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# Faith and (un)certainty in the writing of stowe, hawthorne, and dickinson: the intersecting language of theology and feminism

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**FAITH AND (UN)CERTAINTY IN THE WRITING OF  
STOWE, HAWTHORNE, AND DICKINSON:  
THE INTERSECTING LANGUAGE OF  
THEOLOGY AND FEMINISM**

by

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**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School  
of Wayne State University,  
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Advisor

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Date

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## DEDICATION

*to Timothy, Julia, Lewis, Rachel, and Gabrielle  
whose individual and creative responses  
to their experiences and environment  
give me hope*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to many people who have shared their knowledge, time, and expertise with me over the course of my graduate career. My dissertation committee members of Ross Pudaloff, Renata Wasserman, and Robert Aguirre have provided their thoughtful and critical input time and again over many revisions of this material. Ken Jackson has also provided me with input and introduced me to the ideas of dynamic thinkers in the area of religion, theology, and philosophy. My committee members have inspired me with ideas, provided timely book recommendations, and challenged me to be ever more transparent in my writing. Ross has been dedicated throughout this process in spite of his well-deserved retirement to warmer climes. His support through my sometimes bumpy dissertation process was not diluted by the distance. My outside reader, Joe Csicsila, has not only been a professional and academic advisor, but a true friend whose encouragement and honesty kept me going at times of self-doubt and confusion.

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My parents, Julia and Roger Lussier instilled in me a concern for my fellow human beings, which has given me the impetus to develop my talents through my continued education. My love of reading, I can only imagine, was fostered by my father's example. Although no longer with us, his influence on my life is lasting.

My immediate family has definitely experienced the "ripple effect" from my choice to return to school. Besides taking much of my time and attention, my education has profoundly changed me and how I view the world. My children, Tim, Julia, Lewis, Rachel, and Gabrielle, at different stages in their lives, have all experienced these changes with me. They have been important collaborators as my higher education paralleled their own higher educational pursuits, which have been varied. Each of them is a remarkable human being whose love and passion for life, the arts, knowledge, and justice inspire me daily. Our many lively discussions often provided the stimulus to my research pursuits.

My husband, Gary, could not have imagined what he was in for when he encouraged me, over ten years ago, to return to school for my degree. He has, by far, had to make the most sacrifices and had to challenge himself as I brought new ideas to the table that have affected many areas of our shared lives. Thank you, Gary, for your understanding, and willingness to engage in this growing process.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The nineteenth century in America was a period of transition and challenge for established Christian religions. The federal disestablishment of religion in the late eighteenth century weakened the hold of mainstream Christian clergy as the official representation of Christianity. Religious expression became more individualized, as people were encouraged to read and interpret the Bible for themselves by circuit riding preachers who also promoted a spirituality defined by individual conversion experience. Numerous large revival meetings were taking place in rural, open air locations, and experimental ideas were being put forth as legitimate expressions of living a spiritual life in the form of varying utopian communities and Transcendentalist thought.<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising then, that much nineteenth-century American literature incorporates religious ideas sometimes as a moral yardstick to the action taking place in a novel or in competition with competing rationalistic or capitalistic perspectives, and in some instances critiquing long-held approaches to religion. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and certain poems of Emily Dickinson express religious themes in ways that emphasize emerging divergent responses to these dramatic shifts in religious thought and expression. An analysis of both the content and style of the language that each of these authors employ helps us to understand their

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<sup>1</sup> See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989).

approach to transcendence. The symbolic structure of language and the relationship of words to the objects and ideas they represent bears a resemblance to the symbols employed in the expression of transcendence and religious belief. Each of these authors expresses a different kind of relationship between symbols/words and the ideas they signify. The way each author conceives of language and of the reliability of words to consistently and accurately convey meaning parallels what they express about the reliability of human conceptions of the divine. Stowe represents the sentimental writing popular in the mid-nineteenth century, while Hawthorne and Dickinson, I suggest, exemplify a “counter-sentimental” resistance that indicates a different understanding of language and symbolic systems, in general.<sup>2</sup>

The ability to apprehend or “know” God is what is at issue in the comparison of the texts of these three authors. The authors’ language and approach to symbolic representation speaks to their understanding of this divine comprehension. Stowe’s assumption that her language carries a universal message of truth displays her reliance on symbolic meaning. Further, she asserts a completely graspable God-figure through her association of God-love with mother-love. Hawthorne’s text, in contrast, emphasizes the interpretive quality of language and his novel undermines the assurances of the Puritan religious and their ability to define what is godly behavior. By extension, their

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<sup>2</sup> See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008) 55. Berlant states, “An author’s or a text’s refusal to reproduce the sublimation of subaltern struggles into conventions of emotional satisfaction and redemptive fantasy might be called ‘countersentimental,’ a resistant strain within the sentimental domain” (55).

ability to “know” God comes under scrutiny. Looking at Dickinson’s conceit of using a dead speaker in her poems, I suggest that she undermines the structures upon which her peers were establishing identity. Mainly, these were conventional religious understandings of God and the ability to “know” what the afterlife entailed. Also, her poems often transpose physical death into a kind of mental death. Referencing her letters as well as her poems on the topic of possibility, I point out that the mental death Dickinson was mainly concerned with was a blind acceptance of a reductionist notion of God.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* attempts to effect a political change through a challenge to the reader’s religious and moral sense of responsibility. The novel presents a very feminized version of Protestantism, delineated in a well-established American domestic model to appeal to the reader’s religious sensibilities.<sup>3</sup> She accomplishes this through a sentimental rhetoric that assumes “right” feeling and moral obligation on the part of the audience. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Emily Dickinson’s poetry, on the other hand, express a tentative posture towards one’s ability to know and decipher meaning and this uncertainty is, in itself, put forward as an ethical response. Their emphasis upon language, in particular, language that expresses a hyper-awareness of its interpretive quality, anticipates a much later development: a turn toward language in postmodern philosophy and literature. Their texts suggest an approach toward the divine that acknowledges

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<sup>3</sup> See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1988).

individualized response and human limits of understanding.<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* critiques the universal Law for its inability to accommodate the individual and also challenges the certainty that underlies universal applications of religion and law. Certain poems of Dickinson's also suggest that uncertainty is necessary to experience the limitless and infinite idea of a divine. Only in this attitude or posture, they suggest, are concepts of God kept free from becoming mere reflections of human experience or cultural constructs. Their language challenges the assumptions that Stowe's text relies on.

These authors' texts will be analyzed for both the style of language they employ and the content of their message. I consider how Stowe's sentimental prose, Hawthorne's ambiguous prose, and Dickinson's poetic language work in conjunction with the themes of what they write and how their use of language suggests an approach toward their understanding of the divine. Assumptions about meaning function similarly in language as they do in the symbolic structures imbedded in religious discourse. To be concerned with language use is, itself, a materialist approach to language.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, to be aware of how understandings of God are influenced by culture and language use, can be

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<sup>4</sup> The body of work addressing both Hawthorne's and Dickinson's religious influences is vast. Recommended for Dickinson's religious influences see: Joan Burbick, "One Unbroken Company": Religion and Emily Dickinson," *The New England Quarterly* 53.1 (1980): 62-75; Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and her Culture: The Soul's Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984); Beth Maclay Doriani, *Emily Dickinson: Daughter of Prophecy* (Amherst: Univ of Massachusetts P, 1996); Richard E. Brantley, *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Jane Donahue Eberwein, "'Where – Omnipresence – fly?' Calvinism as Impetus to Spiritual Amplitude," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 14.2 (2005): 12-23.

<sup>5</sup> See David Bleich, "Materiality, Genre, and Language Use: Introduction," *College English*, 65:5 (May 2003), 469.

understood as a materialist approach to transcendence. But further, the materialist approach emphasizes the individual, particular experience of life over universalizing stereotypes and because of this creates a destabilizing effect. Where variety and interpretation abound there is greater room for uncertainty. In Hawthorne's and Dickinson's writing, the emphasis on the material aspect of language is the element that produces the author's insistence on the uncertainty of their grasp of the divine. For them language expresses not only the mind, but the body. The divine is not only apprehended by the mind, but by the body as well. I will be using the terms "material" and "physical" somewhat interchangeably. The definition of physical I reference is concerned with how natural phenomena are perceived through the senses. Typically, when referencing an object, I will use the term material; and when referring to subjective experience of the material world, I will speak of the physical. By drawing our attention to this material aspect of both language and spirituality, Hawthorne and Dickinson disrupt the Platonic dualism of the realm of ideas and the realm of the material world, which has so influenced Western thought and religion. The material no longer occupies the debased position within the dialectic, but moves into a different kind of relationship to the spiritual. Ultimately, what their texts imply is a spirituality that respects physical experience.

Stowe's use of sentimental language in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* maintains the traditional binary between the ideal symbolic and the physical. I employ Karen Sanchez-Eppler's discussion of the overlapping concerns of abolitionism and

women's rights to argue that Stowe's sentimental language, although outwardly expressing a concern for the physical well-being of slaves and a desire to bring her readers into a particular encounter with their suffering, instead stereotypes the slave population. I agree with Sanchez-Eppler's point that sentimental language disguises an unacknowledged repression of physical desire. Just as women remained under the patriarchal confinement of a domestic model that elevated a "moral, emotional, and fundamentally spiritual code that devalues bodily constraints to focus on the soul,"<sup>6</sup> this same model infiltrates Stowe's novel to the point of defining freedom for black slaves through the debasement or removal of their bodies: Tom loses his life from a brutal whipping; and Eliza, George, Cassy, and Topsy all are eventually displaced to other lands. However, what is important to Stowe is that morally and spiritually these characters "succeed." They all have conversion experiences at some point that makes any physical suffering secondary or even desirable if it brings about the necessary spiritual conversion. The spiritual conversion that is necessary is to a very specific expression of Christianity.

My interest lies in the language that makes it possible for Stowe to shift the concern for black slaves from their physical suffering to their perceived spiritual need, while always communicating a narrative of concern for the physical well-being of others. I propose that sentimental language as it was often used in early to mid-nineteenth century literature carries an inherent

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *Representations* 24 (fall 1988): 435

contradiction: It references the words and phrases of concern for physicality through its emotional appeal, but structurally it is a mode of language devoid of the materiality of experience through its reliance upon the symbolic. It is a form of language that relies heavily upon the separation of mind and body rather than putting the mind in the context of the body. This is exemplified in Tom's declaration to Legree's claim that he owns Tom, body and soul: "No! no! no! my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You havent' bought it,--ye can't buy it!" (309). Tom's claim to his soul being untouchable by Legree has the effect of emphasizing Stowe's clear delineation between body and soul, while also implying that to own his body is permissible. This spiritual life, completely separated from Tom's physical existence exhibits Stowe's own beliefs. This life of the soul, which is conflated in the novel with the life of the mind and spiritual assent, is represented through language, the symbolic. Language is what sets human beings apart from other species and as long as this separation between mind and body is emphasized, language is conceived in very symbolic terms, separated from the material or experiential. I argue that Stowe's use of language directly correlates with a discrete and entirely graspable understanding of God.

The writings of Hawthorne and Dickinson, by contrast, suggest that language is rooted in the physical, material experience of life. They achieve this stylistically through metaphor and ambiguous language. Thematically, Hawthorne's novel is concerned with the slippage of language, how meaning shifts based on the actions that are connected with the words. He connects how language is conceived to the practice of religion by using a seventeenth-century

Puritan community as the exemplars of a systematic approach to language and religion. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter* is concerned with a religious discourse as an organizing framework; the difference is that Stowe wholeheartedly employs this organizing principle while Hawthorne calls it into question. Dickinson uses themes of death, possibility, and uncertainty in many of her poems to suggest that genuine contemplation of the Divine will never result in a methodical approach to God but an individualized experience of encountering transcendence.

To understand how the concept of language materiality is being applied to these texts, two sources are helpful. One aspect of language materiality is explained in Julia Kristeva's psycholinguistic theory, the other in Kenneth Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Kristeva's theory of language development departs from Lacan's where the subject enters the symbolic realm of the father with the onset of language, while simultaneously rejecting attachment to the mother and the emphasis on physical needs. Kristeva proposes a theory that is not based on an either/or premise. For her, language appropriation does not require a rejection of the mother and the attending physicality of communication, but expands upon the physical to include the symbolic representation of words. Her theory breaks down the binary between the physical and the symbolic by suggesting a continuum between the two where the subject is constantly relying on both the body as initiator of physical need and the mind as the repository of the symbolic. To conceive of language as only a symbolic function is to neglect the physical connection that gives signification its broader meaning or purpose.

She terms the physical aspect of language the “semiotic.”<sup>7</sup> Kristeva suggests that poetic language is most exemplary of the physical properties of language not only because it relies on rhythm and intonation, but because it underscores the *process* of signification and thereby challenges the fixity of the law and the univocality of totalizing systems of thought.<sup>8</sup> Kristeva’s theory lends itself to an analysis of these authors’ works that considers the psychology of religion and the role of language in conceptions of self and other.

Kenneth Burke makes a similar distinction within language by identifying semantic and poetic meaning. The “semantic ideal” is based upon an assumed organization. He uses the example of a postal address. Through the elaborate system of the postal service a letter can be transmitted from point A to point B by the semantic formula of an address. The organization of the postal service constitutes a totality, made up of partial acts, that works because everyone involved assumes their role within that totality. Poetry, on the other hand, is not based on one correct meaning as with the semantic ideal. It requires a “filling out” or “giving body” to different proposed interpretations and for this reason contains an ethical or moral aspect to it. Burke’s “poetic ideal” encourages the

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<sup>7</sup> See Kelly Oliver, “Kristeva’s Revolutions,” Introduction, *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) “The symbolic is the structure or grammar that governs the ways in which symbols can refer. The semiotic element, on the other hand, is the organization of drives in language. It is associated with rhythms and tones that are meaningful parts of language and yet do not represent or signify something. . . the semiotic provides the motivation for engaging in signifying processes. . . The semiotic both motivates signification and threatens the symbolic element.” xiv-xv.

See also Julia Kristeva, “Revolution in Poetic Language,” *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 34-39.

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva 30-31. Also see Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Kristeva and Fanon: Revolutionary Violence and Ironic Articulation,” *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva’s Polis* ed. Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005) 57-75.

emotions in deciphering meaning, whereas the semantic attempts to eliminate emotion or attitude.<sup>9</sup> Although he doesn't refer to poetic meaning as a material or physical language, he is delineating a very similar property as Kristeva's semiotic. Burke's philosophy of language is pertinent because he establishes the effects of these two different kinds of language. The semantic meaning converts "a transitional stage into an institution . . . a fixity by giving it an established routine. It would prolong a moment into a 'way of life'" (138). Poetic meaning stresses "the rôle of the participant" and encourages variety and specificity. These effects of two different kinds of language or meaning are played out in the texts of Stowe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson. Their texts give insight into how institutionalized religion has used language "semantically" to suggest a fixed spirituality rather than emphasize individual interpretation and involvement or responsibility. The illusion of the symbolic order and the challenge that materiality, or physicality present to it, and also how the acknowledgement of this illusion works in conjunction with religious expression and ideas of God are at the heart of my research project. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe puts forward an expression of religion that is dependent on assumptions regarding prevailing religious beliefs or symbols, such as domestic resourcefulness equating to godliness, which were in turn dependent upon cultural gender constructions. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* challenges those very assumptions that are

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<sup>9</sup> See Kenneth Burke, "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 138-148.

based on “reading” behaviors and symbols, and Dickinson’s poems undermine the identity gained from participating in those symbolic assumptions.

Much of the literature that was popular in the early to mid-nineteenth century is characterized by sentimental domestic values and is didactic in expression. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is representative of this tradition. The language she employs in her novel is meant to evoke an emotional response from her readers. Based on the different descriptions of language materiality thus far given, Stowe’s language that is emotional in its delivery as well as in its intended goal could be interpreted as a use of language that relies on the “material” or physical. However, Chapter Two will argue that Stowe’s sentimental language mainly relies upon the symbolic and is semantic in nature. Hawthorne, though steeped in the Romantic tradition that utilizes symbolism to great effect, approaches language in the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* so as to focus our attention on the physical stimulus of language.<sup>10</sup> Also, through the use of his ambivalent narrator, meaning is continually deferred. Thus, in both the content and the style of his writing Hawthorne challenges what Burke later terms the semantic. Hawthorne does not rely on didacticism or sentimentalism in his novel, and likewise, for the most part, neither do Dickinson’s poems. In particular, those of her poems that use the conceit of a deceased speaker will be analyzed to suggest that she was challenging the sentimental mourning poetry popular at the

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<sup>10</sup> Oliver. “Kristeva attempts to bring the speaking body back into discourse by arguing both that the logic of language is already operating at the material level of bodily processes and that bodily drives make their way into language. She postulates that signifying practices are the result of material bodily processes. Drives make their way into language through the semiotic element of signification, which does not *represent* bodily drives but *discharges* them. In this way, all signification has material motivation.” xvi.

time, as well as traditional Christian conceptions of transcendence. Dickinson's writing, by the very fact that it is poetic, relies heavily on a material approach to language. My argument suggests that Hawthorne and Dickinson are examples of a "counter-sentimental" tradition that makes use of the materiality of language.<sup>11</sup>

Although this project focuses on a theological understanding of these texts, there is a Levinasian slant present in that the argument moves from the authors' representations of God to their attendant ethical stances, particularly in Chapter Two in the analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Chapter Three that discusses Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. My argument suggests that the authors' use of language correlates with their approach to otherness. It is intended to establish the ethical relevance of how conceptions of language affect ideas of God and religious expression, which in turn finds an outlet in everyday, intersubjective experiences. Although Stowe's novel is directly concerned with abolition, Chapter Two suggests that the sentimental language employed by Stowe dilutes the effect of her novel, resulting in a less meaningful engagement with the issue of slavery. Chapter Three argues for the ethical significance of Hawthorne's attention to language. Chapter Four discusses how Dickinson's apparent withdrawal from society allows her to use writing to challenge the social conventions of her time and gender. Although the texts of Hawthorne and Dickinson do not address the pressing issues of slavery and women's rights

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<sup>11</sup> Berlant 55. "An author's or a text's refusal to reproduce the sublimation of subaltern struggles into conventions of emotional satisfaction and redemptive fantasy might be called 'countersentimental,' a resistant strain within the sentimental domain."

directly, their writing challenges many of the underlying assumptions necessary for human abuses to take place. My discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and Dickinson's poems suggests that a critique of language use and an awareness that it can be interpreted differently by different people are crucial to ethical engagement.

Certainly the genres employed by each of these authors affect the directness with which they address issues that were relevant to their time. And it should be noted that while Stowe and Hawthorne both were writing fictional prose, they diverge over their claims to representational accuracy. Stowe was adamant that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a faithful representation of specific instances of slavery, to the extent that she followed it up with *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* as verification of her sources of information. She was responding to her critics who thought the characters and events of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exaggerated, as well as to the "anti-Uncle Tom" literature that suggests slaves are better off under kind slave owners. Hawthorne, on the other hand, makes fun of the idea of authenticity in "The Custom House" by the "pseudo-validation" of his claim that his story was based on the fictitious manuscript of Surveyor Pue. By blending actual circumstances and people with fictional events (A Jonathan Pue is listed as surveyor of Salem and Marblehead in the *Annals of Salem*),<sup>12</sup> Hawthorne blurs the lines between truth and fiction. This is entirely consistent with the themes of *The Scarlet Letter*, which suggest that there is no one correct

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<sup>12</sup> Seymour Gross, et al, footnote, "The Custom House," *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York: Norton, 1988) 23.

way of understanding events. These opposing approaches to the notion of “truth” are important in understanding each author’s philosophy regarding the ethical question of engagement with the social concerns of the day. For Stowe, identifying her characters with living subjects is necessary to support her mandate to “American Christians” to “feel right,” fully confident that the meaning of these ambiguous words carried a universal message that would be understood by all (385). For Hawthorne, the ethical struggle lies in part with each individual actively assessing what is “right” in any given situation. There is no mandate for an agreed upon course of action in Hawthorne’s world, only the individual response that has been refracted through each person’s interpretive lens. This is at the heart of Hawthorne’s ethics.<sup>13</sup> The abolitionist movement was impelled by a religious rhetoric, a univocal discourse that, in many ways, is antithetical to the topic of *The Scarlet Letter*.<sup>14</sup> The fight against slavery was seen as a “holy war” with the battle lines clearly drawn between good and evil.<sup>15</sup> Hawthorne’s hesitancy to proclaim a stand is evident in his letter to Elizabeth Peabody and suggests a self-consciousness based on his, or anyone’s, inability to fully

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<sup>13</sup> Many critics have discussed Hawthorne’s politics. For some of the various arguments see Jonathan Arac, “The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*,” In *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Myra Jehlen and Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 247-66; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of “The Scarlet Letter”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991); Richard Millington, “*The Office of The Scarlet Letter: An ‘Inside Narrative’?*,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 22.1 (Spring 1996): 1-8; Clark Davis, *Hawthorne’s Shyness: Ethics, Politics, and the Question of Engagement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> For a comparison between Hawthorne’s critique of religious zealotry and political zealotry see Larry Reynolds, *Devils and Rebels: The Making of Hawthorne’s Damned Politics* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan P, 2008) in particular Ch. 2 “Witchcraft and Abolitionism.”

