—here specifically that of realism— for American
literature. All share the notion that American texts are
unique, and all argue in some form for their genre as
characteristically American. The romanticists, for
example, see their genre as indicative of an historical
time and cultural circumstances; thus, for a certain time,
they claim, romanticism is American-ness. Others claim
the characteristics of realism as examples of American-
ness. Even specific aspects of American narratives, such
as character and plot, become indicators of one genre or
another, depending on which is claimed as foregrounded by
an author. Although the foregrounding of characters or
plot *per se* doesn't make the genre uniquely American, the
foregrounding of uniquely American characters and plot push the genre toward American-ness.

Furthermore, although these critics seem easily able to clear critical space for their version of American-ness through genre, each time they do so, they expand or deny previously existing definitions and explanation and thus unwittingly undermine their very area of criticism. Unknowingly, they argue against their own positions, for the more definitions that exist of a particular genre, the weaker its position as a viable critical concept. For example, the more definitions there are of realism, the less it can serve to describe and discuss American literary texts. Furthermore, arguing, as these critics do, that their realism is more realistic than the realism of other critics, they implicitly admit its flexibility and limitless possibilities. The problem with this, however, as we have seen, is not just the proliferation of definitions; also problematic are the kind of definitions—ones restricted to conventions and techniques, which are endlessly adjustable.

What the genre critics intend is that their definition replaces an earlier one. We can see, however, that Miller's notions of realism do not replace Parrington's, nor does Chase's negate the need for the earlier critical, philosophical, and historical studies. Even McKay's, as close in intention and method as it is to
Kolb's, does not do away with the need for Kolb's assertions, for her study rests on his assertions. These critics cannot replace each other's work because their questions, their principles, and their methods are different enough—even within the confines of American genre studies—for their conclusions to exist side by side. Although doing so differently and reaching different conclusions, Parrington, Miller, and Chase are arguing for the acceptance of uniquely American genres, for certain American texts to serve as exemplars of those genres, and for certain cultural and historical contexts which created the conditions appropriate to produce romanticism and/or realism. Thus, they are questioning and discussing what realism is and what makes it different from romanticism and different from European realism, whereas Kolb and McKay are asking how Howells, James, and Twain are American realists and how many characteristics of that realism they represent are shared. Bell is using those same criteria to come to a conclusion in opposition to theirs about Mark Twain.

All these conclusions can exist side by side because what these critics locate and isolate in the texts are various objects of authorial focus, for example character, and various means of revealing that focus to a reader, for example first-person narration. In other words, these critics are not wrong when they see the variations in the
texts because these variations can plausibly exist. An author, in other words, may use various conventions and techniques within a single text or in a group of texts and authors may share conventions and techniques.

Unfortunately—and problematically—the critics who have such insights offer only partial knowledge of texts, but use that partial knowledge to make claims about the shape and form of whole texts, when, in fact, their partial insights cut them off from understanding the purposes of whole texts. Even if we view these insights as interesting, sometimes illuminating ways to group texts, we will not be able to move legitimately to critical claims about genre or about how these "realistic" or "romantic" texts reveal American-ness.

Now that we have situated McKay in the tradition, we need to return to her book with, of course, the awareness of the limits of that tradition in mind. We can examine her methodology as it is based in narratology and linguistic theory and decide how the narratological perspective may or may not help her escape those limits. She uses her method on James's *The Bostonians*, Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Because most of the critics we have examined here have
focused to some extent on Huckleberry Finn, I want to look at her chapter on that text.

Each of her chapters is divided according to the kind of analysis she does: "Narrator's Voice," "Directly Reported Discourse," and "Indirectly Reported Discourse." These divisions are preceded with an introduction which synthesizes some of the major criticism of the text, discusses authorial sources of literary beliefs and methods, and explains terms. For example, in the "Introduction" to the Huckleberry Finn chapter, she discusses some of the critical controversies about the ending of the novel as well as critical commentary about Twain's devotion to language, especially how spoken and written language interact. She claims that "Twain's passionate commitment to the effective use of language was the basis of his realistic technique . . . The right word for Twain had to . . . reflect accurately what the speaker/writer saw or heard, and it had to sound convincing in context . . . " (p. 142). Thus, he "turned a romantic belief in the power of language [inherited from Emerson, she claims] into a theory of realism" (p. 144). She also discusses Twain's characters who seem to be predecessors to Huck, at least insofar as their use of vernacular language and their reporting of scenes and people.
She analyzes Huck in the section on the "narrator's voice," according to "three distinct relationships: Huck as narrator and Huck as character; Huck and Twain; and Huck and the other characters" (p. 145). Primarily, she is arguing the following points: 1. that the distance between Huck's "'experiencing self' and his 'narrating self' is insignificant" (p. 145); 2. that "Twain makes Huck's style work by using certain vernacular features, such as nonstandard verb forms, contradictions, and faulty subordination to create the pretense of an untutored narrator, while at the same time developing a highly sophisticated, innovative literary style that uses a full range of standard English constructions and literary devices . . . [creating] a constant and productive tension in the text between narrative voice and authorial control . . . (p. 146); 3. that Huck's "idiosyncracies . . . do not overwhelm the reader"; 4. that Twain prepares for the end in the first paragraph about "stretchers" and honesty; 5. that the first paragraph also establishes Huck's "potential for change"; 6. that Huck's "voice, his vision, and his world are constantly before the reader, but Huck actually talks very little about himself except as participant in the events of the story . . . " (p. 150); 7. that Huck uses action verbs when describing himself as participant but that when he shifts to his role as observer, "his vocabulary becomes less concrete and more
vague" (which also describes what happens at the end of the text when Twain intrudes more and more into the story). To support these conclusions she analyzes sections from the text such as the ones describing Huck's escape from Pap's cabin and the go-to-hell speech.

