

# Hawthorne's Struggle for a Masculine Identity in "The Custom-House"

OHNO, Misa

My aim in this paper is to reread Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" and to study his ambiguous attitude toward his society's norms of gender, making references to various biographical and cultural material. Assuming that literary works are largely influenced by the circumstances in which they are written, I consider Hawthorne's works as a literary expression specific to his time and place.

As many historians' studies on American domestic life have revealed, mid-nineteenth-century America was a society which had imposed gender stereotypes on the people.<sup>(1)</sup> The middle class acquired a new social status in the early nineteenth century, after the economic revolutions ended the old system of apprenticeships and transformed the United States into a market society. The middle-class families, most of whose fathers engaged in non-manual, white color

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(1) Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1770-1900* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977); Mary Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1830-1860* (New York: Haworth Press, 1982); Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

occupations, liked to distinguish themselves from the working class and created distinctive homes peculiar to their class. They established new forms of normalization of domestic life, assigned separate spheres to men and women, invented the categories of manhood and womanhood, and intensified gender separation. The middle-class ideology put men under the pressure that they should succeed in the competitive world of the capitalist democratic country and have enough income to support their family. On the other hand, women were removed from the public realm of production and given private roles to keep house and to take care of their husbands and children as wives and mothers.<sup>(2)</sup>

“The Custom-House,” the autobiographical essay in which Hawthorne dramatizes his three-year experience as a surveyor of the port of Salem, reveals his painful effort to construct a masculine identity. In antebellum America, where there is little chance of pure literature achieving brilliant success, Hawthorne as a male writer strayed from the ideal of manhood.<sup>(3)</sup> Nevertheless, he lived in circumstances that insistently required of him to succeed in the male world.<sup>(4)</sup> He felt uncomfortable with his community which defined masculinity in terms of success in capitalistic

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(2) Hawthorne was born and raised in a middle-class family and his way of thinking is penetrated with middle-class ideology. For example, Walter Herbert describes how the married life of Hawthorne and Sophia as well as their own parents' homes exemplified the domestic ideals that became dominant in the early nineteenth century. Walter Herbert, *Dearest Beloved: The Hawthornes and the Making of the Middle-Class Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

(3) In nineteenth-century America, those who engaged in writing were considered to be feminine, because of their workroom being in the home, the difficulty of self-support, and their concern with the human mind. Furthermore, in those days, the popular literature written mainly by women writers won great popularity. The public for novels was also entirely feminine. See Rachel Bowlby, *Just looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985), chaps, 1. 6.

(4) The eldest son of a distinguished family, he lost his father when he was very young, and was raised as the only man in the family surrounded by his mother and two sisters. His maternal uncle and foster father, Robert Manning, had great hopes for Nathaniel to be a socially respectable man. See Gloria Erlich, *Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction: The Tenacious Web* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1977).

enterprises. At the same time, he internalized the gender stereotypes of the time. He assumed a complex attitude toward the gender structure his community had created.

In this paper, I shall discuss Hawthorne's complicated attitude toward the nineteenth-century gender norms, taking notice of his deviation from stereotyped manhood and his struggle for a masculine identity seen in "The Custom-House." In the first part, I shall examine the structure of opposition between the first floor and the second floor of the customhouse, Hawthorne's dismissal from the male world of the first floor, and his commitment to the feminine culture of the second floor. However, he cannot reject male identity completely. In various parts of the essay, he conceals feminine influences on him and tries to connect his identity with masculinity. In the second part, I shall study this rejection of feminine influence and identification with male authority by referring to some biographical material.

### 1. Hawthorne's Commitment to Female Culture

The world of the first floor of the Salem Custom House is the opposite of that of the second floor. The first floor where the officials provide everyday customs service is an exclusively male world. All of Hawthorne's colleagues are men, and women do not put their foot inside the building: "it is easy to conclude, from the general slovenliness of the place, that this is a sanctuary into which womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access."<sup>(5)</sup> Customhouse servants show some characteristics of a typical nineteenth-century man. Practicality and usefulness in business is essential to the servants. The official who was brought up from boyhood in the customhouse and who is "the Custom-House in himself" (24) is "prompt, acute, clear-minded; with an eye that

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(5) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Vol. 1 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, eds., William Charvat, et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), p. 7. All subsequent quotations from *The Scarlet Letter*, identified by page number in the text, refer to this edition.

saw through all perplexities, and a faculty of arrangement that made them vanish, as by the waving of an enchanter's wand" (24). The books on the shelves, including "a score or two of volumes of the Acts of Congress, and a bulky Digest of the Revenue Laws" (7), indicate the power the officials wield.