<sup>15</sup> Charles Sumner in a campaign stumping speech for Lincoln states, “If bad men conspire for slavery, good men must combine for freedom. Nor can the holy war be ended until the barbarism now dominant in the republic is overthrown, and the Pagan power is driven from our Jerusalem.” qtd. by Adam Goodheart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (New York: Knopf, 2011) 46.

understand a situation: “No doubt it seems the truest of truth to you; but I do assure you that, like every other Abolitionist, you look at matters with an awful squint, which distorts everything within your line of vision; and it is queer, though natural, that you think everybody squints except yourselves. Perhaps they do; but certainly *you* do.”<sup>16</sup> For Hawthorne, truth is elusive; in his writing and often in his life, he maintains a distance from hard and fast points of view.<sup>17</sup> Hawthorne’s tentative stance raises the question of exactly how to ethically address social injustice if it is impossible or undesirable to come to a conclusion on a given situation or issue—an obvious weakness in his position of contingency. Dickinson, similarly, establishes in her poetry a tentative subject identity as a way of challenging fixed concepts of self and other. Through an attitude of contingency she challenges the fixity of institutional constructs that would slot individuals in predetermined roles and responses. This analysis considers the necessity of personal engagement in developing political responses that cannot be passed over as passive expressions of individual liberalism; rather these texts are examples of contingent language challenging conformist thinking on a personal level.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas Woodson et al., vol. XVIII (Columbus: Ohio State UP)89.

<sup>17</sup> See Clark Davis, *Hawthorne’s Shyness: Ethics, Politics, and the Question of Engagement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Davis 22. In his analysis of Hawthorne, Davis states, “skepticism posits a speaking agent aware of limits but speaking nonetheless . . .”. He refutes ideology criticism that would dismiss such preferences for individual response as naïve and completely resulting from cultural influences. I suggest that Dickinson follows in this line of skepticism through her creation of unstable narrators in her poetry.

Language is a physical process because it is rooted in bodily needs along with the mechanical necessity of the body for conveyance of words. Communication in infancy centers on the gratification of physical needs and this physical impulse remains, although restrained, into adulthood. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is intent on reminding us of this fact through characters who represent extreme versions of repressing or acknowledging their physical drives. The Puritan elders, and most dramatically, Arthur Dimmesdale, represent those whose language bears no resemblance to what the body demands. Hester, by contrast, changes the meaning of the Puritan's symbolic system through her physical actions, as is shown by the villagers assigning new meaning to the letter A based on Hester's deeds. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne delineates the difference between meaning originating in symbols and meaning originating in physicality, with the latter put forth as needing to be reclaimed in a physically oppressive environment. As Hester's character denotes, language that originates in the body is a language that is dynamic and shifting. Meanings of symbols change based on the action associated with those symbols. The shifting and interpretive nature of language is central to *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel that Hawthorne's contemporary critics had difficulty categorizing due to its reliance upon a language they found almost too ambiguous to qualify as prose.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gary Scharnhorst, ed. *The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*, (New York: Greenwood P, 1992) lists several of the contemporary responses to this work. Many of these critics acknowledge a quality of *The Scarlet Letter* that surpasses any previous novel. Many of them also found it difficult to place it in a specific genre due to Hawthorne's use of language, which they most commonly referred to as a form of poetics. See, in particular, the review from the *Boston Transcript* (11), the *Salem Gazette* (13), the *Salem Register* (14), the *Boston Post* (17, 18), the *Literary World* (21), the *Portland Transcript* (24), and *Peterson's* (30).

Poetic language is material in that it relies on physical sensation to a much greater degree than prose. Rhythm, intonation, and cadence all involve the reader in a bodily way because poetic language is not only about conveying information but imparting a physical awareness as well, lending itself to being read out loud. Like much poetry of her day, many of Dickinson's poems employ the hymnal prosody as the melodic rhythm to her words, but her poetry, with its innovative and playful use of grammar and with its characteristic dashes, blends traditional poetic conventions with what were entirely new methods, making her poetry more challenging to understand. The destabilization of meaning results from the concern for the physical expression of the words in poetry. Another way to state this is to say that the materiality of poetic language is what creates a sense of confusion, an uncertainty of meaning, an indeterminacy in poetry. The inability to assign specific meaning, the tendency to invite varying interpretations, and the lack of definitive statement, all create a sense of the indeterminate in both Hawthorne's and Dickinson's texts. This indeterminacy results from a reliance upon more physical modes of communication but the language is also *driven* by the physical, a sense of impulse, connected with the physical drives that impel language. Such a lack of meaning threatens many religious sensibilities, particularly institutionalized religion. Hawthorne's and Dickinson's texts challenge the religious tendency to solidify meaning in generalizations and dogma.

Psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud, has named religion as the primary example of the human tendency to protect against a sense of dissolution through the creation of illusion. “Freud’s diagnosis of the power of religious illusion suggests that the fixity of the symbolic provides a consolation and a psychic defense against contingency, finitude.” (Ziarek, 68). Kristeva, too, suggests that religion is threatened by a crisis of meaning.<sup>20</sup> An analysis of the texts of Hawthorne and Dickinson offers literary and linguistic examples that challenge the psychoanalytic assumption that religious expression must be founded mainly in symbolic constructions. An analysis of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* shows inconsistencies that deconstruct her attempts at creating a seamless theological narrative—a fixed symbolic order. The ability of the language each of these authors use to accommodate and acknowledge its dependence upon physical desire is directly linked to the ideas of God that they imply, as well as perceptions of self-identity and alterity. Hawthorne’s and Dickinson’s use of language when writing about religious concerns suggests an entirely different idea of religion than does Stowe’s.

Many versions of Christianity consider the body, or “the flesh” to be in an oppositional relationship to the spirit and require a repression of physical desire in order to attain godliness. I see the writing of both Hawthorne and Dickinson, but not Stowe, challenging this established binary. As a result their texts suggest an expression of religious faith that is much less concerned with adherence to

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<sup>20</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva*, “Desire in Language,” Ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 93-94.

dogmatic definitions of God and religious precepts and more concerned with how an individual acts toward others. A spirituality that is concerned with actions is a logic of the physical and ethical. This “theological” recovery of the physical lends itself to conceptions of God that are much less hostile to ambiguity and uncertainty. This in no way lessens the spiritual attainment of their fictional characters or narrators, but allows them an access to the Divine that is expressed in a concern for and/or delight in the physical world around them and the people they come in contact with. Hester, in *The Scarlet Letter*, cares for the physical needs of the sick and dying; Dickinson’s poetic narrators, even when speaking from the grave, prefer their earthly life over a heavenly spirit existence.

This focus on the physical, however, does not translate into notions of transcendence that mirror human experience. Religious expressions modeled on cultural constructions are presented as failures at attempts of knowing God. Dickinson’s poetic narrative voice as well as her letters often express disdain for traditional religious conventions that seem to be mere expressions of the culture of mid-nineteenth century America.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Hester Prynne challenges the Puritan dictates, which the narrator clearly establishes as in lock step with the social norms of a male-dominant society. What is offered instead is a much less prescriptive approach to God, one that is individual and as unpredictable on the side of the faithful as on the side of God. The spirituality conceived in *The Scarlet Letter* and specific poems of Dickinson is very conscious of the

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<sup>21</sup> Conventional forms of worship are often critiqued in Dickinson’s poetry: see poems 324, 501, 503 for example. Also in her letters as well as what is known about her life, she resists conventional expressions of faith.

interpretive quality of language and therefore of God and also much more aware of the significance of physical experiences of life. Both Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Dickinson's poems display a concern for continuity between the mind and the body. Hester has a spiritual experience listening to Arthur Dimmesdale's sermon even though she cannot hear his actual words. She is moved by the cadence of his voice—a purely physical sensation. In some of Dickinson's poems it is difficult to distinguish whether she is referencing a physical relationship with a lover or contemplation of God. "Wild Nights – Wild Nights" (269)<sup>22</sup> is an example of this kind of metaphoric slippage where the narrator seems at first to be referring to passionate nights spent with a lover, but by the end of the poem through the metaphor of sailing at sea, it seems that the topic has been a metaphysical experience of finding rest in a comforting God. And even at the end the question remains if the narrator does not prefer the wildness of the unknown over the idea of this faith in God. The narrator's preference for passion suggests that ideal religious actions are not those that deny the flesh, but rather, the narrator validates physical expression as part of religious belief as a way of bringing mind and body together in a harmonious expression. The language both of these authors employ manifests this fluidity between mind and body. The religious experiences they convey are not necessarily thought out and thus are unpredictable, not prescribed.

An emphasis on physical experience does not translate into conceptions of the Divine that are steeped in social or cultural traditions. In *The Scarlet Letter*

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<sup>22</sup> *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass: 1998).

those aspects of Puritanism that are presented in a negative light are continually associated with patriarchy. Likewise, Dickinson's rejection of conventional religion is hard to separate at times from her refusal to participate in the gendered expectations of Amherst society as well as the expectations placed on female writers. Both of these writers challenge forms of religion that rely on cultural practices that do not consider the historical context of those practices. These represent forms of religion that have failed to consider their materiality. Hawthorne's and Dickinson's texts do not encourage us to conceive of God as resembling human experience, but to see the physical world with the same uncertainty with which they approach God. It is a turn toward the indefinite or interpretive quality with which we apprehend the world around us, as well as that which transcends the physical world.

Stowe's characters, on the other hand, succeed or fail, based on their acceptance of her own brand of theology, which is conflated with motherly love and acceptance of the Victorian domestic model. This brand of theology is served through the medium of sentimental language. The novel's reliance upon a strict symbolic system aligns it with traditional concepts of language and religion that subordinate the flesh.

Stowe's tendency to equate motherly love with divine love leads her to a certain and univocal stance in her presentation of what is considered religious and what is not. Hawthorne and Dickinson present in their writings a philosophical turn towards uncertainty that is also prevalent in the thought of Kierkegaard and the later writings of Nietzsche. Their philosophies, while going

in very different directions, both emphasize the limits of knowledge. Stowe insists on the universal application of a theology that diverges from the strict Calvinism in which she was raised, but is very much a product of the feminization of religion that was prevalent in nineteenth-century America.<sup>23</sup> This is not to imply that Hawthorne and Dickinson were not also influenced by this culture, but to acknowledge a resistance in their writing to these prevailing cultural norms.

Hawthorne's novel and Dickinson's poems suggest looking at the surrounding world, whether the physical environment or the people who inhabit it, to find the Divine, rather than an emphasis on the abstract. Hester finds spiritual fulfillment in caring for the sick and her actions encourage the Puritan villagers to look at her for spiritual inspiration. Dickinson's "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—" (236) exemplifies her preference for finding God in nature, with the last two lines "So instead of getting to Heaven, at last--/ I'm going, all along" illustrating her repudiation of boundaries between the transcendent and the physical. These authors emphasize the unknowability and mystery of the Divine, which requires an immersion in this physical world that exhibits chaos as well as order.

Hawthorne and Dickinson suggest, as well, that the physical realm, like the Divine, cannot be entirely accounted for through reason. Dickinson expresses this idea repeatedly in her poetry, a clear example being, "This World is not Conclusion" (373). The title is ambiguous—does it suggest that there is

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<sup>23</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800-1860," *Religion in American History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 158-178.

more to come after death or that nothing in this earthly life is entirely comprehensible? The poem ends ridiculing religious affirmations suggesting that the conclusion alluded to in the first line is an epistemological one. Similarly, Hawthorne's critique of Transcendentalism was based, among other things, on doubt about the reliability of our own reasoning skills. Transcendentalist thought was moving in the direction of an appreciation of reasoning powers, even though it strove to reconcile idealism and materiality. The suggestion that the individual has the ability to know, or attain certainty is problematic for Hawthorne and Dickinson alike.<sup>24</sup>

Hawthorne's and Dickinson's emphasis on uncertainty and investment in the physical world finds philosophical and theological resonance in the writings of Kierkegaard who, along with Nietzsche, challenged the objectivity of analytical philosophy and helped create an intellectual atmosphere that enabled the emergence of the modernist and post-modernist periods. Clark Davis has already proposed that Hawthorne's position holds commonalities with the continental tradition expressed in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Levinas particularly in his "skepticism with respect to large, controlling ideas" (30). I suggest that Hawthorne's valuing of individual experience over universalizing applications of thinking places him in the same family of thought as Kierkegaard. Hawthorne could not have read Kierkegaard's texts because they

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<sup>24</sup> See E. Miller Budick, "When the Soul Selects: Emily Dickinson's Attack on New England Symbolism." *American Literature*, 51:3 (1979) for her argument that Dickinson rejected the use of symbolism and the individual's ability to interpret them that was prevalent in both historical Puritanism as well as New England Transcendentalism.

were not translated until a half-century later. However, Kierkegaard's philosophy of religious individualism can be found in the themes of both Hawthorne and Dickinson. He states in his journal: "I am a poet. But long before I became a poet I was intended for the life of religious individuality."<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, imagines a prototypical "knight of faith," a person with a capacity for faith that he cannot imagine himself ever attaining because the actions of this "knight" do not follow practical human tendencies to protect himself from disappointment or from social condemnation. The knight of faith, after once relinquishing his hold on the finite world, immerses himself in it by "virtue of the absurd."<sup>26</sup> He does not detach from society and thereby protect himself from becoming invested in what will not satisfy, but he embraces the physical, finite world as if it were all that there is. The infinite and the finite, Kierkegaard's terms for the transcendent and the physical, are not opposed to one another, but have a paradoxical relationship. The way to the infinite is not through a rejection of the finite but an embrace of the finite. Language in the texts of Hawthorne and Dickinson exemplifies this paradox. Particularly in my discussion of *The Scarlet Letter*, Kierkegaard's alignment of the "tragic hero" with an expression of universal law is helpful in understanding Arthur Dimmesdale's role in the novel as I expand upon in the third chapter.

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, introduction, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, by Soren Kierkegaard, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP) xvii.

<sup>26</sup> ". . . the movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd, but yet in such a way, please note, that one does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact" (37). Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, Ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* emphasizes the crucial connection between language, assigning meaning, and the ways a subject establishes his/her identity. Often religion is used as a means to bolster one's sense of identity by using the prescriptions of a particular religion as what defines a follower of that religion. Hawthorne makes it clear that how a subject gains a sense of identity is of concern to him because "The Custom House" preface to *The Scarlet Letter* is taken up with long descriptions of the custom house officials who relied on titles to give them their sense of importance. The Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* gain their sense of identity and their sense of rightness from the tenets of their faith. Religion has the capacity to establish identity that is fixed and beyond question due to the divine authority associated with it. If a unitary identity is established as "child of God" based on the specific religious tenets to which the believer ascribes, then what falls outside of that framework of beliefs will be considered defective. *The Scarlet Letter* unfolds in an environment where religion and the Law are fused in a single unidimensional male voice of authority; what falls beyond the strict outline of acceptable behaviors is marginalized either by legal pronouncement, as in the case of Hester, or by sheer difference, as Hawthorne carefully establishes the distinctions among those who are on the edges of this community (Mistress Hibbins, native Americans, and seafarers). Hester's role in the novel is in constant tension with this marginalizing male authority. Although she has been relegated to the fringe of society, her actions and her ability to communicate through them gradually causes a shift in the thinking of those in the Puritan community. "Such helpfulness was found in her,—

so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (161).<sup>27</sup> She does not win her way back into their good graces by adhering entirely to their social constructions, but by living in a way that also allows *them* to slowly change in how they conceive of language and symbols in general.

I offer a psycholinguistic analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and the poetry of Emily Dickinson to understand the development of subject/object identity, and how the allocation of meaning through language can effect conceptions of the Divine. This analysis relies on a Levinasian understanding of absolute alterity that cannot be merged with self-identification. According to Levinas, people mainly relate to other individuals either as being like themselves and those they identify with, or as being alien and outside of what is considered acceptable. But, for Levinas, both of these responses fail to acknowledge the ethical demand that comes with our initial experience of another person. The otherness that we confront demands a response that does not try to make sense of or categorize according to our experiences, but respects the distance or strangeness of the other. Otherness cannot be reduced to our limited understanding. This philosophy makes the crucial link between religious belief and social interaction. Levinas posits every face-to-face encounter as an encounter with an absolute other; we cannot make the other like us in

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<sup>27</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, eds. William Charvat et al, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* Vol. 1. (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1962).

appearance and behavior. Language is the verbal register of how a subject responds to the other, but also an active agent in forming thought. Levinas points out the inherent weakness of language when he states, “Language conditions thought—not language in its physical materiality, but language as an attitude of the same with regard to the Other“ (204). That is, language encourages us to approach the other based on assumptions of sameness because it is a symbolic system of agreements. He exempts the physical, material aspect of language from this “saming” operation. If the symbolic aspect of language is over-relied upon, then the speaker is assuming much about the hearer of his/her words. However, if a speaker maintains an awareness of the physical aspect of language, as when Hawthorne’s narrator in *The Scarlet Letter* emphasizes that the meaning of the letter “A” depends on the actions subtending it, this conditioning aspect of language is resisted. For Levinas this is the way we must also apprehend the infinite or transcendence. The two are inseparable; neither God nor other human beings can be made into our own idea of self or be required to act according to the accepted norms we have adopted. These particular texts from the nineteenth century can show how our understanding of language informs our understanding of self, other, and the ultimate Other.

Hawthorne’s and Dickinson’s writing have been critiqued for expressing a conservative, because individualistic, political ideology.<sup>28</sup> While, by no means

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<sup>28</sup> See Sacvan Bercovitch, *Office of “The Scarlet Letter,”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991); Larry Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven:

attempting to suggest that Hawthorne and Dickinson were progressive in their politics, I do argue that they use language in a way that challenges the stability of institutions and totalities, including the notion of the totality of the self. Hawthorne accomplishes this in both “The Custom House” and *The Scarlet Letter* by emphasizing the arbitrary bestowing of titles and the constructed nature of identity based upon those titles. Dickinson’s posthumous speakers, because they are not resurrected beings but corpses, challenge the concept of a stable identity. This questioning of self is presented as a key element in one’s ability to engage the social arena in an ethically-informed manner. The questioning of identity in these two authors’ texts functions as a break, or interruption of subjectivity and one’s ability to attain knowledge. This suspension of the self creates space for the engagement with the other as expressed by Levinas: “Self-interruption is the trope for a form of ethical discourse in which the interruption is not reabsorbed into thematization and totality, namely, an ethical discourse that *performs* its own putting into question” (qtd.in Davis, 27). Davis discusses the ethical content of Hawthorne’s writing stating that Hawthorne’s solution was “that social engagement must be predicated on a fundamental sense of self-limitation, on a radical humility that puts the self in deference to the other and thereby both enables and demands reengagement through, rather than despite, an awareness of separation” (32). Challenging the notion of a stable subject identity parallels

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Yale UP, 1988); and Jonathan Arac, *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989). Vivian R. Pollak, ed., *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004). This anthology offers several viewpoints and angles considering Dickinson’s political leanings and influences.

the ability to challenge fixed ideas of the Divine, both of which affect a person's response to the public arena.

The questioning of identity in Hawthorne and Dickinson's writing emerges within a national culture intent on defining itself. The nineteenth century represents a period in the history of the United States in which it was separating itself from its European forbears while simultaneously experiencing the upheavals of industrialization and post-Enlightenment philosophy. While I am not specifically addressing whether a concern with national identity plays into their expression of ideas, except to acknowledge the macroscopic link suggested by their common time frame and environment, I agree that the division between the personal and political is false.<sup>29</sup> How a subject conceives of self and other is the specific playing out of this national theme on the personal level. All writing is informed by the public arena that surrounds an author. When questioning perceptions of subjectivity, we also question the imagined communities from which those perceptions arise. We cannot divorce the individual from his/her environment. Therefore, Hawthorne's and Dickinson's texts can be appreciated for how they challenge the constructedness of social traditions as well as self identity.

What comes into focus in my analysis of these three authors is the basic ethical conflict between commitment to an idea and responsibility to the

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<sup>29</sup> Ellen Rooney, "Foreword: An Aesthetic of Bad Objects," *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Naomi Schor (New York: Routledge, 2007).