Her next section—on directly reported discourse—more closely analyzes Huck's reporting of the conversations of others as well as his renditions of his own conversations with others. McKay claims that fewer "tags" are used by Huck to mark direct discourse when he is participating in a dialogue than when he describes conversation between others. She shows that Huck "creates himself as a character" by reporting "his straight-forward conversations indirectly, reserving DD for the dramatic scenes in which he has to lie his way out of tight places" (p. 167). Some directly reported discourse, she feels, merely reveals the skill of the author and has nothing to do with progression of the narrative, for example, the conversation between Huck and Joanna Wilks about England; these authorial intrusions, she feels, "eclipse Huck and his story." Finally, she indicates that some non-tagged discourse (UDD) is used to record Huck's thoughts, but that they "have the form of direct discourse," or to put it in other words, they function as direct discourse.
Indirectly reported discourse, the next section of the chapter, is "difficult to identify" in Huckleberry Finn because the "discourse boundaries [are often] very fuzzy . . . Huck can move from narration (DN) to diffused indirectly report discourse (ID) to direct discourse (DD) to compact ID in the course of one sentence" (p. 176).

One of the indicators, however, of DD apparently reported as ID is his use of words or phrases with which he is unfamiliar or which he would be unlikely to use. In reporting direct discourse Huck misspells words alien to him or makes substitutions that may or may not be his own . . . [In] some of Huck's compact ID . . . As with UDD, a comma seems to signal the onset of another voice; however, the quoted (or semi-quoted) discourse contains few ID features . . ." (p. 178)

McKay's method of analyzing point of view and discourse attribution, she claims, provides her with interpretive strategies. For example, she argues that, as the novel progresses, Huck's voice and vision move closer to Twain's: " . . . the ironic relations of the novel shift as Huck allies himself with the author . . . " (p. 183). Further, she says that in the scenes preceding the conclusion, Twain gradually reduces the distance between himself and Huck and between Huck and the reader . . . The 'implied' author has come closer to his narrator/protagonist just as James's and Howells's narrators grew closer to their main characters . . . Twain chooses . . . to have Huck immerse himself in his own story and become an uncritical participant and observer. This solution, like the ones James and Howells developed to solve their 'narrator' problems, creates complications for characterization. The reader is
left with some unanswered questions about Huck . . . Twain pulls back from his character just when he has portrayed him most sympathetically . . . Huck's very naivete [which Twain used so successfully to offer a "legitimate and unobtrusive narrative voice"] created a dilemma for Twain's realistic technique. Having eliminated the external authority and perspective and having created a supremely subjective narrative, he was forced to reimpose order on his story in order to bring it to a close [186-88].

Despite discovering such difficulties with the realistic style of Twain, McKay acknowledges that his "challenge to traditional forms of literary discourse is one of American realism's lasting legacies to the novel" (p. 188). She claims that these three realists understood the linguistic principle that "responsibility for directly reported discourse belongs to the speaker alone" before the linguists began to discuss it. Through "direct discourse, the characters can come to the reader without mediation" (p. 191). Thus, the realists depended on dialogue, directly or indirectly reported, to convey the multiplicity of perspectives necessary to achieve a sense of reality, and their narrators, while "condens[ing] and filter[ing]" the discourse of other characters, remained true to the perspectives of those characters. Yet these realists also felt a moral obligation to edify and instruct the reader in some way, and, not completely trusting the skills of that reader, found it necessary to intrude at the end of the texts.
I will later quarrel with McKay, given her claims, about the adequacy of an account of a literary text that her methodology can provide. However, I can see the implicit power in bringing theories of linguistics and narratology to bear on these texts. They allow her to explain more fully—than, say, the method used by Kolb—the specific ways in which these three authors foreground characters, change the role of the narrator, relinquish omniscience, and diminish authorial intrusions. She is not, as she clearly states, trying to do more; that her study is derivative of other critics would not, then, be an appropriate accusation against her. Her method, in fact, allows her to answer her question of how these three authors "succeeded in the backgrounding of the author/narrator and the foregrounding of nonauthoritative/nonomniscient voices" (p. 31).

However, although her work refines our knowledge of the shared conventions and techniques of James, Howells, and Twain; that kind of knowledge cannot be claimed as full explanation or understanding of these texts or of these authors. Furthermore, her own purpose and her conclusions have to do with the status of these authors as quintessential American realists. Thus, she extends—significantly, I think—one branch of the paradigm of American-ness, and within that limitation her method has efficacy. In our larger picture, however, her work is
limited because it does not get outside that paradigm does not even recognize the existence of the paradigm as such. For example, in her first chapter, "Accounting for Voice," McKay demonstrates rather impressively the range of her knowledge of narratological and linguistic theory; then she includes a section on American literary realism, acknowledging that it is an "elusive and loosely defined category that critics use authoritatively because they assume a commonality of understanding." Moreover, although she wants to locate her investigation in "style," she complicates the usual notion of style by saying that it is "as complex an issue as realism itself, for style is a reflection of authorial intent and a measure of authorial effect, as well as an integral element in the text" (p. 26). Thus, she problematizes the terms and, seemingly, her own method.