The room on the second floor has not been used, because the commercial activity of Salem has not flourished, though the extra room was built in expectation of future prosperity. The official documents piled up in the room have been completely forgotten by the customs officers, and many of the documents have nothing to do with public business. The second floor has been ignored by the male culture of the customhouse.

On the second floor there exists a world alien to the practical male world of the first floor. Hawthorne now uses a different kind of language from that used to describe the first floor. Words such as "fancy," "instincts," "sensibilities," and "sensation" prevail. He rummages among the official documents, "exerting my fancy, sluggish with little use" (29). When he discovers a small package, he feels that "there was something about it that quickened an instinctive curiosity" (29). When he puts the letter on his chest, he "experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat" (32).

The letter A that he finds among the documents lures him into a world in which things cannot be explained by reason. Despite its powerful appeal, he cannot understand its meaning and does not know why he is attracted to it:

My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities but evading the analysis of my mind. (31)

The trace of gold embroidery seen in the letter is a work of art, "wrought . . . with wonderful skill of needlework," which gives "evidence of a now forgotten art, not to be recovered even by the process of picking out the threads" (31). The embroidery

gives Hawthorne a chance to be involved with the artistic talent and the product of lively imagination. The manuscript written by Surveyor Pue, which accompanies the letter, says that the letter has something to do with a woman named Hester Prynne and that she has been “a kind of voluntary nurse” and given “advice in all matters, especially those of the heart” (32). Hawthorne is drawn by the name of Hester into the world of “the heart.”

The ideology of nineteenth-century America divided men and women on the basis of gender and erected the categories of manhood and womanhood. The physicians and the psychologists insisted that women were fundamentally different from men by nature. In their opinion, the intellect dominated in males, while in females the nervous system and the emotions prevailed over the rational faculties. A widely held view of heredity assumed that the father was responsible for intelligence, the mother for emotions.<sup>(6)</sup> Public opinion endorsed this distinction. Nancy Cott says that Americans of Hawthorne’s time accepted that “men were superior in strength and in all the rational capacities . . . but women surpassed them in sensitivities, grace, tenderness, imagination, compliance—the qualities of the heart.”<sup>(7)</sup> On the first floor of the custom house, masculine practicability and rationality are the dominant values. The second floor is full of images of “the qualities of the heart” and is associated with femininity. The opposition between the two floors corresponds to that between masculinity and femininity.

In the competitive capitalistic society of nineteenth-century America, creative activity is closely connected with femininity.<sup>(8)</sup> The first floor is a place which does not accord with writing. Hawthorne’s fellow officials have never read his writing. The routine in the customhouse offers him no materials for novels. “Literature, its exertions and objects, were now of little moment in my regard. I cared not, at this

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(6) Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of American History* 60 (1973), pp. 334-39.

(7) Cott, p. 161.

(8) See note 3.

period, for books; they were apart from me” (25-26). But the letter A and the manuscript written by Surveyor Pue reawaken the writer’s creative power, recall his mind “to its old track” (33), and raise his hope of writing a story. The first floor is a manly business-oriented society having no relation to artistry. The second floor, favorable to artistic sensitivity, is a feminine world of imagination and creativity.

At the end of the essay, Hawthorne is discharged from the Salem Custom House, vows to sever his relations with the customhouse, and becomes a novelist. He leaves the male world of the first floor, and decides to write a story, using the materials found on the second floor. The decision to write a story about the letter A implies a refusal of nineteenth-century gender ideals.

## **2. Hawthorne’s Denial of Feminine Influence and Identification with Male Authority**

Scott S. Derrick, in *Monumental Anxieties*, discusses the mechanisms for the denial of women’s contribution to culture. These mechanisms, he says, can be seen especially in traditionally valued nineteenth-century male texts, because the writers desired to have cultural authority as successful male authors though the presence of women in literary culture at that time called the masculinity of literature into question, and because male writers found themselves alienated from dominant ideas of masculinity.<sup>(9)</sup>

In some parts of “The Custom-House,” we can see Hawthorne, who denies the influence of females on him, detaches himself from femininity, and tries to identify himself with male authority. When Hawthorne presents his family tree in “The Custom-House,” he begins with two Puritan ancestors on his father’s side. They appear in the essay as men of power, patriarchal figures. The first ancestor is described as a “bearded, and sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor,” who