"Thus, the personal is always already the political, the detail's particularity a framing of the general. Reading discloses this frame and the degree to which the individual, idiosyncratic detail always also has its public face" (xxi).

individual. Stowe's novel is concerned with the overriding concerns of both abolition and Christian teachings. Hawthorne's novel has the effect of undermining any ideological framework and upholds individual concerns. Dickinson's poems represent an individualistic expression of spirituality. Hawthorne and Dickinson both express skepticism toward universalizing dogmas through their tentative language and focus on a spirituality based on uncertainty. Juxtaposed to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* this tentativeness and uncertainty stand out. Their resistance to dogmatic proclamation at a time when sentimental writing was at its height in American literature make their works exemplary of what Lauren Berlant describes as "countersentimental": "An author's or text's refusal to reproduce the sublimation of subaltern struggles into conventions of emotional satisfaction and redemptive fantasy might be called 'countersentimental,' a resistant strain within the sentimental domain" (55). The writing of Hawthorne and Dickinson offers a clear case of the countersentimental in tension with the sentiment of the dominant culture exemplified through Stowe's writing. A sense of "emotional satisfaction and redemptive fantasy" comes from a perception of a unified self; an ability to locate one's self above the shifting and chaotic social forces. It comes from a position of power in the social hierarchy. At times in her letter writing, Dickinson does indulge in a kind of collective national sentimentality, but the poems I focus on that have dead speakers partake in a dissolution of a sense of self. They possess no position of privileged knowing, but only doubt and an inability to transcend the material because they are not spirits, but corpses by her very insistence on their physicality.

Hawthorne's and Dickinson's questioning of identity stands out as resistance to the sentimental writing that was prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century.

Through the use of sentimental language, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* plays off assumed Protestant, domestic ideologies and succeeded on an unprecedented level of creating a culture of mass feeling. Through her use of the vernacular, Stowe suggests that her characters are realistic. Her use of sentimental language claims an identification with human suffering. But the politics of feeling relies on assumptions—it assumes common beliefs even as it challenges the social practice of slavery—and is not willing to call certain points into question that may be equally harmful as the rallying point that is being challenged. In this way, sentimental writing is just as capable of reinforcing oppressive attitudes as it is capable of creating resistance to them.<sup>30</sup> So while Berlant argues that the expansion from the personal to the public allows for a cathartic emotional release without any political action taking place, my analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests that a transference from the personal to the symbolic played into the fervor that led up to the Civil War, but did not effect the kind of personal change that is addressed in Hawthorne's and Dickinson's writing and which was, arguably, as necessary.

Threaded throughout this discussion of subjectivity and epistemology as it pertains to theology is the topic of gender. Some feminist theorists emphasize

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<sup>30</sup>Berlant 40,41. “[Yet] the forces of distortion in the world of feeling politics that the citation of *Uncle Tom* puts into play are as likely to justify ongoing forms of domination as they are to give form and language to impulses toward resistance.”

language and discursive practice as the starting point for cultural expressions of gender. *Écriture féminine* theorists challenge the systemization of philosophic discourse, which, in Western culture at least, has evolved within patriarchally-dominant societies and institutions, through a fresh look at language. My discussion focuses on the language that gives vent to desire, that acknowledges its rootedness in desire, and therefore, in the physical, an approach to language that *Écriture* feminists would argue has been repressed by cultural gender encodings. Furthermore, since materiality has been culturally encoded as feminine, gender comes into play in the texts that I discuss and thus, immerses this discussion in feminist thought and theory.

Much of this feminist theory rejects the concept of transcendence and considers it a perpetuation of patriarchal dominance and a continuation of an erasure of woman from the paradigms that inform our lived realities. I will argue, however, that these feminist theories actually make a strong case for a rethinking in theological terms, the divide between the transcendent and the physical and a need to reconsider the traditional religious constructions of the feminine. A fresh understanding of “the feminine” requires a logic that does not presume the traditional stances and qualities that have historically been encoded as masculine. Furthermore, it also does not presume a definition of the feminine that has evolved from a discourse that is foundationally patriarchal. In the argument over essentialism, what often gets obscured is the fact that what has been encoded as masculine and feminine has emerged from cultures that place a much greater value on “masculine” qualities. It is a vicious cycle of minimizing

what is different from what holds power, and defining the powerless according to the mandates of those in power. Gender has certainly been one of the continual paradigms in which this dynamic plays out. Luce Irigaray identifies philosophical discourse as being bound to an “economy of the Same” where what is other is continually diverted, deflected, or reduced. (74)

My discussion of gender is not based on an essentialist notion of the sexes, but on the necessity of recovering the desiring body. I argue that sentimental rhetoric is a necessary linguistic form to enable this sexual repression to take place due to its reliance upon the symbolic. The extreme idealization of women, and motherhood in particular, that takes place in nineteenth-century American society and that is expressed in sentimental literature acts as a smoke screen to the physically repressive environment that women lived in. Irigaray argues that “maternity fills the gaps in a repressed female sexuality” overemphasizing woman’s reproductive role to the point of subservience. A sacralization of the maternal compensates for a repression of female desire. This is evident in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* where certain characters’ spiritual salvation pivots upon their accepting the advice of their mothers. Stowe’s mothers are unsexed by the idealization of their role, best displayed by Rachel Halliday whose most trivial tasks take on a transcendent meaning. Throughout Stowe’s novel, a woman’s value is dependent upon her ability to fit a very narrow definition of motherhood, founded in socio-religious values of thrift, domestic order, and transcendence. In Hawthorne, however, the mother figured through Hester Prynne is described sensuously, and enacts sensuous modes of

communication as well. Her relationship to language through her “branding” with the letter “A,” reconstitutes the physicality of language and simultaneously regains a physical, desiring body for the role of mother. That is, maternity and sexuality remain linked whereas they are mostly opposed in Stowe’s novel. My analysis of these three authors looks for the ways that religious and feminist discourses intersect when applied to nineteenth-century American literary works.

Chapter Two considers how the sentimental language of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* necessarily relies on stereotypes while seeking to draw a physical, emotional response from the reader by creating an identification of the reader with the suffering of slaves. It should be noted that I am not accusing Stowe of being disingenuous, but suggesting that she was unconscious of this reliance on stereotypes. The physical element of language—that element that relies on action and context as giving meaning as opposed to metaphysical concepts and ideals—is actually repressed in sentimental writing, contrary to its claims to appeal to emotion and an ensuing physical response. I argue that this perpetuates oppressive attitudes towards both black Americans and women within the context of Stowe’s own feminized version of Calvinism. Thus, in this chapter, I engage Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s discussion of sentimental language in the abolitionist movement, which describes the relation between repressed sexuality and enslavement. I argue that sentimental language is a form of communication that signals an unawareness on the part of the speaker/writer of repressed feeling. This is not to say that it was not used to powerful effect by

many authors of the period and that it was not an important part of the evolution of women's writing.

I point out several examples from the novel that show Stowe's conflicted representation of admirable Christian behavior and argue that the repression of physical desire is at the core of these inconsistencies. First, I consider how mothers, in spite of being held up as the salvific force in the novel, are not the ones who make the supreme Christ-like sacrifice of redemptive death and show how this ultimate sacrifice would thwart Stowe's unarticulated goal of presenting women as active agents in the public arena. Second, I examine Stowe's puzzling commentary on male aggression and its convenient application along racial lines.<sup>31</sup> Lastly, I look at how sentimental language attempts to uphold discreet conceptions of self, other, and the divine in order to placate a sense of lack of control that comes with the chaos of physical drives. The romantic racialism employed by Stowe (and by many within and without the abolitionist cause) exemplifies attempts at maintaining these discreet boundaries, which are reinforced by a language that relies on symbolism and identity markers.

Chapter Three proposes that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* takes a hermeneutical position close to that of post-modernism not only philologically, but also theologically, in his representation of Hester and her association with Anne Hutchinson. The ambiguity of Hawthorne's language emphasizes the subject's

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<sup>31</sup> Jay P. Dolan suggests that this conflicted representation of aggression is also symptomatic of the tension prevalent in nineteenth-century America between American idealism and Christian principles.

Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of An American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

limited ability to apprehend both the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds. Through the narrator's tone, he conveys the positive aspect of this inability to be certain and connects uncertainty to the physical senses. Events in the novel are interpreted differently by those who witness them because they actually see and hear them differently. For example, Dimmesdale's senses cannot be trusted as he returns from his forest meeting with Hester. "The pathway among the woods seemed wilder . . . As he drew near the town, he took an impression of change from the series of familiar objects that presented themselves" (146). Seeing renders multiple interpretations not only by different people, but the same person may see something different on subsequent occasions.

Through Hester Prynne, Hawthorne suggests that physical desire must be the instantiation of language. The connection of language to the physical undermines the assurances of a stable subject identity that are founded on transcendent ideals. This is why Dimmesdale finds himself susceptible to all kinds of "blasphemous" urges as he re-enters the village. His identity as a holy minister has been shaken. This destabilizing of identity also undermines attempts at "knowing" or apprehending the other, and ultimately, God. This inability to fully ascertain ourselves, others, and God is in constant tension with the well-ordered Puritan world that Hawthorne creates in the novel, which derives its meaning from the assigning of titles, labels, and social roles. Hawthorne's reliance upon irony in *The Scarlet Letter* enacts the irony and play that Kristeva

posits as characteristic of the re-doubled negativity of female subject identity.<sup>32</sup> His use of irony has the effect of underscoring the pretensions to universality of the symbolic and the fixity of the law through the awareness of the contingency of language, subject identity, and the nature of the Divine.

Religious certitude is put forward as the outward expression of the denial of physical desire and is represented through the metaphor of light. Reversing the usual application of light as a metaphor for clear sight or enlightenment, Hawthorne uses this image to represent blindness. Bright light is that which blinds and, I suggest, in *The Scarlet Letter* it is associated with an attitude of certainty. Preferable to sunlight is the reflected, secondary light of the moon, which defamiliarizes what it falls upon, by allowing details to take on meaning apart from the larger object they compose. Unlike the familiar idiom that one “can’t see the forest for the trees,” Hawthorne is more concerned with the fact that we can’t see the trees for the forest. He is concerned with singular details because if we focus only on the larger ideas, we neglect the physical. If we focus only on the symbol, we lose touch with the real. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the actual/action gives meaning to the symbol, not vice versa. I apply Naomi Schor’s aesthetic theory of the detail to my discussion of the recovery of the physical in *The Scarlet Letter*. For Hawthorne, details, like the individuals who make up

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<sup>32</sup> Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Kristeva and Fanon: Revolutionary Biolence and Ironic Articulation,” *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva’s Polis*, ed. Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005) 57-75.

For women, Kristeva claims, there is a greater gap between the sensory and the symbolic because the phallus is not supported in the same visible way in the female genitalia as it is in boys. This is not described as a lack in Kristevan theory, but it causes a greater return to the pre-Oedipal maternal relation and creates an awareness of the illusion of the phallus.

societies, cannot be overlooked. Details do not gain importance from the bigger picture they create when combined. The bigger picture (the Ideal/Symbolic) gains its meaning from the value of each detail. This opposes the Hegelian aesthetic theory, which was dominant in Hawthorne's lifetime.<sup>33</sup> Hawthorne's shift to a valuation of the detail is a precursor to Realism, but *The Scarlet Letter* also suggests the alienation and fragmentation of Modernism, and the deconstructive aspects of Post-Modernism. The prevailing qualities of different literary periods converge in *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as in much of Dickinson's poetry.

Chapter Four looks at poems of Emily Dickinson that either use the trope of a dead speaker or focus on the theme of possibility. I propose that the posthumous voice in several of her poems is used to parody certain forms of sentimental writing, specifically, mourning poetry and foreign culture writing, common to female authors in the nineteenth century. By using posthumous speakers in unconventional ways, Dickinson questions constructions of subjectivity and identity that were expressed in these literary genres. Posthumous speakers also emphasize the materiality of death rather than the transcendent afterlife. I do not believe that Dickinson was intent on suggesting that there is no life beyond the grave, but by interrupting the usual mourning discourse, she forces her readers to strip away a comforting theological narrative in order to cause an interruption in their sense of identity. By merging her poetic

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<sup>33</sup> Taken from Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

voice with that of a corpse, she imposes a sense of self-identification with an extreme "other." In contradistinction, she sometimes uses a corpse as object, as a metaphor for a person who has stopped thinking critically especially within the context of religion. The corpse, whether used as the speaking subject or the object in her poetry, is a metaphor by which she challenges traditional and culturally bound notions of transcendence, such as ideas of the afterlife, accepted expressions of worship, and most importantly the role of physical experience in attempts to encounter transcendence.

The writing of Stowe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson all grapple with rigid religious doctrine as a way of developing an ethical response to the world around them. Hawthorne's and Dickinson's writings encourage us to envision a relationship to the other/Other that acknowledges our limits of understanding, not as a nihilistic defeat, but as a creative openness to possibility. Stowe repudiates the strict Calvinism in which she was raised but her use of language reinforces narrow and culturally informed interpretations of the Divine. It was more difficult for nineteenth-century American female authors to break from tradition because they were entering an arena in which they had to prove themselves to be as capable as men. To be acknowledged they had to stay within the patriarchal boundaries already drawn for them. This included an acceptance of the Victorian domestic model, as well as a version of the Divine that fit within it. Dickinson's poems were not, for the most part, subjected to public criticism and this may have given her more freedom to explore and express more unconventional

views. We can only wonder if the unspoken pressures and expectations of women writers in the nineteenth century influenced her self-imposed isolation.

The writing of these three authors provide a glimpse of the cultural climate of the nineteenth century and some of the competing ideas that reinforced or resisted common understandings of self, other, and God. Stowe's use of language is based on the very assumptions that Hawthorne and Dickinson were scrutinizing. Instead of an awareness of the interpretive element of language, her sentimental writing relies on the affects produced by appealing to the universal. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* she is focused on a theology that she perceives as applicable to all, unaware of the social, cultural, and economic influences that permeate it. Although seeking to effect change in the broader world, she is intent on accomplishing it through the re-inscription of this narrow cultural paradigm, which ultimately reinforces the repression of alterity, both racial and gendered. What makes Hawthorne and Dickinson revisionist writers and forerunners of postmodernism is their attention to the details of language and the language of details. For Hawthorne, language is the very topic of his novel; he emphasizes the meaning of language coming from the actions that accompany words, not the other way around. Hester changes the meaning of the letter A through her actions, while Dimmesdale's psychological torment is borne from the impossible task of trying to live up to the prescribed meanings that have been established without consideration of his physical experience. For Dickinson the play, or "aliveness" of her language is what resists assumptions of received traditions, in particular with regard to ideas of transcendence. Both of these writers use

language as a tool to revision a different world. They find in the inconsistencies of human expression fragments of meaning, which they creatively reconfigure into windows of possibility. Heather Walton, states, “. . . revisionist poets and their work [are] interpreted as an attempt to create something rich and strange out of a symbolic order that has become deathly” (10). Hawthorne’s portrayal of a strict and somber Puritan society represents this “deathly symbolic order” juxtaposed to the ambiguous speech of his narrator. The language of *The Scarlet Letter* is interpretive, not static or dogmatic. Although Hester accepts the punishment the Puritan elders assign her, she refuses the meaning of that punishment. Thus, the signifier, the scarlet “A” remains the same while what is signified is continually replaced by the substitutive quality of language. Dickinson’s posthumous speakers are the darkly playful mediums that implicate what she sees as the deathly symbolic order of Victorian society and religious expression. Death in her poems often represents the mindless acceptance of words and ideas, a mental or spiritual death, but her dead speakers, through metaphor, transition into creative figures as they challenge the living who have stopped thinking critically. It is this dynamic, interpretive quality of language that informs the conceptions of transcendence that are alluded to in their writing. These literary texts give insight into the psychology of religion in the application of a materialist approach to language and its rhetorical and affective use.

## Chapter 2

### **The Unholy Alliance of Sentimentalism and Theology in *Uncle Tom's Cabin***

Nineteenth-century literature by women is most commonly critiqued for its reliance upon sentimental language. Not until the end of the century did women authors begin to shift to what were considered more objective and realist writing styles. This is not to imply that sentimental writing was the sole territory of women; there were male and female readers and writers of this genre. However, the majority of female authors in the first half of the nineteenth century created works that made full use of an ethos that by today's standards borders on kitsch or pretentiousness. Pre-eminent among this fiction is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which surpassed every other work of fiction in sales and readership in the century, a testament to the attraction of literature that appeals to a shared sense of suffering.

Literary criticism centering on women's sentimental literature has moved in the direction of newfound appreciation for this genre, dismissed, and negatively critiqued as recently as in Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977). Nuanced approaches to sentimental fiction have produced studies of its relation to many different areas of feminine life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and often point out its resistance to hegemonic powers whether in the form of "Republican virtue," religious dogmatism, or bottom-line,

business mindsets.<sup>34</sup> I find myself among those admirers of this genre who see a determined, if not often subtle, challenge to these patriarchal institutions. I am not concerned with making value judgments about sentimental literature, because clearly the authors who employed this writing style were immersed in complex cultural and social influences that contributed to its usefulness and popularity. But, at the same time, the conflicted representations of gender, race, and religion that are often manifest in the characters of sentimental literature call out for a greater scrutiny of the operations of sentimental language. For example, Susan Warner's Ellen Montgomery's dedication to self-sacrifice does not allow for a thoughtful questioning of the repressive nature of her environment in *The Wide, Wide World*. Likewise, Catherine Maria Sedgwick's conflicted representations between adherence or resistance to patriarchal authority suggest

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<sup>34</sup> The body of literary criticism on this topic is immense; below are a select group of texts dealing with sentimental fiction.

Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ P, 1997).

Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ P, 2004).

Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago P, 1999).

Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations* (Durham: Duke Univ P, 2000).

Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke Univ P, 2000).

Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition." *Representations* 24 (fall 1988).

Julia A. Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago P, 1997).

Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985).

Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1988).

Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008).

a repression of unacknowledged desire.<sup>35</sup> My concern in this chapter, is the conflicted representation of desirable behaviors in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. My research purpose is not to inquire why women authors tended toward the use of sentimentalism, although this is a worthy pursuit for another time, but to understand how sentimental language operates, how it produces a *sense* of intimacy between writer, readers, and the subjects of the texts, while still maintaining the cultural boundaries that produce distance. At the outset, I also want to make clear that in critiquing the sentimental language of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I am not insinuating disingenuous intentions to Stowe. Clearly, she was moved by a strong desire to right a wrong and devoted an immense amount of energy to the cause of abolition. If I assert that Stowe's language represents African slaves negatively, I am not suggesting that it was her aim and intention to do that. This discussion is not a valuation of Stowe's personal character. My concern is to understand the effect of sentimental language and its ability to produce catharsis for the reader, a very physical response, while at the same time avoiding what Kristeva would refer to as the physical, or semiotic elements

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<sup>35</sup> "Sedgwick never resolved the conflict between allegiance and resistance to her father's values and to the patriarchal authority he represented, as her characterization of the Puritan fathers in *Hope Leslie* reveals."

Carolyn L. Karcher, Introduction, *Hope Leslie, or Early Times in the Massachusetts* by Catherine Maria Sedgwick (New York: Penguin, 1998) xiii

Judith Fetterly also gives an analysis of Sedgwick's inconsistent representations of self-determination and submission in *Hope Leslie*.

Judith Fetterly, "My Sister! My Sister!": The Rhetoric of Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*," *No More Separate Spheres!* Ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham: Duke Univ P, 2002) 67-91.

of language,<sup>36</sup> language that finds its impetus in the materiality of the physical drives.

Through an application of Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic language theory, Stowe's reliance on symbolism can be understood as a repression of the maternal and the physical drives associated with the mother/infant relationship.<sup>37</sup> This conflicted approach to an appreciation and acknowledgement of the physical is played out in sentimental language itself. Sentimental language gives lip service to the physical by appealing to the readers' emotions, but because it relies heavily upon generalizations and stereotypes, psycholinguistically it is a language foundationally based in the symbolic, not the physical, thus creating a gap between the reader and the experience of slavery.

Kristeva proposes the existence of two elements in all signification: the semiotic and the symbolic. The symbolic is the realm of structures within which symbols operate, symbols understood as exemplifying Saussure's theory on the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. The semiotic element is the function of physical/psychological drives and how they relate to language. The semiotic is associated with rhythms, tones, touch, and involves the senses, without linguistic representation. The semiotic gives significance to language by providing the answer to the philosophical question, "Why bother?"

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<sup>36</sup> The semiotic element is the function of physical/psychological drives and how they relate to language. The semiotic is associated with rhythms, tones, touch and involves the senses, but without the direct representation of the symbolic. *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia Univ P, 1997, (53).