However, when McKay presents the principle on which her approach rests, she argues that "the three writers considered in this study represent the realistic tradition in American fiction," (p. 26) thus accepting, unproblematically, realism as a concept and American realism as a category which needs, not examination, but explanation of conventions and techniques. She wants to evaluate these authors but only as they "succeeded in the backgrounding of the author/narrator and the foregrounding of nonauthoritative/nonomniscient voices." She goes on to
say that their "successes and failures . . . have profound significance for the development of the American novel's structure and for the portrayal of perception and the handling of point of view in later fiction" (p. 31). In her final chapter, although briefly admitting that European realists too were experimenting with technique, she looks at the legacy of James, Howells, and Twain in Crane, Anderson, Drieser, Lardner, Hemingway and Faulkner, noting the growing tendency in modern American fiction to minimize further the authority of the narrator.

And, as in all the criticism which locates and discusses American-ness, her work slips into binary oppositions. For example, McKay claims that James, Howells, and Twain were "united in their opposition to the romance and romantic tradition" (p. 31). Thus, part of their position as "realists" comes from their opposition to "romantics." However, since other critics place these three authors, at times, in the category of romance, these categories remain in a kind of on-going dialectic of the American-ness of American texts, until a particular critic extracts various parts of the definitions of these "genres" and tries to stabilize the definition by anchoring it in various texts. At the same time a critic attempts stabilization of one of the "American genres," s/he is stabilizing the other through its binary opposition to whatever parts of the definition are
chosen. McKay, like other genre critics whose "realistic" leg of the binary "wins," implies "realism" as more American, finally, than romanticism because of its honesty about life in America: "It was more important to confront the reader with life's uncertainties without offering easy explanations than to lull him into a false sense of security with neatly interpreted romantic tales" (p. 190). She, in fact, ties the techniques of American realists to morality—in other words, how much moral responsibility the author feels to include narratorial commentary on a text which honestly and "realistically" portrays life in America. Furthermore, the importance of her "realists"—James, Howells, and Twain—is emphasized as she extends their techniques into the work of American fiction which follows so that, finally, the conventions and techniques of American realism become the fully accepted conventions and techniques of all American fiction.

The extent of the limitations of McKay's study—and the limitations of all such genre criticism of American texts—can be dramatically illustrated by using McKay's principles and method on a text that has traditionally been considered to be "romantic." If, as Americanists insist and as McKay's work implicitly supports, all American fiction can be divided, at least through the early decades of the twentieth century, into examples of
the binaries of romanticism and realism, then her method should "prove," by default, that *The Scarlet Letter* is romantic, not realistic. Whatever genre it turns out to be, however, McKay's method implies that *The Scarlet Letter*, like every other American text, through its revelation of its own genre, is a part of the unified body of American literature and a prime example of Hawthorne's intention to reveal American-ness.

Although my version of McKay's method will be a truncated version of it, I think I can argue, by showing how it works on a piece of *The Scarlet Letter*, that it would work similarly on the whole text. I want to begin with several of her principles—the underpinnings of her method: American realists present antiomniscient narrators because they believe that omniscient ones—especially intrusive, omniscient ones—make the reader more constantly aware of the fictionality of their texts, thereby reducing the realism; American realists move the narrator to the background, and move character and dialogue to the foreground, thus decreasing the sense of the synthetic quality of the text and increasing its proximity to the "real world." American realists accomplish the foregrounding of the perspectives of characters by attributing ownership and responsibility for all directly reported discourse and some indirectly reported discourse to the character who speaks the words;
American realists use realistic details; and, finally, American realists are morally committed to presenting a fictional world as close to reality as possible in order to edify readers and enact personal and social change.

Armed with those principles, I can examine The Scarlet Letter to see how it is or is not an example of realism. I cannot claim that the narrator of The Scarlet Letter is unobtrusive or without omniscience; thus, it apparently fails the first test of a realistic text. But McKay shows us that the test has a loophole as she works on the narrator of The Bostonians. By using the term antiomniscience, McKay implies an intention on the part of an author to avoid any appearance of omniscience, yet, about James, she is forced to admit:

The intrusions of The Bostonians narrator often reassure the reader of the narrator's role as historian—as an honest, but far from omniscient, reporter of facts . . . The narrator's voice in the novel is an interesting combination of authority and tentativeness . . . Descriptive details in this novel are so freely offered and often demonstrate such wide-ranging knowledge of characters and scenes that one is tempted to call this narrator omniscient . . . James seems to favor . . . realism of detail rather than technique. The narrator freely judges . . . Yet James is not comfortable with his narrator's powers; he softens and downplays them. Thus, we are beset with qualifications . . . (pp. 39-41).

The narrator of The Scarlet Letter, too, is an "historian," and that designation is emphasized by the prefatory "Custom-House" sketch in which "Hawthorne" as author/narrator finds the scarlet A and the text of the
story of Hester Prynne. More important for our test, Hawthorne, too, seems uncomfortable with a narrative voice which has full authority. Like James's narrator, he qualifies and suggests, but not always confirms. He sometimes knows what a character is thinking and sometimes guesses: for example, he says of Hester Prynne as she emerges from the jail that "it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened to her dress" (p. 52). Yet, in the next sentence, the narrator "sees" inside Hester Prynne's head: "In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm . . . " (p. 52).