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(9) Scott S. Derrick, *Monumental Anxieties: Homoerotic Desire and Feminine Influence in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century U. S. Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 1-2.

exercised his authority in Salem as a soldier, legislator, judge, and church leader, and who “trode the unworn street with such a stately port” with “his Bible and his sword” (9). Next, Hawthorne introduces the son of the first ancestor, who also made a name for himself in Salem. These ancestors are known to have used their power to sacrifice women. The first ancestor treated crucially a Quaker woman and the son took part in the persecution of the “witches” in 1692. They despise Hawthorne because he is a useless story-writer:

“What is he?” murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other. “A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!” (10)

Hawthorne insists that there is a strong bond between these ancestors and himself, though they refuse to accept his talent and have oppressed women: “strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine” (10). Hawthorne, furthermore, presents his family line as follows:

From father to son, for above a hundred years, they followed the sea; a gray-headed shipmaster, in each generation, retiring from the quarter-deck to the homestead, while a boy of fourteen took the hereditary place before the mast. . . . The boy, also, in due time, passed from the fore-castle to the cabin, spent a tempestuous manhood, and returned from his world-wanderings, to grow old, and die, and mingle his dust with the natal earth. (10-11)

In reality, Hawthorne took over almost nothing from his father and his paternal forefathers. Hawthorne’s father died when Nathaniel was four years old, and even during his lifetime he seldom stayed at home, because he was a sea captain and often went on voyages. After his father’s death, the Hawthorne family was looked after by maternal relatives, and cut their connection with the paternal relations. The maternal uncle, Robert Manning, paid most of the expenses to bring up

Hawthorne.<sup>(10)</sup>

Recent critics have revealed that much of the life and works of Hawthorne was shaped by his contact with women. For example, *Hawthorne and Women* edited by John Idol, Jr. and Melinda Ponder and *Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction* written by Gloria Erlich, give enough evidence to prove that Hawthorne owes his literary success to the help of women around him. Hawthorne's mother and two sisters encouraged him to write fiction. Especially his elder sister Elizabeth had a share in his creative activities. His wife Sophia devoted herself to his success as a writer, too. She freed her husband entirely from household chores and arranged things so that he could give himself up wholly to writing.<sup>(11)</sup> *Atheistic Headaches* by Leland Person studies Hawthorne's love letters to Sophia and shows the influence of Sophia on his power of expression.<sup>(12)</sup>

When Hawthorne writes about his family relations, he makes choices. He eliminates the women who have had a direct influence on him, and instead stresses his strong connection with elite males, who have achieved success in the society. He likes to present himself as a descendent of men who have made a great contribution to society.

Explaining the connection between Salem and his family, he mentions the crimes of two Puritan ancestors—the persecution of the Quaker woman and the persecution of the witches. He continues:

Planted deep, in the town's earliest infancy and childhood, by these two earnest and energetic men, the race has ever since subsisted here; always, too, in respectability, never, so far as I have known, disgraced by a single unworthy member (21)

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(10) Erlich, pp. 8, 36-37, 58-60.

(11) John Idol Jr. and Melinda M. Ponder, ed, *Hawthorne and Women: Engendering and Expanding the Hawthorne Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Erlich, chap. 3.

(12) Leland Person, *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), chap. 5.

He eliminates an event which brought disgrace on the family, but which he might fittingly have included in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*. In 1689, Nicholas Manning was accused of incest with his two sisters. Nicholas fled into the forest, but his sisters were arrested and sentenced to sit in public during a sermon with a paper on their heads which indicated their crime by a capital letter.<sup>(13)</sup> Hawthorne cannot have remained ignorant of this event, because the details are written in Felt's *Annals of Salem* and because he had made a thorough investigation into Salem history. Hawthorne dares not relate this dishonorable event that befell his maternal forefathers, and instead tells of the sin of two Puritan men of power, thus identifying himself with elite males.

At the beginning of "The Custom-House," Hawthorne says that the purpose of the essay is to explain "how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession," and provide "proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained," of which he puts himself in the position of "editor, or very little more" (4). In the latter half of the essay, he makes up the story that, one day, hunting for a sheaf of official documents on the second floor of the customhouse, he found a letter A, covered with a piece of yellow parchment, which proved to be the commission written and signed by Governor Shirley for the purpose of appointing Jonathan Pue to the post of surveyor of the Salem Custom-House. Along with the yellow parchment, he says, he found the manuscript, written by Surveyor Pue, summarizing the life of the woman who wore the letter, and creates a story about the woman, using the letter.