<sup>37</sup> Kristeva's definition of the chora describes a primal psychosexual stage that is mediated by the mother's body. 35-37. Julia Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva*, "Desire in Language," Ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia Univ P, 1997).

as it pertains, most especially, to the articulation of experience. Kristeva maintains that these two elements are interdependent and ensure the relationship between body and mind; they are “two heterogeneous operations that are, reciprocally and inseparably, preconditions for each other” (53). Kristeva describes the symbolic function of language as it has been developed in Lacanian theory as maintaining itself “at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother” (104). Stowe relies heavily on the symbolic, a patriarchal model of language, while attempting to promote a sense of maternal affection among her readers. Within Kristeva’s psycholinguistic theory, this is counterintuitive. Sentimental language, in a sense, replicates the patriarchal definition of the feminine, as opposed to an entirely different approach to language that might express different linguistic values than linearity, order, and validation such as would be found in semiotic forms of communication reliant on rhythms, tones, and intonations.<sup>38</sup> Stowe’s novel is an attempt at “truth-telling,” with much concern expressed for the validity of her examples in the “Key to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” as opposed to a novel based on metaphor or analogy. In its over-reliance upon the Symbolic aspect of language, it devalues the physical drives first expressed in the relationship between mother and child.

As a result, Stowe’s language becomes over-reliant upon symbolic archetypal events and characters. Tom and Eva are Christ figures, Chloe is the

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<sup>38</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell Univ P, 1985) 25. “Woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s; woman’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.”

desexualized mammy, Topsy the incorrigible picaninny; many of these characters became stock personas used for decades after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by traveling minstrel groups and later, movie productions. By creating characters larger than life, Stowe diminishes their human aspect making them to be symbols of her own Christian ideology and her racialized anthropology. By definition, a symbol erases those qualities that are particular and idiosyncratic to the individual. Sentimental language is a necessary medium for this transference from the very physical, human element to the transcending symbolism and idealism of her Christian beliefs. Sentimental language as it is used in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and many other nineteenth-century novels, bolsters certain aspects of traditional Protestant theology, particularly Victorian domesticity that sacralized motherhood to the point of repressing women's sexuality. In this way it severs feeling from physical desire creating a detachment between mind and body that reveals itself in almost neurotic impulses. My argument makes a connection between the physical drives as the motivating aspect of language and suggests that repressed sexual desire is manifest in the language of sentimentalism in line with the argument of Karen Sanchez Eppler.<sup>39</sup> Gillian Brown also notes that Stowe attempts to create a maternal economy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that is not based on desire, but on self-sufficiency, as well as self-suffering.<sup>40</sup> She side steps the need for desire that

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<sup>39</sup> Karen Sanchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition." *Representations* 24 (fall 1988) 28-59.

<sup>40</sup> Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Berkeley: Univ of California P, 1990) 32.

precedes possession, creating a utopian maternal logic void of physical desire. Sentimental language operates upon the lack of awareness of this physical repression. Sentimental language is inherently conflicted between its intended goal and its modus operandi in three main ways. First, while appealing to emotions that find expression in the body, sentimental language relies on stereotype and symbol with the attendant formulaic representations denying the personhood of many of Stowe's characters. Second, while presenting itself as an appeal to understand the pain and suffering of the other, this language reinforces a master narrative that recasts the other within the parameters of that narrative and performs a "saming" function.<sup>41</sup> Lastly, sentimental language relies on and reinforces assumptions of shared belief, which further embed perceptions of self in rigid social and religious constructions.

Sentimental language relies mainly upon stereotypic and symbolic representation, avoiding complex or nuanced depictions of both characters and events. It seems counter-intuitive, then, to describe sentimental fiction as "a bodily act" with an "ability to translate words into pulse beats and sobs" as Karen Sanchez-Eppler does (419). It is this connection of feeling with the body that maintains the seductive nature of sentimental language for its ability to produce a *sense* of connection with the other while also purging the communicant from any further sense of obligation. I will use *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an example of sentimental fiction to consider how this language of feeling takes on a conflicted

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<sup>41</sup> Irigaray 74. "The economy of the Same" is the dominant system's organizational patterns that defines anything different to those patterns in relation to its own economy.

and unattainable goal because it suggests that it is a language attentive to the body through its reliance upon emotion, but all the while relies heavily upon the Ideal or symbolic. At the core of this conflicted signification lies the repression of physical desire.<sup>42</sup> The Platonic sublation of the physical to the Ideal or spiritual and its foundational insertion in Christian theologies becomes problematic in the literature of sentiment produced by women in the nineteenth century who are on the cusp of repudiating the masculine dominance of their world while still strongly adhering to the theology produced by this patriarchal system.

This adherence to the dominant Ideal over the material or physical is concomitant with the subject's perception of identity. Sentimental language attempts to create clear boundaries and discrete identities, the aim of which is to engender confidence and remove doubt. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as with most American, nineteenth-century, female-authored literature, this takes place within the context of a Protestant religious framework. The sentimental language upholds and reinforces common assumptions pertaining to religious belief thereby uniting the perception of stable subject identity with very specific religious expression. Yet, although seemingly straightforward in its message and method, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* displays the impossibility of language to create constant structures of meaning and stable subject identities. This inability to achieve its goal of discrete and stable identities manifests itself in the duplicitous messages that emerge regarding Christian behavior. These complexities of Stowe's novel

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<sup>42</sup> Sanchez-Eppler identifies within sentimental abolitionist writing a hidden expression: "anti-slavery rhetoric disguises, and so permits, the white woman's unacknowledgeable feelings of sexual victimization and desire" (42).

also suggest the dynamic nature of language, as well as its power to deceive. The effects and affects of sentimental language reproduce the antinomy present within this genre of literature. While validating a culture of “true feeling” that emphasizes individual, physical response, it upholds the conventional social and religious maxims, which rely on rigid constructions of self-identity based in assertions of religious certainty. While at once attempting to remove boundaries delineating between the free and the slave, Stowe’s language is operating, somewhat haphazardly, to construct new boundaries as well as maintain many traditional ones.

In the final pages of the novel, Stowe addresses the “men and women of America” in one of her characteristic apostrophes. Breaking down this generalized group, she addresses different factions of the American citizenry with the largest passage addressed to mothers. Appealing to the mother/child relationship, she understands it as the most potent site of feeling,<sup>43</sup> and one that has a unique connection to the body. By calling for the ability of a slave mother to be able to “protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom” she invokes the image of the baby at the breast, one could argue only a degree removed from the actual physical connection of the umbilical cord. She continues stating, “There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man

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<sup>43</sup> Lisa Logan, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Conventional Nineteenth-Century Domestic Ideology.” *Approaches to Teaching Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Ed. Elizabeth Ammons and Susan Belasco. (New York: The MLA Association of America 2000) 46-56.

or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (385). The italicized emphasis is Stowe’s and suggests that her novel is predicated upon the belief that feeling must dominate reason. But this passage displays how quickly Stowe’s use of specificity and physicality quickly dissipates into a generalized rhetoric of symbolism. The mother and child evaporate into the “interests of humanity” and the “human race.” Luran Berlant states, “Because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain, its cases become all jumbled together and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy” (297). While calling for a response of feeling from her readers that could result in individual actions, it is lost in the generalized exhortation to “feel right.”

This is a feature of sentimental language in line with Berlant’s discourse on affective “intimate publics.”<sup>44</sup> She explains that “ambivalent critique produces domains (such as intimate publics) to one side of politics that flourish insofar as they can allow the circulation of the open secrets of insecurity and instability without those revelations and spectacles engendering transformative or strongly resistant action in the idiom of political agency as it is usually regarded” (22). By appealing to common maternal emotions, particularly the anxiety many nineteenth-century mothers experienced over the ever-present possibility of losing a child to death, Stowe wanted middle-class white Americans to transfer

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<sup>44</sup> Lauren Berlant. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. (Durham: Duke Univ P, 2008).

those emotions to the plight of African American slaves. Some have argued that the emotional response generated by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played a role in fueling the emotional fervor leading to the Civil War. Whether or not there is any validity to this claim, the kind of critique of slavery that the novel gives is not concerned with a philosophy of individual ethics, but resonates with the philosophy of war, as described by Emmanuel Levinas:

The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western Philosophy . . . The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to bring forth its objective meaning. For the ultimate meaning alone counts; the last act alone changes beings into themselves. They are what they will appear to be in the already plastic forms of the epic. (22)

Stowe's tendency to create epic characters and events was maintained by her reliance upon Christian teleology and its emphasis of final judgment and salvation. Some critics have even suggested that the goal of the novel shifts halfway through when Tom arrives at the St. Claire mansion.<sup>45</sup> From this point on much of the concern of the subplots are with individual characters' responses to the Christian message rather than with slavery, feeding a political consciousness resistant to individual agency. Much of the criticism surrounding *Uncle Tom's Cabin* points to Stowe's racial ambivalence repeated in many

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Railton points out that once Uncle Tom reaches the St. Clare's home in New Orleans, the novel has a different concern: ". . . the novel's message shifts, drastically and even perversely, from the sufferings and needs of black slaves to the sufferings and needs of the white bourgeoisie—and to how much blacks can do for whites" (106). Stephen Railton, "Black Slaves and White Readers." *Approaches to Teaching Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: MLA, 2000) 104-110.

instances of confusion and contradiction within the novel. This is not to suggest that one novel could erase a country's history of racism, but many critics have argued that Stowe's racial ambivalence in the novel, promoted a sense of purgation among her readers that relieved them of any further sense of duty. The consumerist response generated by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* supports Berlant's theory of affective intimate publics. The rush for "prints, pottery, games, puzzles, dolls, among other things" <sup>46</sup> that created the phenomenon around the novel provided the material connection to this sense of shared suffering that did not necessarily translate into political action. I would point out as well, that Stowe's "intimate public" still maintained very specific boundaries. Not all abolitionists believed in the equality of the races. The idea that all human beings were created in God's image still somehow managed to create a hierarchy of humanness expressed through the romantic racialism, which assigned traits according to race. Sentimental language produces a *sense* of intimacy between writer, readers, and the subjects of the texts, while still maintaining the boundaries that produce distance. Considering the effect of a sentimental text upon the reader positions my argument in the realm of the personal. It is the only way to conduct this argument, since it is in its very expansion from the personal to the general that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* loses its ability to make the human connection it so strongly seeks.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Winship, "Uncle Tom's Cabin: History of the Book in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century United States," *Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture* <[utc.iath.virginia.edu/interpret/interframe.html](http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/interpret/interframe.html)>

<sup>47</sup> Berlant addresses this component of affective domains. She states, "The expansion from the personal to more abstract domains constitutes the scene of judgment and critique. Emotional

James Baldwin, one hundred years after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and on the cusp of the civil rights era, understood the connection between specificity and physicality when he states in "Everybody's Protest Novel" that Stowe's sentimental language ironically expresses an "inability to feel" because there is a vast difference in being devoted to a cause or humanity in general, and being devoted to the human being. (12) Baldwin's commentary emphasizes the contradiction within sentimental language. It cannot at once be a language of symbol and stereotype *and* attuned to the human, physical element. He attributes what he considers the failure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Stowe's "merciless doctrine," not compassion for the other, but "fear of being caught in traffic with the devil."<sup>48</sup> Her theology is also my concern, not for the purpose of judging Stowe's motives, but to understand how the words we speak work in concert with our belief systems, whether religious or political, to protect and reinforce an often myopic understanding of the world around us. Berlant has also noted Baldwin's perception of the generalizing operation of Stowe's language recognizing the "national-liberal refusal of complexity . . . so that they[whites] might continue disavowing the costs or ghosts of whiteness, which

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justice on the small scale figures the pre-experience of its resolution on the larger. The main paradox here too lies in the centrality of cliché and stereotype to the establishment of the expanded terms of the human"(36).

<sup>48</sup> Baldwin states: The virtuous rage of Mrs. Stowe is motivated by nothing so temporal as a concern for the relationship of men to one another—or even, as she would have claimed, by a concern for their relationship to God—but merely by a panic of being hurled into the flames, of being caught in traffic with the devil. She embraced this merciless doctrine with all her heart . . ." (14).

involve religious traditions of self-loathing . . .”<sup>49</sup> Stowe’s views of religion intersect with the sentimental style of writing she employs to maintain a common operation: the repression of physical desire.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s expression of religious fervor in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* mirrors her own brand of theology developed over her lifetime. Her beliefs are reactions against her father’s strict form of Calvinism, while at the same time maintaining an emphasis similar to his on sin and the many perils a good Christian must avoid in life. Of note is her view of gender in relation to God. John R. Adams’ biography of Stowe describes her delight in the absence of a male progenitor of Jesus, and his having only maternal influence. She believed that there was a sympathy between Jesus and women due to biblical emphasis on his relationship with his mother rather than his stepfather, Joseph, and that mothers were the best representation of Jesus in the world.<sup>50</sup> This conflation of motherly love with Divine love is an example of Stowe’s tendency to create larger than life roles for not only her characters in the novel, but for those groups of people that inhabit her life. It evolved out of a cultural context that desexualized women as selfless angels and equated female passion with debauchery leading to destitution. The archetypal mother figure was built upon the repression of physical desire and Stowe’s reliance upon symbolism and stereotype in the novel is contiguous with this repression.

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<sup>49</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” *No More Separate Spheres!* Ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham: Duke Univ P, 2002) 312.

<sup>50</sup> John R Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Updated Edition. (Boston: Twayne P, 1989) 53.

Maternal affection is presented as the saving force in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Beginning with Eliza's daring and courageous escape with her son when she learns he will be sold, to the salvific influence mother's have even after they've departed from this life, Stowe imparts her theology of maternal love. This is most clearly exemplified in the cases of Augustine St. Clare and Simon Legree, when for both, their acceptance or rejection of the Christian message is conflated with their response to their mothers' instruction and pleas. St. Clare's final word upon his deathbed is "Mother" as if to suggest that she, not Christ, beckons and awaits him (276). The way the maternal is used in this scene is to strip it of any physicality by conjoining the mother figure with the divine. St. Clare's conversion to Christianity is synonymous with being reunited with his mother in the afterlife. Legree's mother is presented in the same way—her lock of hair turned into a sacred symbol and being the one reminder of what could possibly save him. Stowe's conflation of the maternal with the divine emphasizes how completely ideal archetypes dominate *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead of building upon the relationship of the maternal to the physical in order to emphasize the particular humanity of individuals, she idealizes it to the point of substitution for God. The Victorian "angel of the hearth" is further idealized fusing the mother figure with Christ himself.

But the characters in the novel who perform the ultimate Christ-like acts, giving their lives for another, are not the mothers. This is a note-worthy deviation considering the maternal theology that permeates this text. The two characters, whose deaths, like Christ's death, are redemptive, are Uncle Tom and Eva.

Uncle Tom dies at the hands of his master, Simon Legree, for refusing to give information about two runaway slaves, while Eva's death is presented as a gradual wasting away due to her sensitive nature and inability to exist in a world of ethical contradictions. Both of their deaths result in the conversion of the most incorrigible slaves, in line with Christological doctrine. I believe that Stowe was unable (whether consciously or unconsciously) to place a mother or woman in this role because she wanted to present women who were true to the ideals of the Victorian domestic model yet empowered, not debased. She could not require the ultimate sacrifice of her female characters and still represent them as having agency and influence in the social sphere. Her female characters are aware of what is wrong with society and use what influence they have to effect change in a much more active form. While remaining obedient to their husbands, the white middle-class women are, nonetheless, depicted influencing the men in their lives who find themselves immersed in and compromised by the slave system. In the case of Mrs. Shelby, she is appointed the "sole executrix" of her husband's estate upon his death, and she "applied herself to the work straightening the entangled web of affairs" left by her husband; the obvious implication being that she is a better administrator than he. The roles that women perform in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are one way by which Stowe attempts to overcome her own dissatisfaction with aspects of Christian theology. While taking comfort in the prominence of the Virgin Mary in the life of Jesus, Stowe was troubled by the resigned nature of Mary in the Gospel accounts.<sup>51</sup> For this

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<sup>51</sup> John R. Adams argues that Stowe's womanly ideal was disrupted by depictions of the Virgin

reason many of her female characters take front and center roles in effecting change for the better. They are often presented as the bearers of Christ-like love, but where they are presented as having salvific influence, it is from the glorified place of heaven and resurrection; they avoid the role of the suffering servant.

Her desire to represent women as strong and influential creates a theological paradox for Stowe in regards to the Christian doctrine of selflessness, which is emphasized in the novel. As a result, the characters who carry the burden of selflessness, whose trajectories follow in the footsteps of Christ, are representative of those portions of society that are even less empowered than women: slaves and children. Sentimental language is a necessary medium for this shift to take place because it allows for the continued repression of the physical while professing feelings of attachment and compassion. Karen Sanchez-Eppler explains the intersecting concerns of the abolitionist and women's rights movements in the nineteenth century as both seeking to "reclaim the body" from patriarchal paradigms. But Stowe is still operating within the patriarchal paradigm through her consent to the Victorian domestic ideal and her adherence to certain aspects of Protestant theology. Her inability to identify the similarities between slavery and women's position in this paradigm, Sanchez-Eppler argues, requires a medium for her novel that allows a shift from a physical to a spiritual ontology. Sanchez-Eppler's argument accounts for the

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Mary. He quotes Stowe from *Religious Studies, Sketches, and Poems*(1896): "It is remarkable," said Stowe, hinting that it was also deplorable, "that Mary was never in any one instance associated in public work with Jesus" (53).

inconsistency between the physicality of sentimental fiction; what she describes as “a bodily act . . . gauged, in part, by its ability to translate words into pulse beats and sobs” and the fact that “sentimental narrative functions through stereotypes” through a detailed explication of the imbricated repressions of white and black women by white men. (419, 420) In the midst of her argument she states that “anti-slavery rhetoric disguises, and so permits, the white woman’s unacknowledgeable feelings of sexual victimization and desire” (427). This is in line with my argument, but I am suggesting that the white woman’s repressed physical desires surface in Stowe’s novel in glimpses of women strongly voicing their opinions or in the example of Mrs. Shelby taking over the business affairs her husband left behind, and equally through the shifting of a doctrine of selflessness, that posits “the flesh” in direct opposition to “the Spirit,” upon two characters who represent more marginalized segments of society than women. Sentimental rhetoric aims for a conflicted and unattainable goal because it suggests that it is a language attentive to the body through its reliance upon emotion, but all the while it operates on the premise of unacknowledged desire. It is the unawareness of the subject’s desire that creates the space for oppression to exist within this language while manifesting inconsistencies in the text.

Similar to the conflicted application of Stowe’s Protestant theology to women’s roles is the disparity in how aggression may be acceptably displayed in males. One of the more puzzling aspects of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is Stowe’s indirect commentary on male aggression. Again, through her use of sentimental

language she extols the principle of self-sacrifice, while indirectly upholding a very different one—self-preservation. The role allotted to the black man is that of the mild and meek as exemplified in the typology of Christ as the sacrificial lamb. As Tom is taken to face Legree for the lashing that will end in his death, he quotes the words of Christ: “Into thy hands I commend my spirit,” and “Fear not them that kill the body, and after that, have no more that they can do” (357). His final words to Legree are “I forgive ye, with all my soul!” (359). This example stands in stark contrast to George Shelby’s reaction after witnessing Tom’s death. Stowe plays this scene out in such a way as to side the reader exactly with George’s Anglo-Saxon need for revenge.<sup>52</sup> Keeping Legree in the background as a witness to Tom’s death and inserting his heartless comments at just the right moments, she puts us in complete accord with George when he finally “knocked Legree flat upon his face . . . blazing with wrath and defiance” (364). And in case anyone is wondering if Stowe doesn’t herself think this is exactly what George should have done, she follows it with the comment, “he would have formed no bad personification of his great namesake triumphing over the dragon” (364). While Tom is put forward as the suffering servant, the model Stowe puts forward for her white readers is George Shelby who claims that side of Christianity that is modeled on St. George slaying the dragon or possibly

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<sup>52</sup> George M. Fredrickson, “Uncle Tom and the Anglo-Saxons: Romantic Racialism in the North.” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. (New York: Norton, 1994) 429-438.

Christ overthrowing the money changers' tables in the temple.<sup>53</sup> This model is more resonant with the Anglo-Saxon qualities claimed by romantic racialism and imposes the Christian doctrine of selflessness, and suppression of the flesh upon the meek and child-like Africans.<sup>54</sup> In much the same way that Stowe allows the mothers in the novel to express a more active and aggressive role, she also allows the white male population to express "positive" physical aggression.

The scenes of the Quaker settlement are interesting for their deviation from white male aggression. It is as if the Quakers are the realization of Stowe's ideal domesticated world where the kitchen and women are the hub of all meaningful activity and even shaving takes on the added meaning of being "anti-patriarchal." But once again, just as George Shelby is praised for his aggressive nature, Phineas Fletcher is the Quaker, converted and therefore not entirely pacifist, who manages (along with George Harris' sharpshooting) to send Tom Loker tumbling down a ravine as he attempts to catch the runaway slaves. Phineas' pacifism does not require him to sacrifice himself as his response to Loker's identification of him as the one who pushed him in the ravine suggests: "Well, if I hadn't, thee would have pushed us down, thee sees" (175). The other Quakers, although represented in an almost heavenly depiction for their refusal to engage in any form of violence, are unable to secure the slaves' freedom without the help of Phineas, whose "old nature hath its way . . . pretty strong as

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1985). Gossett also has noted that Stowe presents her white characters admirably for not taking "the blows of fate meekly" (107).