Such examples of the combination of "authority and tentativeness" abound in The Scarlet Letter as they do in The Bostonians. Acting as a practical critic who is using McKay's method, I am forced to draw conclusions about the strength of her principles and the manipulation of her own methodology to make those principles seem to be natural conclusions of an examination of James.

When she looks at Howells's emphasis on dialogue and fewer, less omniscient intrusions by his narrator, and when she looks at Twain's first-person, boy narrator who cannot be both participant in the action and omniscient,
her principle about narrative technique seems to hold true, but not when she turns to James. Thus, what seems a small hole through which James seeps, can be opened further to admit Hawthorne's text of *The Scarlet Letter*. In other words, if *The Bostonians* "passes" the test, so, too, does *The Scarlet Letter*.

Moreover, the loophole grows even larger when we go back to McKay's contention that the reason for authorial insistence on antiomniscience is to avoid the sense of fictionality necessarily present in a work of fiction. Yet, James's narrator draws more attention to the text as a "synthetic construct" than does Hawthorne's, who maintains that he is reporting the history of a particular, real woman who lived in Puritan Boston. On the second page of *The Bostonians* the narrator says,

> It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect [of Basil Ransom]; but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound . . . [Basil] is, as a representative of his sex, the most important personage in my narrative; he played a very active part in the events I have undertaken in some degree to set forth (p. 2).

While we can see the implication of the telling of real events in the last clause, the uses of the words character and representative just as easily imply fiction. Is *The Scarlet Letter* thus more realistic than *The Bostonians*?

McKay's next important principle, that American realists foregrounded character and dialogue, is
applicable to the texts of Howells, James, and Twain. Twain, of course as we have already seen, foregrounds his major character/narrator, Huck Finn, but Huck's reporting of what he sees and hears allows us to be very aware of the perspectives of other characters in the text. Howells's concentration on dialogue also foregrounds characters and approximates reality because of the multiplicity of perspectives. James, like Howells uses a third-person narrator, thereby necessitating the use of a "central consciousness," although, also like Howells, he may use the consciousness of one character at one time and of another character at a different time. James, however, almost always uses the perspective and consciousness of one character more often than any other: the governess, Newman, Winterbourne, Archer, Strether, and Ransom, to name a few.

The focus of our interest as readers of *The Scarlet Letter* is also character: Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and Pearl excite the most interest and speculation. Hawthorne, like James and Howells, offers us a third-person narrator but foregrounds the perspectives of these four characters to varying degrees. For the first half of the book, the central consciousness is Hester Prynne's, but by chapter nine, "The Leech," we move to the consciousness of Roger Chillingworth, and by chapter eleven, to that of Arthur
Dimmesdale. For the remainder of the book we move between the minds of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, although the emphasis is more on Arthur Dimmesdale's perspective than on Hester Prynne's, since we have been assured, before chapter nine, that with her reserves of inner strength, she will survive and, even, grow emotionally stronger and more intellectually independent. The Scarlet Letter has passed the test of how, in a work of realism, an author accomplishes the foregrounding of characters.

At this point, to be true to McKay's method, I should point out that, like James's narrative technique to foreground character in The Bostonians, Hawthorne's narrator, in The Scarlet Letter, runs the gamut of ways to report direct discourse: from "tags" which precede or follow the discourse, untagged discourse, long, involved descriptions of not only the way in which the speaker speaks (e.g., quickly, quietly, etc.) but also glimpses into attitude or intent or in-depth analyses of character and situation. Sometimes, the tags qualify the narrator's authority, words like "apparently" or "evidently" or "seeming." Thus, even in cases of the reporting of indirect discourse and the thoughts of the characters, it is clear that the responsibility for the discourse belongs to the character and not to the narrator or the implied author.
That her three realists used details which duplicate environments, human actions and reactions, and situations is accepted by McKay. However, because James's narrator is more intrusive and descriptive, his use of "realistic" details is greater than that of Howells; and Twain, by using a first-person narrator/reporter, can include immense amounts of descriptive detail without intruding on his text and as a way to develop our understanding of Huck. Hawthorne, too, makes use of a great deal of realistic detail; his technique of describing the environments of his characters has been touted as almost cinematographic. Hawthorne's descriptions of Hester Prynne as she walks from the prison to the scaffold and of her position on the scaffold, while she is stared at from below by the crowd (and Roger Chillingworth) and preached to from above by the Puritan authorities (and Arthur Dimmesdale) are like Ambrose Bierce's technique of "spanning" a scene, describing it with such precise detail that the reader sees, hears, smells the surroundings. Likewise realistic is the description of Governor Bellingham's house:

Here, then was a wide and reasonably lofty hall, extending through the whole depth of the house . . . At one extremity, this spacious room was lighted by the windows of the two towers, which formed a small recess on either side of the portal. At the other end, though partly muffled by a curtain, it was more powerfully illuminated by one of the embowed hall-windows, which we read of in old books, and which was provided with a deep and cushioned seat. Here, on the cushion, lay a folio tome . . . even as, in our
own days, we scatter gilded volumes on the center-table, to be turned over by casual guests . . ." (p. 104-105).