Some critics have discussed the actual sources of *The Scarlet Letter*. For example, Nina Baym, in her essay, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother," remarks on the direct influence of Hawthorne's mother on *The Scarlet Letter*. Baym points out that Hester is given an image of maternity rather than of selfhood, and that throughout the story she is occupied with the problem of being a mother. She is never

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(13) Erlich, pp. 35-36.

separated from Pearl.<sup>(14)</sup> Actually, there are some similarities between Hawthorne's mother Elizabeth and Hester. Elizabeth, like Hester, was a black-haired, gray-eyed beautiful lady.<sup>(15)</sup> She bore Hawthorne's elder sister seven months and five days after the wedding.<sup>(16)</sup> Such evidence of premarital sexual relations ought to have caused family humiliation, because the Hawthornes were a distinguished family and because bridal pregnancies were rare at that time. Elizabeth lost her husband at the age of twenty-eight, went back to her parents' home, and never married again. These circumstances might have made her look like a virgin mother in the eyes of Hawthorne.<sup>(17)</sup> In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is kept apart from her husband and her lover. In the first scaffold scene, the image of the Virgin Mary is projected on to Hester. As some critics point out, the death of Elizabeth along with his dismissal from the customhouse could have been the spur for Hawthorne to create *The Scarlet Letter*.

Thomas Mitchell also discusses the model for Hester in *Hawthorne's Fuller Mystery*. He studies the relationship between Margaret Fuller and Hawthorne in detail, and insists that Fuller informs Hawthorne's total conception of Hester.<sup>(18)</sup> David Reynolds in *Beneath the American Renaissance* asserts that *The Scarlet Letter* makes good use of various features of heroines in contemporary popular literature.<sup>(19)</sup>

It is certain that Hawthorne sought in the women around him or in books the

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(14) Nina Baym, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother, A Biographical Speculation," *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 36-56.

(15) Philip Young, *Hawthorne's Secret: An Un-Told Tale* (Boston: Davie R, Godine, 1984), p. 13.

(16) Young, p. 13, Baym, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother," pp. 41-42.

(17) Erlich, pp. 28-29.

(18) Thomas R. Mitchell, *Hawthorne's Fuller Mystery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), chap. 5.

(19) David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp. 337-86.

materials for *The Scarlet Letter*. Yet in "The Custom-House" he never mentions these women at all, though one purpose of writing the essay is to let the reader know about the creative process. Instead, he makes up the episode about the letter A and his eighteenth-century predecessor Surveyor Pue. He thus tries to detach his authorship from feminine influence and identify it with male authorities, such as the customhouse, official documents, the commission, Governor Shirley, and Surveyor Pue.

In various ways Hawthorne tries to avoid having his identity connected with femininity, and to place himself among successful men. This reveals his own complex feeling about being a writer in nineteenth-century America. He aspired to develop his literary talent, but did not want it to be associated with feminine traits.

This paper has offered a reading of Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" and an argument about his ambivalence toward the gender stereotype which nineteenth-century middle-class culture had produced. "The Custom-House" reveals a complicated attitude: he adapts himself to the expectations of his society's gender norms while resisting them.

Middle-class Americans of the first half of the nineteenth century regarded manhood and womanhood as complementary opposites. Their conceptions of gender assigned to men the duties of working outside the home and earning money. Women were expected to specialize in domestic management. The views of medical circles at that time legitimized different spheres for men and women as the result of biological differences.

In the middle-class culture, the writer's social position seemed marginal. Male writers found themselves estranged from the middle-class masculine norms of competitiveness in the capitalistic republic. The writers secluded themselves from the commercial world. They concerned themselves with women's sphere of interest such as the issue of the human heart. It was difficult to succeed in the literary profession. In those days, furthermore, the best-selling of sentimental novels

written by women made the masculinity of the literary profession questionable.

Nathaniel Hawthorne as a fiction writer was at odds with the masculine standard. Yet he attached importance to meeting his society's expectations. In "The Custom-House," he draws a line between the male world of the first floor of the customhouse and the female world of the second floor, and commits himself to the second floor. At the same time, he is attracted by male authority. He denies feminine influence on him and connects himself with elite males. "The Custom-House" attests Hawthorne's painful struggle to construct a masculine identity.