<sup>54</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: Jewett, 1853) 41.

yet" (164). The religious, sentimental language communicates the message of passive self-sacrifice while the plot enacts the reality of what is needed to achieve freedom for the slaves. The language in this way is disembodied from the reality of lived experience. Sentimental language operates out of a scheme of the unacknowledged and repressed allowing speaker and listener to be seduced by the spoken/written word, but it is betrayed by its incongruent representation of lived reality.

George Shelby and Uncle Tom are cast as embodiments of the Ideal/physical binary. Stowe seems to suggest that aspects of both the Ideal, transcending qualities as found in Tom, and the more corporeal traits requiring a venting of emotion as displayed by George have a place within Christianity; these positions correlating with the church militant and the church triumphant. Stowe uses her mulatto character, George Harris, to express her views in this regard:

I think that the African race has peculiarities, yet to be unfolded in the light of civilization and Christianity, which, if not the same with those of the Anglo-Saxon, may prove to be morally, of even a higher type. To the Anglo-Saxon race has been intrusted the destinies of the world, during its pioneer period of struggle and conflict. To that mission its stern, inflexible, energetic elements, were well adapted; but, as a Christian, I look for another era to arise. . . . I trust that the development of Africa is to be essentially a Christian one. If not a dominant and commanding race, they are, at least, an affectionate, magnanimous and forgiving one. (375, 376)

Stowe expresses through George Harris' letter a valuation of Africans as better suited to her definition of Christian principles. But at the same time the hierarchy of human traits is subtly expressed in the last sentence of this passage. Through

the interjection of “at least,” “affectionate, magnanimous and forgiving” are relegated to an inferior place to “dominant and commanding.” It becomes difficult to discern which Christian principles and which of the racialized traits she is upholding. From this passage she appears to be elevating qualities of flexibility and mercy if we extrapolate from her movement away from the inflexibility and sternness of the Anglo-Saxon. In “The Key to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” we can see that she attributes very sensuous characteristics to the African race: “they give vent to their emotions with the utmost vivacity of expression, and their whole bodily system sympathises with the movements of their minds” (420). She continues with descriptions of African expression with phrases such as “violent gesticulations” and “agitating movements of the body” (420). The physicality she assigns to Africans is undomesticated, sensuous, and disorderly. She explains in this passage, using several quotations from clergymen to validate her point, that this quality is particular to the African race; unlike the “cool, logical, and practical” qualities of Anglo-Saxons; she insists on “how very different they are from the white race.” Both Anglo-Saxons and Africans are depicted as having a distinct connection to the physical; the difference is that the white person’s corporeal link is ruled by logic and promotes his dominance while the African’s “sympathy” between mind and body is peculiar and of a more expressive and sensuous nature. In Victorian culture, different forms of physical expression also correspond to the gendered hierarchy of values. Male aggression is upheld at the expense of the acknowledgement of sexual desire. One is allowed expression and the other is repressed. The perceived sensuous nature of

Africans is also aligned with another “tendency” to believe in the illogical. “The African race, in their own climate, are believers in spells . . . The magicians in scriptural history were Africans; and the so-called magical arts are still practiced in Egypt, and other parts of Africa” (421). Stowe uses this argument to imply that Africans are more readily disposed to belief in the unexplainable or unscientific. While these qualities make them more receptive to Christianity, set alongside of George Shelby’s righteous indignation, there is no doubt that this tendency to belief and sensuousness is inferior to the clear thinking and reasoning skills she attributes to the white race and their ability to righteously defend themselves. Stowe’s confusing depictions are connected to the post-Enlightenment shift that subjects faith to the standard of reason. The African “believer[s] in spells” may be more receptive to Christianity, but reason clearly comes out on top. In spite of all her religious rhetoric, the losers in Stowe’s post-Enlightenment world are faith and a certain sensuous physicality overridden by logic. The civilizing aspect of domesticity sacralizes the maternal and the home, and aggression. These delineations correlate with the repression of sexual desire that was expressed in Victorian culture and understood in many Christian theologies.

Tom’s death due to his ultimate disobedience to Legree’s cruel demands proves his selfless disregard for his own physical life and reinforces the romantic racist position promoting Africans as models of Christianity. George Harris is portrayed as more defiant because of his half white ancestry:

We remark, *en passant*, that George was, by his father’s side, of white descent. His mother was one of those unfortunates of her race, marked out by

personal beauty to be the slave of the passions of her possessor, and the mother of children who may never know a father. From one of the proudest families in Kentucky he had inherited a set of fine European features, and a high, indomitable spirit. (94)

But George's defiance is not his downfall, rather it exemplifies the "fine(er)" and "high(er)" aspect of his gene pool. For all of Stowe's religious exhortations, her words betray a conflicted attitude toward what her religion outlines as desirable conduct and what she and many white Americans held up as desirable human qualities. The romantic racialism prevalent among abolitionists considered meekness and humility to be inherent traits of the African race, while the stereotypic traits of Anglo-Saxons gave them permission to be materialistic invaders and conquerors.<sup>55</sup> Although the novel suggests that white Americans need to temper these inherent qualities, it still allows for and exalts behaviors for Anglo-Saxon descendants that indulge a dominating, aggressive kind of physical outlet. Because sentimental language maintains the hierarchical dominance of the Ideal over the material, the way this principle of Christianity which calls for humility and denial of self gets depicted in an uneven distribution of power is for the already powerless to conveniently display its workings. While selflessness is *spoken* of as laudable behavior that all should pursue, the novel, instead, racializes this trait making it a tool for continued oppression and leaves Anglo-Saxon descendents free to express their more aggressive nature. It also allows

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<sup>55</sup> Susan M. Nuernberg. "Stowe, the Abolition Movement, and Prevailing Theories of Race in Nineteenth-Century America," *Approaches to Teaching Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Ed. Elizabeth Ammons and Susan Belasco (New York: The MLA Association of America, 2000).

for a continued blindness to what is being repressed. Stowe's sentimental language, which relies heavily on symbolism and stereotype further upholds the clearly defined boundaries between black and white, slave and free, male and female and in this way avoids the specificity required to bring her readers in contact with the idiosyncratic individualism of each character, a contact that requires an openness in the language to physical, practical connections. As strictly as the "other" is defined, so also is the subject's own identity rigidly defined in direct opposition to it. These boundaries and definitions create a sense of certainty and security that is entirely bound up with the Protestant theology espoused by Stowe.

Conceiving of language solely as a symbolic function, with no connection to the physical drives, posits rigid subject identities that are threatened by difference. Kristeva's theory, again, explains how the conception of the other comes about with the advent of language as the infant (the "not yet" ego) establishes itself (as ego). The infant makes no distinction between itself and its mother in a space dominated by physical drives, sensations, and rhythms. Subjectivity is obtained through the onset of language while a "prohibition [is] placed on the maternal body" in order for that ego to maintain its separateness. Conceptions of identity fall on a continuum between the chaos of the semiotic realm and the stasis of the symbolic realm. Between these two extremes identity establishes itself either more rigidly and conservatively toward the end of stasis, or more fluidly and precariously close to chaos. A psychological movement is necessary between the chaos of the semiotic aspect of language connected with

the physical drives and the more static symbolic element of language in order for the subject to be receptive of otherness. Once it establishes a separate identity, the subject perceives the physical drives as the threatening “other” and the physical drives are associated with the maternal. The subject, however, cannot entirely reject the maternal, for in so doing, it loses the connection the symbolic must maintain with the physical drives. An overemphasis on the symbolic, as in the use of stereotype, and an assumption of the reliability of those symbols, is a result of the loss of the semiotic, physical connection in language and reinforces rigid constructions of self-identity and of otherness. Stowe establishes these rigid lines of subject identification in her novel in several ways. One way is through the application of racialized assignation of traits typical of her day as I have already touched upon. On several occasions in both the novel and in the “Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin” she expresses her understanding of racial difference:

The vision attributed to Uncle Tom introduces quite a curious chapter of psychology with regard to the negro race, and indicates a peculiarity which goes far to show how very different they are from the white race. They are possessed of a nervous organization peculiarly susceptible and impressible. Their sensations and impressions are very vivid, and their fancy and imagination lively . . . they give vent to their emotions with the utmost vivacity of expression and their whole bodily system sympathises with the movements of their minds. (420)

This description establishes a contrast to the Anglo-Saxon race, which is “cool, logical, and practical” (421). Another way she upholds discreet identities is to imbue practical, routine activities with transcendent import and thus suggests the God-ordained essentialist nature of those performing the activities. Her

representation of the Quaker settlement in the novel shows how even the most mundane daily activities are endowed with transcendent qualities. “There was so much motherliness and full-heartedness even in the way she [Rachel Halliday] passed a plate of cakes or poured a cup of coffee, that it seemed to put a spirit into the food and drink” (122). Either actions become sacralized or they convey a meaning beyond their obvious import as when Simeon’s act of shaving is described as “anti-patriarchal” (122). The effect of this is not to emphasize the humanness of these activities but to make them representative of something else, symbolic of something much greater and thereby instill a sense of immutable identity.

While creating strict boundaries of identity, sentimental language universalizes pain and suffering within a metanarrative, which recasts the other in the “economy of the same.”<sup>56</sup> In this case, the dominant white, patriarchal culture, through Stowe, attempts to tell the story of the slave’s pain and suffering from its own perspective, according to the hegemonic economy or paradigm. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* attempts to narrate the slave experience but Stowe can only accomplish this as an outsider, as a metanarrator looking down from a higher, privileged position, her overpowering, moralizing voice framing the experiences of the characters. Stowe’s authoritative voice is exemplary of Lyotard’s description of metanarratives, an attempt at legitimization through an appeal to

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<sup>56</sup> Irigaray 74. “The economy of the Same” is the dominant system’s organizational patterns that defines anything different to those patterns in relation to its own economy. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ P, 1969) 43. “The neutralization of the other who becomes a theme or an object—appearing, that is, taking its place in the light—is precisely his reduction to the same.”

universal reason, or in Stowe's case, universal feeling. From her first direct address to the reader a few pages into the novel, to the frequent homiletic soliloquies, which culminate with an entire concluding chapter devoted to her own exhortative commentary, Stowe makes a universal claim to reason and feeling, as in the following example when Tom finds out that he is to be sold and separated from his family:

Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and great tears fell through his fingers on the floor: just such tears, sir, as you dropped into the coffin where lay your first-born son; such tears, woman, as you shed when you heard the cries of your dying babe. For, sir, he was a man,—and you are but another man. And, woman, though dressed in silk and jewels, you are but a woman, and, in life's great straits and mighty griefs, ye feel but one sorrow! (34-35)

Stowe uses this passage as a leveler of humanity by universalizing the experience of parents being separated from their children despite the significant differences between Tom's situation and that of losing a child to death. The many descriptive domestic scenes that embody these universal experiences, operate on the foundation of several assumptions that are unique to class, race, and religious belief and thereby function to reinforce white, middle class identity grounded in Protestant theology. Stowe's maternal theology, in particular, is always imbricated within these social domestic constructs. That Stowe chose to title her novel after the dwelling place of Uncle Tom expresses this emphasis upon the domestic and her description of it is an attempt at duplicating on a cruder and smaller scale the same domestic qualities of the homes of the white characters:

In one corner of it stood a bed, covered neatly with a snowy spread and by the side of it was a piece of carpeting, of some considerable size. On this piece of carpeting Aunt Chloe took her stand, as being decidedly in the upper walks of life; and it and the bed by which it lay, and the whole corner, in fact, were treated with distinguished consideration, and made so far as possible, sacred from the marauding inroads and desecrations of little folks. In fact, that corner was the *drawing-room* of the establishment. . . A table, somewhat rheumatic in its limbs, was drawn out in front of the fire, and covered with a cloth, displaying cups and saucers of a decidedly brilliant pattern, with other symptoms of an approaching meal.(17,18)  
(author's emphasis)

Stowe shows how, even within their meager dwellings, slaves with lenient masters managed to meet the expectations of domestic propriety. Later in the novel we get similar descriptions of the domestic spaces of white characters such as Senator and Mrs. Bird's home, and Rachel Halliday's kitchen, although they are more sumptuous by comparison. The implication is that black characters must align themselves with the standard of white, middle-class domestication.

Domestic life is contained within the demands of daily routine and meeting the physical needs of people. The patriarchal domestic model civilizes those aspects of the physical that might otherwise be considered wild, savage, or sensuous. The racialized traits of Africans, "giv[ing] vent to their emotions," and their "vivacity of expression" are expressions of the physical that need domestication. The Victorian domestic model is of a female realm devised by patriarchy to repress the uncontrollable physical realm. It is a civilizing tool

rooted in middle-class commodity culture.<sup>57</sup> The domestic, besides being the model that all of Stowe's characters must be able to attain, is also another instance of the symbolic dominating the physical. It is a realm within which objects carry meaning above and beyond their practical use. Material objects establish those who own them within the symbolic structure of middle class society. The slavery system makes the domestic model impossible to fulfill for blacks, and insofar as Stowe means to bring the otherness of the black race into a degree of sameness with white society, her argument pivots upon this standard of measure. So while positing discreet differences through a philosophy of romantic racialism, Stowe's novel, somewhat contradictorily requires assimilation and conformity to white, middle-class standards. This requirement is based upon Stowe's certain conviction that Anglo-Saxon qualities are superior and her assimilation of Christianity to fit her cultural expressions.

These middle-class particularities are masked by the claim the novel makes to universal reason and feeling.<sup>58</sup> The reinforcement of this identity also works to further alienate her intended audience from the black experience and more importantly, operates not as an opening up of oneself to otherness, but an attempt to re-create the other in one's own image. George Harris' letter near the story's conclusion exhibits Stowe's mapping of white America's (and her own) hope that freed slaves would return to Africa onto her mulatto character. He

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<sup>57</sup> Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke Univ P, 2000) 2.

<sup>58</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) 69.

writes: “We have the claim of an injured race for reparation. But, then, I do not want it; I want a country, a nation, of my own” (375). Catherine O’Connell explains how Stowe’s sentimental rhetoric refuses “otherness” by showing how *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* uses Eva’s death as a preparation and modeling of Uncle Tom’s death at the hands of Simon Legree.<sup>59</sup> What is implied in the transference of emotion is that only by making the black slave as white and innocent as Eva can the “right feelings” follow that will enable white Americans to abolish slavery. Black slaves needed to mirror the white population’s own culture, beliefs, and values.

The important theological link here is that of the “other” to the “Other.” Alterity culminates in the Divine, an unthinkable concept, which it is impossible to grasp either physically or intellectually. If Stowe’s metanarrative attempts to erase the difference of the African slave experience by drawing descendants of Africans into the cultural and religious structures of nineteenth-century middle-class America, her theology is also implicated in this act of saming. The theology she espouses, so thoroughly saturated with a maternal mindset, reverses the Genesis story. Rather than Adam and Eve made in the image of God, God is made in the image of a nineteenth-century middle-class American mother. Stowe’s domestication of the “savage” African is wholly implicated with her domestication of God. Sentimentalism and its adherence to traditional Christian

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<sup>59</sup> Catherine E. O’Connell “‘The Magic of the Real Presence of Distress’: Sentimentality and Competing Rhetorics of Authority,” *The Stowe Debate: Rhetorical Strategies in Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Ed. Mason I. Lowance, Jr. and Ellen E. Westbrook and R.C. DeProspero. (Amherst: Univ of Mass P, 1994) 13-36.

concepts in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is inflected with nineteenth-century commodity culture, market capitalism, and middle-class familial and economic structures.<sup>60</sup> By creating a metanarrative with God's stamp of approval, she makes a compelling appeal.

Metanarratives as defined by Lyotard are stories imposed on history by a "metasubject," perceived as outside of the narrative, whose aim is to legitimize a discourse.<sup>61</sup> Metanarratives are myths that obscure their foundations, which are based on an agreement among those involved, an agreement that alone gives the discourse of the metanarrative its authority. Metanarratives would have us believe that they are founded on an a priori authority, the authority of the universal, and this is why sentimental language is so aptly suited as the medium of metanarrative. Sentimental language poses as an unconflicted representative of universal feeling. When the physical is repressed and feeling is removed from the individual, specific, and bodily response, sentimental language becomes the feeling of the unfeeling--feeling in name only because it is forgotten that it is a symbol.

The pre-determined goal of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made its metanarrative function inescapable. Though fictional, the novel carries with it a burden of proof in order to increase its political persuasion in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Under this onus, Stowe deviated from common fictional expectations by insisting on the accuracy of her depictions along with the principles upon which

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<sup>60</sup> Merish intro.

<sup>61</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota P, 1984) 34.

her argument rested. The fact that she includes as a chapter her “Concluding Remarks” as opposed to including such commentary in appendix form, is indicative of the extent to which the novel is interwoven with her own pre-determined interpretation. To even use the word “interpretation” seems fallacious, as Stowe did not approach her book as a text to be interpreted, but to be obeyed. *A Key to “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”* published in 1853 further ensconces her in the legitimating process involved in metanarrative and expands the metadiscourse already present in the novel. Responding to intense and often insulting critique from pro-slavery factions, her novel becomes more focused on proof than on the telling of a story. Instead of acknowledging the limits of its representation, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* makes far-reaching claims by appealing to common social and religious views. The trajectory of this kind of metanarrative is played out by Stowe’s later comments suggesting that the novel was dictated to her by God.<sup>62</sup> The irony of her text is that it does not free her readers from the grip of slavery, but performs a “master” narrative function that demands consent to a prevailing Ideal. While she hoped to reach the “generous, noble-minded men and women, of the South” through her sentimental rhetoric, she further alienated them by aligning her position with God. Within her dualistic paradigm

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<sup>62</sup>John R. Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Updated Edition (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 33.

this could only suggest that those fighting for slavery were in league with the devil.<sup>63</sup>

Stowe was intent on maintaining control of her depiction of slavery to the point of refusing Harriet Jacobs, who came to her for help with writing a narrative of her own slave experience.<sup>64</sup> But as much as Stowe wanted to fit the slave experience into her Protestant theological paradigm, there are points in the novel where it fails in its symbolic function. One instance of this is the scene where Tom converses with the slave woman, Prue, who has lost her children multiple times at the auction block and finally has to witness the slow starvation of her last baby due to the callousness of a harsh mistress. Stowe attempts to represent the harsh realities of slavery, but simultaneously contextualizes them within the Christian rhetoric she wants to convey. In this particular scene not even Tom's placid evangelizing has any effect upon Prue. Unlike Legree, who also is "past repentance, past prayer, past hope," Prue's resistance to the Christian message seems entirely justified. She does not want to go to heaven because that is where she's been told her master and mistress will spend eternity. "I'd rather go to torment, and get away from Mas'r and Missis. I had so" (189). Prue's character adheres to Stowe's reliance upon the symbolic. She never questions that heaven might be different from what white people have told her it is. She

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<sup>63</sup> The "Criticism" section of the Norton Critical Edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* includes several nineteenth-century reviews. In particular, see those written by George F. Holmes and "Anonymous" for references to the Southern reaction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Norton, 1994) 467-482.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin, "Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative," *American Literature* 53.3 (1981): 482-83.

never questions that the picture of religion they've passed on to her could be a misrepresentation. She relies on their words and for that reason she must reject it, because she knows she cannot live with the same constructs in eternity that she has endured in her material life. For her, "torment" offers more hope than heaven. As Tom walks away sorrowfully he encounters Eva and relates Prue's story to her. "She did not exclaim, or wonder, or weep, as other children do. Her cheeks grew pale, and a deep, earnest shadow passed over her eyes. She laid both hands on her bosom, and sighed heavily" (189). It seems Stowe's intent is to convey Tom and Eva's sadness over Prue's inability to respond to the Christian message of redemption, as well as Prue's suffering, but what is also evident is the inability of Tom's rhetoric to overcome the physicality of Prue's pain and suffering. This is one point in the novel where the symbolic fails and the reader is left with unresolved feelings. Tom's words after learning of Prue's circumstances, "'han't nobody never telled ye how the Lord Jesus loved ye, and died for ye? Han't they telled ye that he'll help ye, and ye can go to heaven, and have rest, at last?'" sound scripted and lacking in compassion in the face of Prue's loss and suffering. From this point onward in the novel, Eva's health begins to deteriorate until her death scene, which is often interpreted as a messianic representation that "saves" Topsy. But following the unreconciled death of Prue, Eva's death is more like that of a crushed spirit who no longer has answers for the harsh realities of life. Stowe all but states that Eva's sensitivity is what kills her: ". . . the things that she had witnessed of the evils of the system under which they were living had fallen, one by one, into the depths of her

thoughtful, pondering heart. She had vague longings to do something for them,-- to bless and save not only them, but all in their condition,--longings that contrasted sadly with the feebleness of her little frame" (239). There are other characters in the novel who refuse the Christian message, but they mainly serve the purpose of showing the depravity of life outside of that framework. Prue's character, however, does not fulfill this expectation. Her refusal of Tom's proselytizing is irresolvable because we know from Stowe's metanarrating that Tom's Christian view is also her belief, but we are, nonetheless, drawn to sympathize and even agree with Prue. Stowe's meta-narrative is unable to maintain its strict adherence to the symbolic when confronted with examples of actual slave experiences where the endings are not neatly and happily resolved. Prue's dialogue manifests the inability to universalize pain, within a text that didactically demands the readers' assent to that universality.