The description continues for another page or so with more details. Not only does Hawthorne's narrator describe realistically but also, because his focus was on an historical time rather than a present time, he attempts to relate that time to the present by drawing attention to environmental similarities. Such attention also undermines, at least to some extent, arguments that realism must picture society which is contemporary to the author in order for his contemporary audience to learn and perhaps effect changes. By tying past time to present in many instances in the book, by associating the behavior of the characters with all human behavior, and by making connections between the story of Hester Prynne in Boston and a partially fictionalized version of Nathaniel Hawthorne in Salem—the moral and thematic intentions of the author are discernible. Losing touch with the "truths of the human heart," religious intolerance, and dehumanizing societal impositions are not confined, Hawthorne is saying, to the times of the Puritans.

To all this, McKay, or some other critic devoted to the view that The Scarlet Letter is romantic, might reply that I have neglected to mention the overt romantic elements in the text. These elements in The Scarlet Letter, which have been traditionally used as evidence of
its categorization as a romantic text, could instead be evidence of its realistic technique. These include such narratorial suggestions as an "A" burned into the chest of Arthur Dimmesdale, an "A" seen in the sky, Pearl's elf-like or witch-like qualities, or the evil in the forest. However, the narrator never confirms these elements and almost always offers them to the reader through multiple perspectives:

Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister a SCARLET LETTER . . . imprinted in the flesh. As regarded its origin there were various explanations, all of which must necessarily have been conjectural. Some affirmed that the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, on the very day when Hester Prynee first wore her ignominious badge, had begun a course of penance . . . by inflicting a hideous torture on himself. Other contended that the stigma had not been produced until a long time subsequent, when old Roger Chillingworth, being a potent necromancer, had caused it to appear . . . Others again . . . whispered their belief, that the awful symbol was the effect of the ever-active tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly, and at least manifesting Heaven's dreadful judgment by the visible presence of the letter. The reader may choose among these theories . . . It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant's . . . (p. 258-59).

Thus, these "romantic" conjectures become details realistic to Puritan times—not to Hawthorne's own time, which is why—if his book is to realize its moral, thematic, and aesthetic intentions for his contemporary readers—he must not present them as truths. The "truths"
of *The Scarlet Letter* are those of human psychology, ones which the author would not have wanted his readers to subordinate to technique.

My attempt here to show that *The Scarlet Letter* can pass the test of a realistic text can be helpful in several ways. For one thing, it shows the ease with which the details of a text can be adjusted to fit the categories of realism and romanticism as described by McKay and the other genre critics discussed in this chapter. It shows, as well, the adjustability of the categories. Second, my analysis shows that if a work that has been for over a hundred years considered as a romantic text can be "proved" to be a realistic text, there might be something inherently limiting about those two American genres. Third, the test itself does not reveal textual characteristics that are uniquely American. What is American about the three texts McKay uses and the one I use is that they were written by Americans and use American settings and are informed by various American ideologies. Their techniques, including style and narrative means, however, are applicable to many works of fiction, regardless of their national origin. It is also likely that these four authors would have made claims—in fact do make such claims in their fiction—to representing—in addition to the American condition—the human condition.
At the ends of my other chapters, I have suggested revisions of methods to allow critics to answer adequately the important questions they ask. I have also foregrounded the influence—often unacknowledged—of the institutional paradigm of American-ness. Thus, the critics we have examined have had at least two limitations: inappropriate or inefficacious methods and adherence to the Americanist paradigm. In fact, in some cases—particularly deconstruction—unacknowledged adherence to the paradigm undermined the very nature of the project.

In this chapter I will not revise McKay's methodology because it allows her to discuss the shared techniques of James, Howells, and Twain. I will, however, argue with the way in which she formulates her question and with the extent of her claim that her answers provide an adequate account of the three novels she examines or an adequate theory of genre. In doing so, I will be positing a way of talking about genre that seeks to avoid some of the problems we have uncovered in this chapter.

Discussing the shared conventions and techniques of Howells, James, and Twain provides useful knowledge for us as readers/critics of their texts. The discussion also implies some assumptions about the uses of language and
the responsibilities of authors shared in an historical
time, further implying other authors who shared them.
More specifically, McKay's method, which synthesizes the
methods of various linguists and narratologists, educates
us about the ways James, Howells, and Twain foreground
characters, change the role of the narrator, relinquish
omniscience, and diminish authorial intrusions.

Her question (How are James, Howells, and Twain
realists?), however, presupposes that American realism is
a viable genre with a shared definition and that James,
Howells, and Twain were all realists of that particular
kind. And, as we have seen, such a presupposition is
problematic, given the shifting definitions of the
American "genres" of romanticism and realism. If she had
formulated her question as, what techniques and
conventions are shared by James, Howells, and Twain?, then
her question and method would have matched. Then, she
could have--say, in her conclusion--discussed the
consequences of the knowledge we gain from her analysis
and, further, the implications of that knowledge and the
consequences of it for a more general theory of genre.

The difference between a general theory of genre and
one based on shared uses of conventions and techniques
(what I will now call shared-usage theory) is that the
general theory ties itself to the purpose of the whole
text and the shared-usage theory illustrates certain
objects in the text and the means by which an author reveals those objects; the shared-usage theory thus offers us partial knowledge of texts. Tying genre to purpose makes it a category which can account for an entire, coherent effort at communication between author and reader. Shared-usage theory, however, is a category which can offer specific, intrinsic knowledge of a text but which cannot account for the whole work. This way of talking about genre and about shared-usage theory implies that understanding of parts comes from knowledge of and inferences about wholes.