Because metanarrative operates on a priori principles, it takes for granted the agreement necessary for those principles and the language that proceeds from them to have effect. These assumptions have the effect of negating difference and simultaneously reinforcing a subject identity grounded in hegemonic foundations. Because of its reliance upon assumption, sentimental language is a language of metanarrative. It is an attempt at feeling and connection from the distant security offered by symbolic constructs. This is a secure position because it is ordered, domesticated, and predictable; it avoids the chaos of physical desire. If the African race was conceived as sensual within the prescription of romantic racialism, the way to tame that sensuality was to

reconfigure it within the paradigm of Victorian sentimentalism, to pass on the same repressive conceptual thinking which polarizes the spiritual and the physical, relegating the physical to a place of disdain unless it has been redefined (sanitized) according to the symbolic. To do otherwise would be to open oneself up to the other and possibly undergo a shift, a change. This could only happen by giving voice to African Americans.

Slave narratives *were* published in the Nineteenth Century. Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* dealt openly with the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her former master. The open acknowledgement of this *type* of physical abuse was too horrific for many accustomed to Victorian sensibilities, who could not come to terms with their own repressive sexual mores, especially in regards to women. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* allowed the *idea* of slavery to be addressed, without having to come in contact with its practical results and untidy consequences. To read Jacob's narrative required a thorough self-assessment on the part of the white readers because they were forced to consider the network of sexual repression that is implicated in the sexual abuse of its narrator. They were forced to confront their own sexuality and the social constructs maintaining the repression of not only African slaves, but of white women as well. There was too much at stake for this to take place—namely, their core beliefs about God, which had come to resemble their own idyllic concept of Mother. By conflating God and mother, women were reinscribed in the domestic as paragons of selflessness, and God was safely domesticated.

The domestication of otherness comes about in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through the sentimental rhetoric of feeling. By its very parameters, it is concerned with the feelings of the subject, not with the feelings of the other. These parameters require strict delineation within an overarching structure of thought that maintains a subject identity that feels secure and certain because its symbols are unchanging. As the words of Prue indicate, over-reliance on the symbolic, assuming that words are unchanging concepts, will eventually result in a collapse of that symbolic structure because it cannot bear the weight of its own claims. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reminds us that our language cannot maintain itself as a system of symbols alone; language has a physical component and if we distance ourselves from it in the form of physically repressive theologies or ideologies, we lose the ability to distinguish between communication and dictation, dialogue and dictum.

The overwhelming popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests an identification with this use of language as symbol posing as compassion. Berlant points out that "whatever transformation we might imagine being wrought from the world-making effects of identification must start right here, in the place of corporeal self-knowledge."<sup>65</sup> In other words, the identification sentimental language attempts with the other falls short because of an unwillingness or inability to comprehend our own physical desires. That is not to say that nineteenth-century readers did not feel compassion for black slaves, and neither

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<sup>65</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *No More Separate Spheres!* Ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham: Duke Univ P, 2002) 299.

does it mean to negate the political access that “feeling right” provided for women, children, and slaves; but it must also be acknowledged that they were able to use this text as a depository of feeling that did not translate into action, but only “pulse beats and sobs” that fulfilled its symbolic function of purgation. The novel’s handling of otherness and transcendence indicates an adherence to concepts of God that are comforting and containable. Sentimental rhetoric allows for quick gratification, a cathartic release, without having to acknowledge the complexity of individual, particular experience. It works in tandem with Stowe’s theology that likewise settles for a very attainable concept of God that does not have to deal with the ambiguity of uncertainty.

## Chapter 3

### Hawthorne's Post-Modern Uncertainty:

#### The Feminine in Language

If Stowe's sentimental language exhibits an equation of religious certitude with rigid conceptions of self-identity, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, published just one year before the serial publications of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, represents a very different use of language and conception of self and other. Central to Hawthorne's writing is the use of metaphor; his reliance upon the ambiguous through the use of such qualifiers as "seems" or "as if" implies the narrator's hesitancy to posit or signify. If we conceive of sentimental language as operating upon assumptions and certainty, Hawthorne's language, on the contrary, constantly impresses this interpretive element of language to the forefront of our consciousness. In *The Scarlet Letter* this element of language is the very topic of the novel; his characters enact the causal relationship between how we conceive of language and how we act. I will argue that Hawthorne was acutely aware of the connection to perceptions of self and other and how we use language. Assertions of one's own self-understanding as well as assertions of the nature of God become highly suspect in *The Scarlet Letter* because the language impresses upon us our inability to escape the interpretive nature of language. But Hawthorne's novel is not merely a nihilistic expression of humankind's hopeless condition to make a positive statement. He suggests in a very circumspect and circuitous method—one that fits entirely with his use of

language—a possible remedy, not in the sense of rectifying a problem once and for all, but as a mollifying agent constantly interacting with the symbolic nature of our world. His concern with language in this novel is that it is dangerous if it loses its function of expressing the subject's inner desires. Desire must be the instantiation of language, desire based in our very human and physical longings. The materiality of language, often overshadowed in Lacanian and Saussurian theories of language, is of central concern in *The Scarlet Letter* and Hawthorne genders this materiality feminine. His attempt to retrieve the physical connection to language accounts for his corollary critique of certain types of masculinity.<sup>66</sup> Hawthorne locates subjectivity within language and asks us to reconsider subjectivity and its relationship to materiality. The physical body is not exterior and antithetical to language, but the very aspect of language that maintains its uncertainty, its ambiguity, and by extension creates a more fluid understanding of subjectivity.

Religion is of paramount concern to Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* because it is the validating context for his characters who express a fatal certainty. God has become the ultimate expression of the symbolic for these characters. But Hawthorne suggests a concept of the Divine that is other than their ordered and civilizing conception of the transcendent. Much like Stowe's maternally transformed God, the Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* espouse a God that is remarkably similar to their own perception of the world. For them God is

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<sup>66</sup> See Richard H. Millington, "The Meanings of Hawthorne's Women," *Hawthorne in Salem*. Northshore Community College <<http://www.hawthorneinsalem.org/page/10482/>>.

male, civilized, logical, consistent, and predictable, with gender being the main difference from Stowe's theology. But through his narrator's ambiguous voice Hawthorne suggests a transcendent that is very different, a God who is unknowable and who is equally represented through qualities most associated with femininity. In his emphasis upon the feminine, Hawthorne maintains a link with Stowe's theology as well as the pervasive "feminization of religion" common to the nineteenth century,<sup>67</sup> but his ambiguous language suggests a very different concept of both the feminine and of transcendence. Likewise, his homology of the feminine with religion takes place within the context of seventeenth-century Boston when the representation of religion was strictly the domain of men. In this context Hester Prynne's role upsets the traditional binary of the Ideal/material and its attendant gendered hierarchy of qualities, and thus, unlike Stowe, rejects the patriarchal ordering of philosophy, religion, and society.

Hawthorne's metaphoric writing in *The Scarlet Letter* makes it difficult to rely on his narrator, who often has difficulty presenting a clear, unified assessment of events described. The plot also disappoints those expecting a conclusive resolution. Instead the novel questions totalizing concepts of self-identity, performing the role of skeptic. Within the Romantic tradition Hawthorne's skepticism upholds the critique of mastery or certainty—what Clark Davis suggests is the positive side of the tradition—an "'aversion' to modes of

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<sup>67</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800-1860," *Religion in American History*, Ed. John Butler and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford U P, 1998) 159.

philosophical ‘conformity.’”<sup>67</sup> It is questionable if an “aversion” is any less negative than skepticism and I will identify in *The Scarlet Letter* what I see as Hawthorne’s ‘positive’ response to his critique of certainty. Through his use of language, Hawthorne’s skepticism and ambiguity defer meaning, and in *The Scarlet Letter* he not only critiques symbolic systems based on idealistic and transcendent concepts, but suggests a positive alternative, not in the form of a definitive solution, for that would surely work against the very instability that is at the heart of Hawthorne’s ambiguity. But it is alluded to as a hidden trace in much the same way that Derrida’s deconstruction of binaries exposes ruptures within metaphysics. His writing shows a preference for uncertainty and he expresses it through a positive reappropriation of the physical, which for Hawthorne is encoded feminine.

*The Scarlet Letter* is, at heart, a philosophical project, as well as a theological one, which begins with a desire to undo the Platonic Ideal/material dualism through the medium of language and thereby calls into question some basic theological assumptions. The traditional Christian conception of “the flesh” always at variance with the subject’s desire for transcendence is problematic for Hawthorne.<sup>68</sup> In *The Scarlet Letter* he exposes what is at stake in such a polarizing understanding of subjectivity: “the whole relation between man and

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<sup>67</sup> Clark Davis, *Hawthorne’s Shyness: Ethics, Politics, and the Question of Engagement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2005) 51.

<sup>68</sup> Roberta Weldon also considers Hawthorne’s apparent dissatisfaction with Christianity but argues that *The Scarlet Letter* exposes the cultural association within Christianity of women and death. She concludes that Hawthorne reinforces this repressive cultural linking. *Hawthorne, Gender, and Death: Christianity and Its Discontents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

woman,” because Hawthorne plays off of the traditional pan-cultural associations of linking the feminine with nature and the physical realm, and the masculine with civilization and transcendence.<sup>69</sup> However, he does not use these common genderings to reinforce these associations, but to expose what is lost or hidden within them. The culprit for Hawthorne is an understanding of language, and more broadly, any symbolism, which attempts to elevate the idea over the actual, transcendence over materiality, or the Ideal over the physical. To do so results in a legalistic fixity that works as a psychic defense against human vulnerability creating social systems that cannot allow for difference. Hawthorne’s ambiguous language creates a space for the singular individual that has been subsumed by overarching ideologies. He intimates at what is beyond, or in excess of, common understandings of human behavior as determined within a binary that elevates the Ideal and represses particular instantiations of human expression. *The Scarlet Letter* addresses this binary at several levels: philosophically in the common Platonic Ideal/material paradigm, but also aesthetically, where the terms shift to the Sublime versus the detail, ethically, as the Law versus the particular, and linguistically as the symbolic versus the sensory, or the semiotic.<sup>70</sup>

Hawthorne configures gender to suggest a different ontological order that very much coincides with French feminist theories of subjectivity, namely those of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Kristeva’s psycholinguistic theory attempts to

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<sup>69</sup> See Sherry B. Ortner’s essay for an anthropological consideration of the gendering of nature and culture. Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” *Feminist Studies* 1:2 (1972): 5-31.

<sup>70</sup> In the Kristevan sense. I detail this theory in the introduction.

bridge the traditional dualism between mind and body by locating language acquisition in both the body and the realm of symbols. Her theory re(un)covers language's relation to human experience by emphasizing the physical realities of language development. Language does not only have a symbolic function, but a bodily one. "We have a bodily need to communicate" (Kelly, xv). Hawthorne was very aware of this physical element of language and he expresses it through the character of Hester Prynne. The end of the novel states, "The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman" and although it continues to declare that she must be "lofty, pure, and beautiful," these are Hester's own thoughts of her unworthiness as the "destined prophetess," when, in fact, she has already performed her role of exposing the illusion of the social and theological authority of her patriarchal culture.

Irigaray's theory of feminine sexuality correlates with the plurality of language connecting physical expression to language. Woman's desire is based on a different economy than male desire according to Irigaray, one that is not singular in its goal-object. It is this discourse of plurality that must surface from its place of repression. Irigaray posits the performance of mimesis as an important function in uncovering the repression of a female discourse. I will take this up in more detail in this chapter using Hester as an example of mimetic parody that uncovers the illusion of the Puritan elder's ordered world. Hawthorne's insistence on the hermeneutic character of language has explicit implications for his approach to religion, which I suggest places him in company

with our own post-modern theologians who posit an understanding of a divine concept which is not based on fixed certainties but on unknown possibilities.

Hawthorne's ambiguity not only resists the sublation of what has traditionally been repressed when opposites clash as is common to Hegel's theory, but his attempts to blur the boundaries between reason and faith, and the material and the spiritual also distances him from the rigid categorizations of Kant's *Three Critiques*. His emphasis on unknowability is at odds with teleological philosophies that emphasize Cartesian ontology as the basis of human subjectivity.<sup>71</sup> *The Scarlet Letter* gestures more toward a Kierkegaardian philosophy that finds relief in an acknowledgement of the limited ability of the subjective mind to apprehend the phenomenal world without and the intangible realm of the spirit and mind within. By focusing on the medium of language he questions the basic structures of these philosophical constructs and of individual identity. *The Scarlet Letter* enacts the impossibility of assigning constant structures of meaning through the elusive meaning of the letter "A" and suggests a re-thinking of religious and social certainties. Just as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have been considered by post-modernists as the first philosophers to call into question the systematizing of philosophical and theological thought, so too, Hawthorne stands out as a forebearer of post-modernism in the literary world.

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<sup>71</sup> Davis 48. Davis also makes this point tracing a line of thought from Emerson to Levinas and Cavell, of which Hawthorne was a link, that sought "liberation from both Platonic and Cartesian suppositions."

Hawthorne prefaces his novel with the unlikely introduction of “The Custom House.” The mundane aspect of “The Custom House” with its emphasis on the inflated and unearned status of its officers seems an unlikely introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* with its typically Romantic, exaggerated events and characters of equally intense personality traits. “The Custom House” feigns authenticity by Hawthorne’s narration of his experiences at his former post as a customs officer, but then attempts to use that authenticity as a proof for the validity of the somewhat fabulous story of *The Scarlet Letter* that follows. Clearly, he is not concerned with authentication, but possibly making fun of the entire process of validation. This stands in stark contrast to the validating process of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and immediately emphasizes the unreliability of what we know. Instead of a validation of the tale that follows, “The Custom House” introduction emphasizes the unreliability of subjective identity and the illusion of titles used as a means of establishing identity and social importance. The narrator of “The Custom House” is intent on conveying the sense of false security obtained from titles and positions as well as from claims to what is considered factual.

The edifice of the Custom-House embodies the governmental office of levying duties upon imports, but it is no accident that the word *custom* also refers to behaviors and ways of thinking that develop over time out of mere repetition. It refers to a mindless existence. The officers of this institution are depicted as stuffy codgers who serve no real purpose but who nonetheless enjoy the benefits of elevated rank and title. “Oftentimes they were asleep, but occasionally might

be heard talking together, in voices between speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses, and all other human beings who depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolized labor, or any thing else but their own independent exertions” (7). But these men of rank are only symptomatic of something more encompassing, because the narrator goes on to implicate his own ancestors of a similar inflated sense of self:

—[he] came so early, with his Bible and his sword, and trode the unworn street with such a stately port, and made so large a figure, as a man of war and peace . . . He was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a ruler 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, and relate an incident of his hard severity towards a woman of their sect . . . 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. (9)<sup>72</sup>

To neglect the precarious nature of one’s own subjectivity is to feed an illusion that could result in dangerous consequences as the narrator exemplifies in his own ancestors in Salem whose confidence in themselves and their ideology is followed by unfortunate results for others. Such definitive conclusions were the result of the illusion of an unchanging subjectivity and could have dire consequences for those upon whom such declarations were pronounced. The narrator’s descriptions of the officers of the Custom-House, likewise, emphasize

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<sup>72</sup> The editors refer the first “incident” of severe judgment to Hawthorne’s “The Gentle Boy” and the second as a reference to John Hathorne, judge during the Salem Witchcraft trials in 1692, “unlike the majority of his colleagues, he refused to repent his role once the hysteria had passed” (9). Seymour Gross et al. *The Scarlet Letter*, Norton Critical Third Edition, by Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York: Norton, 1988).

their reliance upon rank and tradition as a way of reiterating their positions, which in turn inform their subjectivity. “General Miller was radically conservative; a man over whose kindly nature habit had no slight influence; attaching himself strongly to familiar faces, and with difficulty moved to change, even when change might have brought unquestionable improvement” (12). The attachment of these “aged men” to the Custom-House provides the security of an environment and *custom* that acknowledges their titles, but the narrator associates this attachment with “evil and corrupt practices” thus suggesting that an existence that merely reinstates the status quo without questioning the relevance of established routines has broader negative impacts. (13) It was not only that these men had constructed false images of who they were, but that they had participated in grasping onto *any* theory of an irrefutable and seamless identity, because like the inability to fully comprehend the world around us, we are equally incapable of understanding our inner workings. Hawthorne rejected the Cartesian *cogito*.

The second theme that issues from “The Custom House” is a resistance to the discrete categorization of the physical world and the realm of thought. Describing objects in a room lit only by moonlight, the narrator states that they “are so spiritualized by the unusual light, that they seem to lose their actual substance, and become things of intellect” (35). He bemoans his inability to (re)capture in writing a space where neither the mind nor the physical senses dominates the other, but allows for a “neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. . . Ghosts might enter here, without

affrighting us” (36). The neutral space is where the potential for the unexpected remains. The material objects in the room dwell in this space in a symbiotic relationship with the noumena or the “spiritualized.” The fact that “Ghosts might enter” suggests that the boundary separating these two distinct realms has collapsed; the phenomenal and the noumenal, the universal and the particular, are not directly opposed to one another, but intermingle on the same plane. This is a space where moonlight makes

every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility. . . There is the little domestic scenery of the well-known apartment; the chairs, with each its separate individuality; the centre-table, sustaining a work-basket, a volume or two, and an extinguished lamp; the sofa; the book-case; the picture on the wall;--all these details, so completely seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light that they seem to lose their actual substance and become things of intellect. Nothing is too small or too trifling to undergo this change, and acquire dignity thereby (35).

This passage is intent on lingering on the seemingly insignificant details that can only be clearly seen in an environment that is not too brightly lit. Such strong light as “a morning or noontide visibility” is suggestive of the certainty we experience of objects we perceive. But it is only in the uncertainty of a dimmer light that this narrator can appreciate the details of his environment. The mundane physical objects in the room, when seen in a light that does not blind the observer to the details, become spiritualized, like transcendent ideas, while at the same time Ghosts enter into the physical realm. The familiar objects are invested with a quality of “strangeness and remoteness,” a defamiliarization brought about by the observer’s ability to see these objects *in detail* as opposed

to glancing at them and dismissing them with the thought that it is just a lamp, or a sofa, their assigned signifiers. There is no detail “too small or too trifling” to be denied this attention. This emphasis on minute details and their ability to impart meaning and significance works directly against Hegelian and other neo-classical aesthetic philosophies which hold the Ideal as the repository of meaning.<sup>73</sup> The intensity of light is analogous to one’s sense of certainty. What the moonlight reveals is a narrative opposed to the meta-narrative of a noontide light.

This scene in “The Custom House” sets the stage for what follows in *The Scarlet Letter*, where, in fact, a parallel scene is described when Hester and Pearl come upon Dimmesdale in the middle of the night standing atop the scaffold where years prior Hester had stood before the crowd in shame. Returning from the deathbed of Governor Winthrop, Hester and Pearl are invited by Dimmesdale to join him on the scaffold where his incessant guilt has driven him during a sleepless night. The narrator describes the scene, which has been illuminated (possibly) by the light of a meteor:

It showed the familiar scene of the street, with the distinctness of mid-day, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light. The wooden houses with their jutting stories and quaint gable-peaks; the door-steps and thresholds, with the early grass springing up about them; the garden plots, black with freshly turned earth; the wheel-track, little worn, and, even in the market-place, margined with green on either side;—all were visible, but with a singularity of aspect

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<sup>73</sup> Schor, *Reading* 22.

that seemed to give another moral interpretation to the things of this world than they had ever borne before. (154)

In both scenes a secondary light source imparts just enough illumination to highlight the details of the scene. The “singularity of aspect” resists the observer’s tendency to “totalize” the scene by identifying it as the main street of the village and encourages a consideration of each distinct object. The ability to appreciate singularity, the narrator suggests, requires a different kind of “moral application.” Hawthorne emphasizes details not only in an attempt to affect the reader’s aesthetic valuation, but he invokes singularity in the form of Hester Prynne as she stands in contrast to the Puritanical Law.

This contrast between the universal Law and singularity is emphasized from the start of the novel proper. Hawthorne uses the structure of a Puritan community to represent a highly symbolic and Idealistic realm as it clashes with the physical and singular world in the form of Hester Prynne. In the midst of a bleak and somber setting in the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne turns his readers’ attention to “a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems” (48). The narrator wants us to know a few important attributes of this rose bush: it has survived by chance in a hostile environment and it has a consoling effect on the prisoners who pass by it upon entering the prison door. These attributes gain significance by the fact that they are given after a dismal description of the prison, which had been established by “the forefathers of Boston” as one of their first orders of business upon settling in the vicinity. (47) The prioritizing of a prison underlines the dominant role of the Law

within this community. The narrator describes it as “gloomy,” and “ugly,” and made of heavy materials of oak and iron which conveys a fixity associated with the establishment of this society and the laws that maintain it. (47-48) The contrast of the rose bush that grows at the doorway of the prison is offered as a relief from the judgments of the law passed upon those who have transgressed. It is personified as merciful and not planned or premeditated. The chance appearance of this rose bush, upon which the narrator contemplates its survival and origins, emphasizes the contingency of existence by placing value upon that which has not been pre-ordained. This contingency relates to the arbitrary nature of language and offers a means of escape from that which is determined or over-determined.

What is fixed in *The Scarlet Letter*, and not open to change, is repeatedly put forth as oppressive and stifling. The Puritan life in the novel is oppressive due to an unyielding commitment to the universal, whether it be in the form of the Law or religion. Iron is frequently used as an adjective throughout the novel to emphasize the rigid, immovable approach to life that is upheld by the Puritan magistrates. Playing upon the historical linkage of the feminine with nature<sup>74</sup> by calling our attention to the wild rose bush’s “delicate gems” which offer a pleasant odor and “fragile beauty,” Hawthorne suggests that something is missing from this Puritan society, something that we must turn to the natural world to find. In creating a civilization that could withstand the brutal forces of nature and the “savagery” of the native dwellers, Puritans created a somber and relentless

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<sup>74</sup> Ortner 5-31.

vision of life, law, and spirituality. But it is the “*wild* rose-bush” that can offer this ordered community something of value, something that has not been premeditated by the careful planning of these colonizers. Hawthorne establishes the traditional binary construction of the Ideal precepts of Law against the chance elements of nature and from the outset connects Law with the Puritan religion. In so doing he imposes a very Hegelian mindset upon his Puritan characters, which upholds the Ideal not out of a “concern with the *general*, but rather with the *spiritual* . . . the Ideal is that which escapes the contamination of ‘chance and externality.’”<sup>75</sup> The Law and religion for Hawthorne’s Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* represent the Ideal because they have a telos; they have a set meaning and purpose that is applicable to all. The Ideal represents religious precepts and order and is encoded masculine; the material is the realm of random and chance occurrences in nature and is encoded feminine. The rose bush is also personified as capable of offering pity and kindness to those who have experienced the inflexible application of the Law and immediately reminds us that although the Law is a necessary element of society it is lacking in its ability to accommodate singularity. The chance placement of a wild plant, growing outside of, but so close to, the edifice in which the law is maintained creates the stark opposition to two competing aspects of this Puritan society and to Christianity in general: the Law of the Old Testament and the mercy and love of Christ of the

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<sup>75</sup> Schor, *Reading 22*. Schor discusses Hegelian aesthetics in relation to the binary construction of the Ideal to the detail.

New Testament, but it is clear from the start that the Law/Ideal/order are the dominating principles in this community.

The final paragraph of the first chapter explains that “This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history” and Hawthorne’s narrator speculates that it *may* have “sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door” (48). Hawthorne suggests through this historical reference a connection between Hutchinson and his protagonist, Hester Prynne. This sympathetic allusion to Anne Hutchinson is somewhat puzzling considering Hawthorne’s reliance on ambiguous language. Hutchinson, although standing trial by the Puritan magistrates of the Massachusetts Bay Colony just as Hester does in *The Scarlet Letter*, maintained a claim to truth in much the same way as the magistrates did; she accused most of them of relying on a “covenant of works” rather than a “covenant of grace”—a severe charge for a sect that emphasized God’s power to save and human sinfulness and depravity. She believed that she received messages from God and was not afraid to make them known. Many in the nineteenth century viewed Hutchinson as a figure who liberated religion from the strict confines of a discipline-based Puritanism. However, more recent historical theories suggest that Hutchinson was used as more of a scapegoat in a time when there was much turbulence within Protestantism over the nature of grace and the determination of salvation.<sup>76</sup> Exactly how Hawthorne configures Hutchinson is uncertain, but he

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<sup>76</sup> See the introduction to Michael P. Winship, *The Times & Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided* (Lawrence, Kansas: U P of Kansas, 2005).

gestures sympathetically with what falls outside of the strict boundaries of the law and also with the fact that both of these “perpetrators” are women. The narrator implies, through the flower metaphor, that the reader should keep this historical event in mind while reading the subsequent pages because it may “symbolize some sweet moral blossom” (48). My argument is in company with others who have developed a reading of *The Scarlet Letter* as an attempt by Hawthorne to revise our understanding of the Puritan response to antinomianism.<sup>77</sup> My interest, however, is not with his perception of this historical event, but how he uses it to open a door to a different theological, philosophical, and aesthetic space.

From the onset Hawthorne contrasts the immovability and certainty of the Puritan community with the unpredictability and uncertainty of nature represented by the forest where the narrator’s footnote explains the folklore of witch activity that occurs there. (Gross, 55) It is unpredictable because it has not come under the civilizing influence of the Law and religion. The marginalized characters in the novel are associated with the forest and by extension with the natural, material world. He follows the common gendering of the Ideal as masculine and the natural world as feminine, but does not grant the traditional, pan-cultural superiority usually bestowed upon those aspects of life which raise humans

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<sup>77</sup> Colacurcio shows the connection between Hester’s and Anne Hutchinson’s offenses to be of a sexual nature based upon the language that Anne’s accusers used against her, “the heretical-idea-as-illegitimate-child conceit.”

Michael Colacurcio, “Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of *The Scarlet Letter*.” *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. 1850. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988) 224.

Loebel considers how Anne Hutchinson’s speech while on trial emphasizes the linguistic nature of the antinomian debate.

Thomas Loebel, “‘A’ Confession: How to Avoid Speaking the Name of the Father.” *Arizona Quarterly* 59.1 (2003): 1-29.

above the “mere” physical realm which is shared with all living species to the “civilizing” aspects of human life that transcend “repetition and immanence.”<sup>78</sup>

The punishment the Puritan elders assign to Hester, requiring her to wear the letter “A” upon her dress, represents an attempt to negate her physical nature, which is conflated with her individuality. The narrator explains the intention of the punishment, “giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point” (79). What follows, however, is a gradual undoing of the finality of this judgment. The individual upsets the repressive effect of the Law, which would bring all actions and behaviors under its conforming power. Hester accomplishes this through a slow process that relies upon her physical actions and her refusal to use language in a way that is contrary to what she feels. Hester’s reappropriation of the punishment, which was meant to turn her into a generalized symbol or moral, uncovers not only the illusory nature of the Puritan’s well-constructed social system, but elevates what they have repressed

The connection that is made between Hester and Anne Hutchinson at the beginning of the story not only highlights Hawthorne’s concern with religion as a basis for knowing, but his concern with how we conceive of language and the connection between language and religion. Hester fulfills an adversarial role to uses of language that deny the mutability of its meaning. The letter “A” imposed

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<sup>78</sup> Simone de Beauvoir uses these terms to describe the historical alignment of women with their reproductive capacity. Domestic labors “produced nothing new,” but were repetitive. (63) Woman’s work within a patriarchy is the work of maintaining what already is, whereas man’s work is creating something new. (25) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Random House, 1989).

on Hester's bosom as punishment suggests the subduing of what is perceived to be her wild and lawless nature by the symbolic and ordered patriarchal system that makes up the religious and social environment in which she lives.<sup>79</sup> Her connection to Anne Hutchinson lies in their common challenge to the laws of their Puritan societies, but Anne Hutchinson's story ends very differently than Hawthorne's imagined one. Hawthorne conceives of a very different challenge to Puritan authority than the historical case of Hutchinson provides. I suggest that Hawthorne's revision of a woman challenging Puritan authority calls for a change in how language is perceived. Hutchinson's battle with the magistrates was a verbal one in which she was relying on the very language she was challenging but with an equal reliance upon individual revelation. Ross Pudeloff explains her undoing as the inability to maintain a subjectivity without entering into what he calls "the contractual model" which "articulates the space of knowing as fields of binary oppositions which are exclusive and exhaustive" (148). Her ability to claim subjectivity as an unmediated interpreter of Scripture was only possible by entry into the domain of the symbolic, universal law, or the contractual.

Hester, however, does not enter into discussion with her accusers. When she stands upon the pillory and is asked to speak the name of her child's father, she refuses. In one sense, this refusal could be read as an inability to appropriate language in a way that would give her agency within her community. To speak up and expose Dimmesdale as the father would certainly be justifiable

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<sup>79</sup> Symbolic is used in a general sense here, in the cultural sense of establishing constructions of value and meaning.

and relieve her of some of the blame. But, her refusal to speak allows her to be true to the feelings she possesses for Dimmesdale; her words must be commensurate with her emotions. It is not that she cannot use language to benefit herself, but that she refuses to use it in the way that the Puritan elders insist, in a way that would reinforce their emphasis on the law and obliterate consideration for the individual. Her resistance under pressure to name the father displays an insistence on the necessity of the physicality of language but also maintains her singularity. If she were to speak the name of Pearl's father, at that moment, she would enter into the universal, or ethical realm, much as Pudaloff proposes that Hutchinson entered the "contractual model" that insured her being banished from the Puritan community. Hawthorne maintains Hester's literary purpose by having her remain silent in this regard. She is not allowed the comforts of belonging within the universal. She exhibits, here, a Kierkegardian expression of faith, where to trust in the Divine takes one out of the universal realm and requires the silence of the "knight of faith."<sup>80</sup> Reverend Mr. Wilson tempts her to "Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast" (68). But Hester's response maintains her purpose within the novel to uncover the sublated individual and the sublated physical realm: "Never . . . It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off" (68). She implies that the letter is part of her physical being. The letter belongs upon

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<sup>80</sup> Kierkegaard uses Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and the necessity of silence on his part to explain the difference between a person of faith and a "mere" tragic hero. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, Ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton U P, 1983).

her breast and becomes a constant reminder to the villagers, not of her sin as the elders intended, but of the need for language to have a bodily connection, originating in physical feeling. As she slowly works her way back into the daily life of the village she creates a space for the individual in this society.

The greatest evil implied in *The Scarlet Letter* is to rely on symbols as repositories of meaning rather than on actions. The letter “A” was intended to identify Hester as an adulterer, although this is never directly stated. This is Hawthorne’s way of showing how assumptions operate in language; often times meaning is assumed as a universal given. The Puritan community, however, learns that the letter “A” could mean more than its original intent. Likewise, they learn that Dimmesdale, though put forward as God’s representative—“They fancied him the mouth-piece of Heaven’s messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love.”—had the capacity to be the living symbol of sin as the letter “A” “imprint[ed] in the flesh” revealed. But the narrator questions even the ability for everyone to witness a scene and come away from it with the same account. “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” (174). Therefore, the ambiguity of language lies not only in the random application of symbols but also in the subjective apprehension of it. Hawthorne emphasizes the hermeneutic aspect of language; there is not one way of speaking, nor is there only one way of hearing or seeing. Antinomianism has an etymological connection to the contingency of language because its Latin roots indicate a

resistance to “naming” or designating things or actions as a means of categorizing or universalizing them. But the common definition of the word means “against the law,” therefore linking language (naming) and the symbolic realm with the universalism of the law. The reference to Anne Hutchinson at the outset of Hawthorne’s tale clearly emphasizes his resistance to the univocality of language and the dangers inherent when the hermeneutic aspect of language is not acknowledged.

Hawthorne associates the material, the particular, individual experience, and the detail with the feminine, a coupling that Naomi Schor reveals in *Reading in Detail* was prevalent in the aesthetic theory of his day. Drawing upon Sir Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses on Art* delivered between 1769 and 1790, she establishes the inferiority of the detail in dominant aesthetic theory and further establishes the link in “Western philosophy which has, since its origins, mapped gender onto the form-matter paradigm, forging a durable link between maleness and form (eidos), femaleness and formless matter” (9, 10). “Formless matter” is equivalent to the detail,<sup>81</sup> which is “viewed as linked to the unredeemed natural world of immanence and contingency presided over by women” (310). Hawthorne chooses this gendered affiliation as a meaningful context for addressing this dualism between the Ideal and the particular. The context of the perceived dualism between male and female was seen as integral to the

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<sup>81</sup> Schor makes this connection explaining that beginning with Greek aesthetics form is contrasted to matter. Matter constitutes form but without form, matter is meaningless. This coincides with Sir Joshua Reynolds aesthetic theory that stated that the Ideal, like Greek form, is “arrived at by conceptual rather than perceptual means” (9). Details in Reynolds formula are like Greek matter that gains meaning only in losing its singularity in the beauty of the whole. (3-5)

perceived dualism of the Ideal to the material, the Sublime to the detail, and the Law to the particular. But just as Hawthorne wishes to create a “neutral territory” in regards to the phenomenal and the noumenal, he, therefore by implication, suggests a similar neutral ground between the feminine and masculine, a place where one term is not subsumed by the other. The narrator makes reference to this at the novel’s end telling of Hester’s assurances to others of “her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (177).

The illusory structure of the dominant masculine Puritan society in *The Scarlet Letter* becomes evident as the strict order of this community is contrasted with the more impulsive traits associated with Hester, Pearl, and even Mistress Hibbins and their connection to the natural world. These female characters are outcasts of Puritan society but their contrast with the strictness of the elders suggests they may be necessary elements of the human community if it is to avoid the ossifying tendencies of applying strict dogmatic frameworks to its lived reality. This becomes clear as Hester’s services to this community become the link to human compassion and tenderness. The narrator states, “. . . because Hester really filled a gap which must otherwise have remained vacant; it is certain that she had ready and fairly requited employment for as many hours as she saw fit to occupy with her needle” (58). The “gap” that Hester fills, however, has more to do with her humanity than her needle. In the later chapter “Another

View of Hester” the narrator establishes her true worth to this community. “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 the head that needed one” (110). The Puritan’s shortsightedness does not allow them to consider that the very humanness of Hester’s “crime” may be what also enables her to respond with empathy. Thus, in marginalizing her, Pearl, and Mistress Hibbins, they also remove needed qualities from their midst. Hawthorne depicts their marginalization by associating them with nature and the narrator insists on identifying feminine elements that are resistant to civil and religious law as the most marginalized aspects of this society.<sup>82</sup> The woman in the forest in *The Scarlet Letter* is the woman who thinks outside of the allowable limits of Puritan dogma and thus, she is the ultimate danger to this society established and maintained by patriarchal authority.

When Hester meets Dimmesdale in the forest, the difference between their mental viewpoints is highlighted:

She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest, amid the gloom of which they were now holding a colloquy that was to decide their fate. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view of human

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<sup>82</sup> Colacurcio 219. “Evidently, in Hawthorne’s view, fully awakened women accept the inevitability of a given legal order far less easily than their male counterparts. And clearly this is the central issue.”

institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church . . . The minister, on the other hand, had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws. (136).

This passage emphasizes the perceived danger of female independence by associating Hester with the “wild Indian,” but it is contrasted to Dimmesdale in such a way as to uphold Hester as adventurous and free-thinking and the minister as shallow and conforming. Hester’s lack of reverence correlates with Anne Hutchinson’s bold challenge to the Puritan elders. Both Hester and Anne are put forward in the novel as challenges to male authority emphasizing the danger they represent to a society based on systems of male governance and law.

Anne Hutchinson and Hester both, although married, represent themselves before prevailing authorities in a way that defines them as a *feme sole*. Hugh Peters, one of Hutchinson’s inquisitors, reprimands her: “You have stept out of your place, you have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject” (Hall, 383). Peters’ concern regarding Hutchinson is similar to the extreme attention given to women’s role in society as the American republic was establishing itself. A concern for women’s sexual purity is expressed in much of the early fiction

beginning with what are considered the first “American” novels.<sup>82</sup> These texts take pains to uphold the accepted social norms of a *feme covert*, or a woman who comes under the protection (and authority) of a husband or father. Also, women’s sexuality was intricately tied up with notions of nationhood as the early republic attempted to establish identifying national traits of virtuous character in comparison to England’s tainted history.

As indicated in a letter John Adams wrote to Benjamin Rush in 1807, the burden of the nation’s success seems to have rested upon women, both upon women’s minds and their bodies. ‘I say then that national Morality never was and never can be preserved without the utmost purity and chastity in women’ (qtd. by Mulford, xvi).

The idea of a woman outside of the social constructions of the family (a *feme-sole*) was perceived as a great danger to American society. Women were required to fill a delineated role within patriarchal society, a role in which they had limited input as to its character and performance. The anxiety that existed over women remaining in this prescribed place suggests the precarious nature of the male-dominated society. This historical context enables us to understand the threat that women outside of traditional bourgeois middle class social norms represented to society and why *The Scarlet Letter*’s female characters are portrayed as they are. Pearl most embodies the *feme-sole* idea in the novel, in spite of her youth. When interrogated by Mr. Wilson, “Prithee, young one, who

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<sup>82</sup> William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* were the first epistolary novels written by a native of British North America as well as published in North America. Carla Mulford, Introduction *The Power of Sympathy*, by William Hill Brown. *The Coquette*, by Hannah Webster Foster (New York: Penguin, 1996) xxxvii.

art thou. . .?," she responds "I am mother's child . . . and my name is Pearl!" (76). And when he inquires further, "Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee?" she "announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door" (77). Through these responses Pearl is rendered free of not only a patrilineal connection by being associated only with her mother and nature, but also from patriarchal church authority by denying a Father God as her creator. She functions as the revealed hidden subsumed element of this patriarchal community as her name suggests.

Mistress Hibbins' character is often overlooked as merely a fanciful Romantic trope and for good reason. It is difficult to make sense of the absurdity of her character. She is introduced in the novel not merely as the unmarried sister of Governor Bellingham, but as the "venerable witch-lady" who consorts with "hags, with whom she was well known to make excursions into the forest" (102). This is not only the perception of others, but she, herself, speaks of meeting with "yonder potentate" in the forest when she encounters Dimmesdale upon his return from his forest meeting with Hester Prynne. (150) Mistress Hibbins' character is best explained as a parody of the common view that a *feme-sole* was a threat to the established order. The excessive aspects of her character in regards to her witch-like behavior takes on the role of mimicking, to the point of excess, the commonly held notions that a woman without the direction of a man to guide her is destined to moral and social decay. Her consent to her witch-like activity has the effect of justifying the patriarchal system

around her. It is implied that due to her long years without the benefit of a masculine influence in her life, she has come so far as to be the personification of witchery and devilry. But the excesses of her character—references to her excursions in the forest and night “rides,” along with her preternatural knowledge of people—make her character one of the most phantasmal in the story, only rivaled by Pearl whose preternatural similarities and affinity to Mistriss Hibbins suggests that unless she obtains the father figure missing in her life, she, too, will become a Mistriss Hibbins. Because of the irrationality of her character, Mistress Hibbins’ literary purpose is to parody, or embody an exaggerated version, of the common understanding of a woman’s need for male guidance. Like Mistress Hibbins, Anne Hutchinson was accused of diabolical influence, which was directly related to the fact that she was performing actions without any male supervision. The absurdity of Mistress Hibbins’ persona suggests the absurdity of the social attitudes towards women who attempt a life free of the traditional coverture norms.

Mistress Hibbins also makes several references to meetings in the forest with witches and the “Black Man.” However, in the novel there is never any indication that such fantastic activity occurs. The only scene in the story that does occur in the forest is between Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale and it is the one time that they are able to communicate openly about their experiences and feelings. Satanic activity, Hawthorne suggests, is what Puritans feared and what was associated with the forest, but by making the only activity that happens in the forest the true expression of feelings, Hawthorne suggests that these

Puritans were mainly fearful of their own physical desires. The fear of witches can be seen merely as a displacement by the Puritans of their own physical desire onto a mythological figure represented by women who dared to think differently. Mistriss Hibbins is the imagined witch of historical accounts, but her portrayal is harmless, even foolish, in comparison to Chillingworth who fulfills the common associations of a witch as herbalist and naturalist.