In other words, one of the ways critics recognize and understand the shared usage of conventions and techniques in the literary works of such authors as James, Howells, and Twain comes from the inferences of the critics that these works have realism as their purpose. Or, more likely, is the possibility that, after reading Howells’s literary and critical texts, and understanding his practice and inferring his theories of realism, they notice similar techniques in James and Twain and infer the purpose of realism, whether that purpose accurately reflects the purposes of James and Twain or not. Then, they substitute their understanding of shared-usage for explanations of purposes of whole texts. Their next "leap" is that shared-usage implies American-ness. This substitution of a part for the whole and the implication
of American-ness leaves us as readers/critics with the same dilemmas we have faced in the other four chapters of my study.

Instead, in this chapter, genre can be a loosely descriptive category of purpose which includes conventions and techniques. However, what happens when the shared-usage theory comes to stand for the genre-theory is that the author's purpose is lost, and the way of talking about genre becomes formulaic—prescriptive, in other words, rather than descriptive. When literary texts are described, however, we might find that some share purposes but not all conventions and techniques, or they might share conventions and techniques but have different purposes.

As far as The Scarlet Letter is concerned, it will neither be romantic nor realistic in terms of shared-usage-theory categories but instead a text which incorporates shared conventions and techniques of both romanticism and realism. Its purpose, however, seems to be, despite Hawthorne's narrator's comments in "The Custom-House" about romanticism, more complex by far than can be explained by the shared-usage theory of realism or the shared-usage theory of romanticism. Thus, our general genre theory can help us understand and account for the purpose and the complexities of The Scarlet Letter. As we describe the purpose of the text, we must take into
account characters, the progression of the action, language, techniques of narration, signals, and the outcome of the story. Such a description would place The Scarlet Letter in the larger genre of prose fiction or, more specifically, in the genre of an action, but cannot locate it as a whole text in either of the categories of realism or romanticism. As Peter Rabinowitz notes in Before Reading (1987), "... genre categories can overlap. Depending on what rules we choose to focus on, a given work may appear to fall into several different generic classes."

In other words, The Scarlet Letter is not exactly like Sir Walter Scott's texts, nor is it exactly like texts by Howells, yet it shares some characteristics with each in addition to sharing with each the larger generic category of prose fiction. The Scarlet Letter also shares characteristics with such works as Moby Dick and with Huckleberry Finn: they are all prose fictions (or novels); they are all written in America; they all explore the human condition as it flourishes or flounders under social and theological pressures; they all include characters about whom we care; they all have powerful themes, some embodied in characters and some gleaned from the combination of character and event in the progression of the stories.
Yet there is difference even in this "sameness," and without this understanding of differences between literary texts, discussions based in genre categories—or in any kind of categories, for that matter—are more limited than powerful. In other words, even our general, loosely descriptive theory of genre can become limiting if the categories resulting from that general theory—like the ones which make it, in some way or other, like the texts of Scott, Howells, Twain, and Melville—become the primary—or only—way to talk about *The Scarlet Letter* as a literary text. Such use of those categories limit our understanding of a text by moving us too far from it and making it an example of something rather than what it is in itself. However, if the categorizing goes on in addition to understanding of the text as it is different from the other works in the various categories, then the special knowledge which results from genre and other categorical descriptions and groupings can enrich our understanding just as our understanding has been enriched by our relationship with the other critical perspectives in this study: cultural, biographical, historical, post-structural, and ideological.
NOTES


6 Harold Kolb, Jr. *The Illusion of Life: American Realism as a Literary Form* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1969). All further references to this work appear in the text.
Michael Davitt Bell. "Mark Twain, 'Realism,' and Huckleberry Finn" in New Essays on Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ed. Louis J. Budd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 35-59. All further references to this work appear in the text.


For Howells, realism was inextricably tied to authorial purpose, especially as that purpose was moral and didactic. In fact, the "ruling idea of [Howells's] criticism is that fiction is justified by its realism," according to Elsa Nettles in Language, Race, and Social Class in Howell's America (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), p. 63. "His idea of realism rests on the conviction that people are bound to each other by their humanity, that in the speech and manners of a
particular class or group are revealed universals of human nature. 'What is true to humanity anywhere is true everywhere' . . . Howells defined the realist as one who 'feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men" (pp. 67-68).

CONCLUSION

American-ness Ignored: The Powers of American Literature

"Men grind and grind in the mill of a truism, and nothing comes out but what was put in. But the moment they desert the tradition for a spontaneous thought, then poetry, wit, hope, virtue, learning, anecdote, all flock to their aid" [Ralph Waldo Emerson]

As an epigraph to my Introduction, I quoted Emerson's expression of longing for an American poet of genius; then I noted his later words of caution, "But I am not wise enough for a national criticism." Throughout this study, my claim has been that an institutional constituency created a national criticism, one that has exerted enormous influence over the study of American literature. It thus appears that while critics recognized Emerson's implicit challenge to American writers, they missed his caution about a national criticism.

In my study we have seen that many of these critics have intended to honor Emerson as the progenitor of American literature, yet, in doing so, they failed to acknowledge his important principles about an individualism that does not conform to institutional or societal expectations or depend upon confirmation from others. Furthermore, Emerson believed that an undue regard for the past and an adherence to the notion of
consistency would undermine genius and independence. My intention is not to explicate "Self-Reliance," but to show that—in their reverence for a writer like Emerson and in their desire for a unified, national approach—these institutional critics created a hermeneutic system which violates Emerson's work and other American literary texts. In fact, this American hermeneutics, by its very nature and intent, can only reduce and distort texts because they are explicated on the basis of the binaries of American-ness. Thus, while well-intentioned, neither the ends nor the means of their American hermeneutics allow these critics to honor or adequately explicate American literature.

As I have tried consistently to show in the examinations in the previous chapters, I do not wish to do away with the critical approaches that this institutional criticism has spawned. Instead, I want to give them the kind of self-awareness and evaluative means by which to empower them further. I also want to return to each American literary text its power as a unique artistic object as well as its power to illustrate certain, special kinds of knowledge that our five critical approaches can—but fail to—reveal: broadly cultural, biographical, historical/deconstructive, specifically cultural (feminist), and generic. I argue that these critical approaches fail because their methods—determined in
large part by the traditions of institutional criticism--
do not allow them to answer their important critical
questions. Thus, at the end of each chapter I offer
suggestions for revising those methods. Always, however,
the claims of the critics have a great deal to do with my
suggestions for revision as a metacritic.

At work in each of the revisions are my own
assumptions about the power of the text, about the
possibility of understanding someone else's text and
duplicating his/her method, about the recovery of
authorial intention and about the power of an a posteriori
method. Those assumptions reveal both my metacritical
position and my critical one.

From a metacritical point of view I contend that we
can honor all texts, literary and critical. In doing so,
I extend to each critic the right and power to view the
text in ways radically different from my own critical
position. For example, in chapter two, metacritically, I
get "inside" Alfred Kazin's critical agenda deeply enough
to duplicate his method, even his style. As I do so, I
can recognize that his adherence to traditional notions of
American-ness and his reliance on explaining that American-
ness in terms of binary oppositions limit his ability to
honor the texts and authors he sets out to honor and
explain.
From a critical perspective, however, I do not attend to all questions and methods; I attend to my own, and the texts being honored and examined are literary ones. If I use critical texts I try to understand them but do not incorporate their questions and methods into my own. Using Kazin again as an example, I can, as a practicing critic, see that he and I share some ideas about texts and about language, although he is interested in them as they reveal information about an author's life and I am interested in them as powerful and explicable acts of communication between an author and a reader. I may use him as a point of departure for my own method.

To offer another example: when I examine other critics—say, in chapter three, Kronick as deconstructionist—I discover that he is not interested in honoring the text. He doesn't believe in the referentiality of language much less power in texts. As a metacritic, I give him his question and look for ways to make his method more powerful. I see that he has undermined his own beliefs in the indeterminacy of language and in the impossibility of a history outside language by maintaining ties to the traditional paradigm of the American self. As a critic, however, I merely recognize that our principles and method are fundamentally different, and, again, I may use him as an example of a
critic whose work does something to a text I want to avoid.

What I want to do now is show more clearly how my metacritical and critical perspectives converge and diverge and what the significance and consequences of those similarities and differences are. Briefly, I will use my critical method on our test text, The Scarlet Letter. Then, I will act as metacritic on myself.

If I were to do a full reading of The Scarlet Letter, I would discuss the movement of the story--its progression—and how each event impinges on the other. I would talk about how certain signals are built into the text to raise or lower our expectations about certain consequences of certain actions. I would also argue that the text will end in a way consonant with what precedes that end.

I would begin with the idea that we are set up as readers to react in a certain manner to Hester Prynne even before the novel begins. For one thing, we are given "The Custom-House" sketch in which the narrator/Hawthorne discusses the difficulty of leaving a place where we have had important experiences—even bad ones. This narrator also "finds" the scarlet A in the Custom House and, holding it to his chest, fancies that it burns him. That
"A," he tells us belonged to one Hester Prynne of the Puritan days in Boston. We are also set up, as I have argued during this study, by the order of presentation (progression) as well as the means of presentation. What I mean is that, for example, Hester Prynne comes out of the jail only after we have been introduced to various Puritans whose vindictive anger at her is apparent. They have no compassion for her plight as an outcast and as mother alone with a new baby. Furthermore, Hawthorne makes Hester beautiful and these Puritans unappealing physically and emotionally.

When Hester appears, she maintains control over her raging emotions and her embarrassed shame, even when she recognizes her husband, Roger Chillingworth, in the audience. Only when she returns to the prison does she reveal her turmoil: "... [she] was found to be in a state of nervous excitement that demanded constant watchfulness ... As night approached, it proving impossible to quell her insubordination by rebuke or threats of punishment ... the jailer thought fit to introduce a physician" (p. 70). Even then, however, Hawthorne lets us know that we are not to worry excessively about this strong woman. For one thing, her turmoil takes the form of insubordination not subject to "rebukes or threats of punishment." She is not, in other words, fearful or withdrawn; she is angry and violent.
When the doctor arrives, it is her husband, Chillingworth, whom she has not seen for years. He gives her a medication to relax her, and she says to him, assuring us again of her strength:

'I have thought of death,' said she,—'have wished for it,—would even have prayed for it, were it fit that such as I would pray for anything. Yet if death be in this cup, I bid thee think again, ere thou beholdest me quaff it. See! It is even now at my lips' (p. 74-75).

We know she will not commit suicide, that she will not "perpetrate violence on herself." The chapters that follow emphasize further her sources of inner strength and her intelligence.

I am arguing that, from my critical perspective, these signals are in the text of The Scarlet Letter; in other words, my perspective assumes that the text is an affective structure designed to move the emotions and intellects of an implied audience by an implied author. I do not bring the signals to the text, and my knowledge of history and culture help me only in so far as I know what suicide, murder, and revenge are. If I am right about the signals, then as readers we do not continue to worry about Hester Prynne. We are asked to anticipate—not a happy ending for her (too much has happened for that outcome), but one which accords with her strength.

Hawthorne has agendas in his narrative other than Hester Prynne, however. He also focuses on Arthur
Dimmesdale, about whom we are never given the same assurances as we are about Hester. In fact, we become less sure about him as the novel progresses. In the beginning he shows a kind of authority and control as one of the Puritan leaders of Boston. We are shown, too, how revered and adored he is as the minister of the town. However, as Hester survives, he declines. When he "shrieks" into the night while standing on the scaffold, we (and Hester) are worried. Hawthorne then moves the focus of his story away from Hester and to Arthur (and to his nemesis, Chillingworth). When Dimmesdale further declines, we are not surprised, nor are we surprised when, after the Election Day sermon, he confesses on the scaffold and dies.

In my discussion of the movement of the story and the signals and expectations, I am also discussing character. So far I have discussed them as mimetic beings, who, like real people, feel and think. I could also talk about them as synthetic constructs—as characters in a narrative who act in certain ways at certain times for certain artistic purposes. Moreover, I could discuss them as carriers of themes which were important to Hawthorne.

I want to argue that my method of a posteriori reading—that is, letting the text determine the way I talk about it—will allow me to discuss, should I choose to do so, every textual detail. Further, I could discuss
them as they affect each other and as they affect the
reader in terms of her experience of reading that text.

Since I promised only a brief reading of The Scarlet
Letter, I will now move to my metacritical position.
Since we can safely assume that I know what I mean, I
won't have to try to understand myself. Thus, I will go
on to assess the powers and limits of my critical method.
The claims of this method are its ability to discuss all
the details of a text. Since it does read from an a
posteriori position, it has that potential, whether or not
any practicing critic of this method ever goes to that
extent or not. The limitation, then, would be in the
practicing critic and not in the method itself. It can,
in other words, live up to its claim of comprehensively
explaining a text.

The a priori reading, as we have seen in the
chapters, instead commits the reader/critic to finding
details which prove the critical notion brought to the
text from outside it. For example, if I decide ahead of
time that The Scarlet Letter is a romance, I can either
read every detail in terms of that generic notion, or I
can foreground only those details which most successfully
prove my point.

As a metacritic I can see that my critical method is
adequate to the task of looking at textual details and
explaining them because it does so as each detail impinges
on other details. In other words, I am not examining the
details in light of my commitment to an extrinsic ideology
or philosophy but, instead, in light of my commitment to a
philosophical/theoretical position, which believes not
only that such textual work can be done but should be
done. (Since I will not allow myself to say that I am
outside theory, I cannot allow myself here to say that my
position is outside ideology. It is, however, an ideology
which begins in the text rather than using the text as a
place to discuss extrinsic ideological commitments.)

It is here, I think, that one of the limits of my
critical approach becomes apparent. The context of the
text, so important in all the approaches examined in this
study, is not apparent in my approach. While, as a
critic, I want to applaud that "return to the text," as a
metacritic, I want to see it as having limitations like
that of the other approaches. In other words, it offers
one special kind of knowledge—textual knowledge as
opposed to biographical or historical or political. Now,
that limitation is not one which is inherent in question,
method, or conclusions of my framework; in those ways, as
I said, it lives up to all its claims. In other words, it
cannot be faulted for offering only a certain, special
kind of knowledge because that it what it sets out (and
claims) to offer. However, if I decide here, because of
the power of this critical method to do what it says it
will do, that the other questions and their (revised) methods should be abandoned, I have failed to take into account the power of my position as a metacritic.

The power in that position is, I hope, apparent. It allows us the kind of examination and evaluation that have gone on throughout this study. It allows, as well, for multiple critical questions answered by multiple methods, from which we draw multiple conclusions. This multiplicity can only enrich the texts that my critical method purports to desire. My metacritical position also allows me to choose which question and method I want to use, depending on which kind of special knowledge I am after at any given time. In other words, I do not have to abandon any of the critical approaches; instead, I have to recognize their various purposes, and to choose one appropriate for the ends I have in mind. Furthermore, my metacritical position frees me from the constraints imposed by ideologies that will not allow me to adopt other methods or to view literary texts as anything other than political propaganda. Finally, this metacriticism forces me always—whatever critical approach I use—to be aware of my theoretical and critical positions and to examine and assess them.

While I want to argue that my metacriticism is appropriate for all literary texts of all national origins, I want now to return to my concerns about
American literature. An awareness of our theoretical and critical perspectives—as well as our willingness to examine the assumptions behind those perspectives and to assess our critical practices—will allow us to be more effective critics, teachers, and students of American literature. Furthermore, such awareness will allow us to realize that we write and teach in response to what has preceded us in the critical field. Several generations of students have been trained to believe that American identity (American-ness) is revealed in American literature. By questioning the basis of that training, I am questioning what it implies about the nature of both that character and that literature. At stake in the study are the ways the next generation of students think about their own national character and the way masterworks do and do not contribute to their understanding of that character. Because our study of American literature is closely tied to our notions of a national self, we influence our students in the ways they think of that self. Thus, what is at issue here are the consequences, further reaching than the classroom or the pages of an academic journal, for the ways Americans think about themselves and their history.


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Fiction and Repetition??


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