Mistress Hibbins may be used by Hawthorne as a parodic element in the novel, but the character of Hester consciously employs parody when she performs her punishment of wearing the letter on her chest in an exaggerated fashion. The implied motive of her lavishly created letter "A" is to appropriate her punishment according to her own dictate. If she is going to be singled out for her crime, she makes sure that no one will overlook this symbol on her dress by embellishing it extravagantly. Hester's literary role accomplishes a particular kind of parody, the act of mimesis, which has the power to transform subordination to a positive subjectivity by acting out the punishment not through acceptance and acknowledgement of her crime, but through an act of conscious subversion. Luce Irigaray develops this theory in *This Sex Which is Not One* in application to prescribed feminine socio-cultural roles:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it . . . to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain

invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (76)<sup>83</sup>

Hester assumes a similar disposition in relation to Puritan law by submitting herself to the verdict of the magistrates, but the narrator makes it clear that “[t]he scarlet letter had not done its office” (114). It might more accurately have stated that the scarlet letter had not performed the office the *magistrates* had intended. Hester, through her mimetic actions of humility and servitude, changes what is meant to be a punishment into her own life narrative as opposed to being part of the meta-narrative the magistrates hoped to make of her. As the narrator points out, Hester could have left this community and returned to England, but she willfully chose to remain. Although lonely, “she, however, incurred no risk of want” (57). She is able to support herself and her child without the aid of a man and eventually wins over the esteem of the entire community. “Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge?’ they would say to strangers. ‘It is our Hester,--the town’s own Hester,--who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!’”(111). She ends up rendering a “service” to this community that goes beyond her needlework and acts of kindness. Hester’s mimesis of taking on the punishment, her reappropriation of the letter “A”, changes what was meant to be a symbol of shame to a symbol of a strong woman who lives out a vision for an “order to establish the whole relation

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<sup>83</sup> The translator’s note on Irigaray’s term of “mimicry” describes it as “An interim strategy for dealing with the realm of discourse (where the speaking subject is posited as masculine), in which the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within this discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her.” Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, translators, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1985) 220.

between man and woman on a surer ground" (177). Hester assumes the role of the penitent woman, but she does it according to her own prescription from the moment she attaches the letter "A" of "fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread" (39). By deliberately assuming this role, she "convert[s] a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin[s] to thwart it" (Irigaray, 76). Hester's mimetic acting out of her punishment has the effect of making what has been repressed and hidden visible. She makes visible the mutability of language and law (what Irigaray would term the "operation of the feminine in language") through her particularity, her individual and unique version of the letter "A."

Hester's detailed embellishment of the letter "A" epitomizes the function of the detail in that it assaults the neo-classical aesthetics of the eighteenth and nineteenth century embodied in Sir Joshua Reynolds *Discourses on Art*. With regard to the *Discourses*, Naomi Schor explains that Reynolds' negative attitude toward the use of details in the visual arts came from two distinct ways that detailism "fails." "In the first instance, Reynolds argues that because of their material contingency details are incompatible with the Ideal; in the second he argues that because of their tendency to proliferation, details subvert the Sublime" (8). For Hester to turn her punishment into a work of art contests the supremacy of the Ideal as the only worthy subject matter of art, and to embellish it with many "fantastic flourishes" draws the observer's eye (and mind) away from the lofty and absolute nature of the law it was meant to represent, to what might seem in contrast to be petty details.

The similarity Hawthorne wants to emphasize between Anne and Hester lies in the authoritative attempts to use their personal life circumstances as material for mandating universal meaning. Because their actions did not fit within the prescribed norms set forth by the Law, the givers of the Law have created their narration of these infractions. The women's story or experience is ignored. Their lives are objectified as they are made into symbols of what happens when one transgresses the Law. But their responses differ dramatically. One speaks, relying on the symbolic, while the other keeps silence and lets her actions speak for her. In Hester the symbolic realm is confronted by a more intuitive, sensual realm, a realm that is also reliant upon individual, particular experience and which coincides with the semiotic element of language, in contrast to the symbolic, put forth by Julia Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*.<sup>84</sup> These two aspects of the process of signifying are inseparable and the dialectic that takes place between them determines the type of language that is produced (narrative, poetic, etc). It should be noted that although Kristeva compares this dialectic to Hegel's dialectic, "unlike Hegel, there is no synthesis of the two elements . . . For Kristeva, unlike Hegel, negativity is never canceled and the

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<sup>84</sup> Kristeva 53. In attempting to address the philosophical questions of the meaning of life and language, Kristeva proposes the existence of two elements in all signification: the semiotic and the symbolic. The symbolic is the realm of structures within which symbols operate, symbols understood as Saussure's arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. The semiotic element is the function of physical/psychological drives and how they relate to language. The semiotic is associated with rhythms, tones, touch and involves the senses, but without the direct representation of the symbolic. The semiotic gives significance to signification by providing the answer to the philosophical question, "Why bother?" as it pertains, most especially, to the articulation of experience. Kristeva maintains that these two elements are interdependent and ensure the relationship between body and mind; they are "two heterogeneous operations that are, reciprocally and inseparably, preconditions for each other."

contradiction between the semiotic and the symbolic is never overcome" (Kelly, xv).<sup>85</sup> Hawthorne chooses language as his medium for questioning the dualism between mind and body, subject and object by focusing on the meaning of the letter "A." In Hester he creates a character whose relationship to language is very informed by her physical, bodily drives, what Kristeva terms the *semiotic*. Hester's relationship to language constantly challenges the stability and univocality of this symbolic system.

Hawthorne's reliance upon the ambiguous through the use of such qualifiers as "seems" or "as if" implies his hesitancy to posit or signify. His ambiguous writing in *The Scarlet Letter* avoids judgments, which would parallel the function of *thetic* breaks that assign meaning in appropriating language.<sup>86</sup> Hester's punishment—the imposition of the letter "A" upon her clothing by the magistrates—is a visual enactment of this thetic rupture. It can be seen as an

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<sup>85</sup> The *semiotic* mode of signification is constituted in the primary drives of the body in infancy and is shaped by the socio-familial constraints that are placed upon it. It is a pre-verbal state that is expressed in rhythms and intonations, a bodily form of communication. Depending on the dialectic between these two modes of signification, subjectivity is founded between the range of "pure signification" and "psychotic babble." (xvi) "The motility of the subject and the subject's ability to change are the result of the interplay of semiotic drive force and symbolic stasis." Kelly Oliver, introduction, *The Portable Kristeva*, by Julia Kristeva (New York: Columbia U P, 1997) xvi.

<sup>86</sup> Kristeva 39, 40. The *symbolic* mode of signification in Kristevan theory involves the acquisition of language and the awareness of subjectivity through the ability to objectify. In order for the subject to signify an object through language he must make a break from the semiotic realm to the symbolic realm. Kristeva terms this point in subjective consciousness a "thetic" break "We shall distinguish the semiotic (drives and their articulations) from the realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment, in other words, a realm of *positions*. This positionality, which Husserlian phenomenology orchestrates through the concepts of *doxa*, *position*, and *thesis*, is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the *identification* of the subject and its object as preconditions of propositionality. We shall call this break, which produces the positing of signification, a *thetic* phase." (author's emphasis)

attempt to bring the chaotic realm of bodily drives into the order of the symbolic, but ambiguity is created by the ever-changing signification of the letter "A":

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 signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength. (110,111)

Hawthorne insists on the inability of language or the symbolic to universalize or create constant structures of meaning. Thetic signification imposes controls upon those instinctual drives creating the stasis necessary for the subject to emerge, but Kristeva proposes that movement between these two modes of signification must be maintained; the symbolic cannot forget its connection to the body, so to speak. It operates in tandem with the physical.<sup>87</sup> If Hawthorne resists signification, it suggests a turn or gesturing to the material aspect of human organization; an uncovering of the repressed physical, maternal connection to the symbolic. It accounts for Hawthorne's privileging of the feminine.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In her more recent texts, *New Maladies of the Soul*, 1995, *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, 2000, and *Intimate Revolt*, 2002, Kristeva further develops her theory of subject (and language) development as a sublimation of the drive force, which allows the developing subject to transfer maternal and narcissistic identification to the paternal symbolic realm via the imaginary father, a third element, which is a composite of the maternal and paternal and provides loving acceptance, making this transition possible. (NMS, 121-22)

<sup>88</sup> Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Kristeva and Fanon: Revolutionary Violence and Ironic Articulation," *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis* ed. Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (Albany: State U of New York P, 2005) 57-75. Ewa Ziarek details Kristeva's further developed theory of the feminine logic that presents a challenge to the illusion of phallic "fixity of the symbolic" (68). Ziarek distinguishes between Oedipal I when the female (and male) child revolt, parricide, and assimilation of the paternal attributes, but emphasizes that for females it becomes a "contestation of the universal" (70). For women, Kristeva claims, there is a greater gap between the sensory and the symbolic because the phallus is not supported in the same visible way in the female genitalia as it is in boys. This is not described as a lack in Kristevan theory, but it causes a greater return to the pre-Oedipal maternal relation and creates an awareness of the illusion of the phallus. In the Oedipal II stage that girls alone experience, for

In contrast to a language that relies upon physicality, Hawthorne presents a version of Puritanism devoid of human attachments; they use everyday language as the expression of the ideal and this language is the verbal representation of the repression of the bodily drives. Presenting the women in the marketplace as unsympathetic to Hester's plight and willing to impose the harshest sentence upon her demonstrates the over-reliance on the symbolic law and the repression of human identification and sympathy. Arthur Dimmesdale most exemplifies this Puritan repression through his self-inflicted punishments, and his inability to connect his physical deterioration to his mental state. His punishment to his physical body is commensurate with his inability to acknowledge his physical drives. He can only continue in this deception if he can convince himself in this way that he has no need for his body. Likewise, Governor Bellingham and Reverend Wilson can only appreciate Hester's relationship with Pearl for the possible spiritual benefit it may have for them both. They are intent on separating the mother and child until Dimmesdale can convince them that there is a spiritual benefit to their remaining together. The natural bond between mother and child bears no significance, but, on the

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heterosexual females a shift occurs from desiring the mother to what the mother desires. She maintains her position as speaking subject due to the Oedipal I phase where she identifies with the dead (imaginary) father as entry into the symbolic. These two contradictory identifications create the tension between speech and desire.

Kristeva suggests that the doublings manifest in Oedipus I and II are what enable the apparent bisexuality of women as opposed to the "phallic monism of the boy" (71). Kristeva sees this female bisexuality as an integral component of revolution because it will constantly challenge the illusion of the phallus. The re-doubled negativity of female subjectivity identifies the "play" of language – the pretending of the universality of the symbolic and the fixity of the law. This ironic play is the conduit of the awareness of the contingency of the symbolic.

contrary, is seen as an obstacle to the child's spiritual development. In Kristevan theory, this disconnect between the physical and the symbolic creates an artificial self, one that has denied the physical to the point of creating a disconnected consciousness.<sup>89</sup> Hawthorne's Puritans downplay physical attachment to others. Within a model of linguistic psychoanalysis this suggests an over-emphasis on symbolic signification, which is fixed and totalizing. The Puritan magistrates, with their dependence upon the law, are the embodiment of this artificial self. Pearl represents the living evidence of physical drives and their inability to intuit her identity indicates their over-reliance upon the symbolic. The magistrates' suggestions for alternate names for Pearl reveals their belief that a name or any signifier should denote what is seen, that in some way the signifier is one and the same as the signified. "Pearl?—Ruby, rather!—or Corall!—or Red Rose, at the very least, judging from thy hue!" (76). Her name, rather, is indicative of what is hidden, just as pearls are formed within the casing of an oyster as a bodily response to a foreign matter inserted there, turning an irritant into something of symbolic value. For Hawthorne the pearl is the hidden feminine, physical aspect of signification.

If language is a dialectical oscillation between materiality and symbolic elements, then the active process of language and a dynamic theory of

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<sup>89</sup> Oliver xxiv. Kristeva's psychoanalytic diagnoses of what happens when the affective element is repressed or dissociated from language is a flattening of "psychic space." "Psychic space is the space between the human organism and its aims; it is the space between the biological and the social. It is the space through which drives move energy between these two interconnected spheres. It is within this psychic space that affects materialize between bodily organs and social customs."

subjectivity and otherness are emphasized. The difference between static and dynamic approaches to language correlates with post-modern definitions of religion as they confront dogmatic insistence on certainty. John D. Caputo, in *On Religion*, states “Creedal statements are trying to give propositional form to a living faith and a radically different form of truth . . . When love calls for action, we had better be ready with something more than a well-formed proposition . . . we had better be ready with a *deed*” (129, author’s emphasis). Similarly, Richard Kearney emphasizes a theology of “transit” or “transfiguration” as opposed to a strictly ontological theology of being in his attempt to envision a more ethical expression of religion.<sup>90</sup> Even though Anne Hutchinson was operating upon the same methods of religious knowing as her accusers, her trial along with the many others who came before and after her exhibits the interpretive quality of the language that makes up the dogma of any religious sect. The interpretive quality of language removes religion from the confines of tenets and dogma, which would universalize and make absolute to the uncertain territory of individual experience. Hawthorne’s coupling of antinomianism with the ambiguity of language and law, makes us aware of the continual tension in religion between individual approaches to the Divine and the attempts of organized religion to control the ability to interpret God. This tension is manifest in religious history

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<sup>90</sup> Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2001). “Between these poles of negative theology and onto-theology I propose to navigate a third channel approaching God neither as non-being nor as being but as the possibility-to-be” (8).

and continues today with the interpretive quality of post-modernist approaches to religion.

Expressions of religion that rely on dogma are critiqued in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne offers a different approach that relies on sympathy rather than duty. In the chapter, "Another View of Hester," the narrator describes Hester's transformation to emphasize the motivation of her good deeds. No longer needing to prove herself to anyone or claiming any acknowledged position within society, Hester's motivations are of a purer sort. She goes beyond the fulfillment of her punishment to a daily expression of kindness motivated by an inward sympathy:

With nothing now to lose, in the sight of mankind, and with no hope, and seemingly no wish, of gaining any thing, it could only be a genuine regard for virtue that had brought back the poor wanderer to its paths . . . she was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man, whenever benefits were to be conferred. None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty . . . None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town . . . Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. (110)

This depiction of Hester is put forth in contrast to those around her who claim the titles and forms of religion but whose lives lack a lived expression of those forms. What Hawthorne makes clear is that Hester's deeds proceed from a physical sympathy with those around her; they are not performed out of duty, but flow from her ability to relate to suffering. Her sympathy is what makes her a

commendable character and a truer representative of her beliefs. Sympathy is the physical connection between religious belief and religious expression.

Hawthorne's use of metaphoric language attends the transitional nature of Hester's deeds, in contrast to Stowe's sentimental language, which reifies constant structures of meaning as well as the rigid delineations between class and race. Metaphoric language also allows the transition of meaning that enables his Puritan characters to embrace what is other without consciously realizing that this has taken place. Again, compared to Stowe's didactic language that demands sympathy, the "text" that moves Hawthorne's Puritan characters are Hester's deeds, and these, in turn, effect the change in meaning of the letter. The Puritan villagers now see Hester as their own:

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; as if its gloomy twilight were a medium in which she was entitled to hold intercourse with her fellow-creatures (110).

This passage again invokes the narrator's "neutral territory" passage from "The Custom House" by its reference to the "twilight" which becomes a medium for the characters to "intercourse" with each other. If the lack of light is again associated with a lack of certainty, this epistemic posture, or position, is what enables Hester to communicate with the Puritan villagers and they with her. It implies that the letter "A" had, after all, "done its office" but upon the villagers rather than Hester. They are finally able to allow for a shift in meaning of what this symbol stood for

by being influenced by the actions that attended it. They had learned something of the changing, interpretive aspect of language.

Later in the novel Hester again exhibits her reliance upon the physical aspect of communication when she stands outside of the crowded church to hear Dimmesdale's Election Day sermon.

[She] was in sufficient proximity to bring the whole sermon to her ears, in the shape of an indistinct, but varied, murmur and flow of the minister's very peculiar voice. This vocal organ was in itself a rich endowment; insomuch that a listener, comprehending nothing of the language in which the preacher spoke, might still have been swayed to and fro by the mere tone and cadence. Like all other music, it breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated. Muffled as the sound was by its passage through the church-walls, Hester Prynne listened with such intentness, and sympathized so intimately, that the sermon had throughout a meaning for her, entirely apart from its indistinguishable words. These, perhaps, if more distinctly heard, might have been only a grosser medium, and have clogged the spiritual sense. (164)

This religious oration has significance for Hester not for its words but its sympathetic conveyance, which cannot be reduced to words. By hearing Dimmesdale's sermon without the encumbrance of specific meaning, she maintains a connection to the materiality of language. Hawthorne suggests, even, that her physical experience is commensurate with her spiritual experience; being unaware of the actual words spoken and experiencing them on a purely physical level ("swayed to and fro by the mere tone and cadence") allows a purer "spiritual sense" to be imparted to her. (164) It seems no accident

that the language Hawthorne employs in this passage is sexually suggestive further conflating the act of speaking with physical sensation. But it is only because of Hester's position in this society as outside, in this instance outside of the church, but also "in sufficient proximity," that allows her to partake of the sermon in this physical way. By remaining outside of the church, Hester represents a position of non-acceptance of a theology that claims a unified and absolute ideology. By living on the "threshold" of this community, Hester is not subsumed by it and is able to live out an existence which allows her actions to proceed from a dynamic relationship between the physical and the symbolic, an existence which is commensurate with her own conscience. Her sympathetic experience listening to Dimmesdale's sermon is, however, one-sided and partially motivated by her belief that the orator had finally acknowledged his physical drives. In actuality, Dimmesdale's consistent adherence to the symbolic impels him toward his tragic end.

If Hester is represented as relying on the side of physical expression and individual experience, Dimmesdale is cast as her counterpart, and defined by a reliance upon the symbolic. He is first introduced to the reader as he is called upon to speak to Hester on the scaffold to convince her to name the father of her child. He is a "young clergyman, who had come from one of the great English universities, bringing all the learning of the age into our wild forest-land" (48). This description implies a character bound by the book and intent on bringing order to the natural, chaotic world. Dimmesdale's inability to reveal his paternity is essentially a denial of his physical drives or the "wild forest-land" within

himself. Pearl's birth is a reminder to him that he is not exempt from the laws of nature, no matter how much he may claim the spiritual realm as his own. The laws of nature do not correspond to the civil and religious laws that bind him to the community of Puritans. The laws of nature are constant reminders, troublesome though they be, of the physical world and man and woman's subjection to it. Although in Lacanian theory Dimmesdale's refusal to name himself as father would be considered a refusal of the Symbolic and cultural realm, in Kristevan theory the symbolic is only one aspect of signification and Dimmesdale's refusal to acknowledge his physical drives demonstrates his rejection of the semiotic element. His refusal is, then, a complete reliance upon the constructed symbolic realm. Thus, he represents an exaggerated version of the repression of the physical drives, and we, as omniscient readers, perceive the immense gap between his words and his mental state. His position is also a symptom of his blindness to the otherness, or the unknowability of his own being. His body's response to the repression of his physical drives is totally out of his control and he is portrayed as one driven blindly by this force. Though Dimmesdale refuses to publicly acknowledge his paternity, his body somatically "speaks" for him. If he insists on ignoring his physical drives and the connection that they have to language, his body bears the consequence of this denial and eventually is "forced" to enter the symbolic realm through its creation of the "A" upon his chest, paralleling Hester's embroidered letter. Chillingworth intuits after taking Dimmesdale on as his patient, "A rare case! I must needs look deeper into it. A strange sympathy betwixt soul and body!" (95) As a physician, he picks

up on the somatic expression of Dimmesdale's condition. The strange and questionable development of the letter "A" on Dimmesdale's chest can be interpreted as the necessary action to bring him as the representative of the symbolic to a common, or neutral ground with Hester, who expressing the semiotic in language already bears the symbolic on her chest. Dimmesdale's denouement in the story makes him once and for all the everlasting symbol, he becomes representative, the "tragic hero" of Kierkegaardian philosophy who "relinquishes himself in order to express the universal."<sup>91</sup> As omniscient readers, we are aware of the illusionary basis of his greatness.

In Dimmesdale's (or Hawthorne's) Puritan community the over-reliance on universal law obliterates the specifics of human experience, giving the same seriousness to all crimes. Whether correcting an unruly child or hanging someone for witchcraft, "there was very much the same solemnity of demeanour on the part of the spectators; as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused" (37). Just as the somberness of their religion left the town devoid of color and mirth, blending everything into the "general tint [of] the sad gray, brown, or black," the all-consuming power of the law erased the lines of distinction between one crime and the next leaving only the transgressor and the knowledge that punishment must be inflicted. (157) Dimmesdale bears the enormous tension of having once acknowledged the specific or physical, but then

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<sup>91</sup>Kierkegaard 74. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and the necessity of silence on his part is, for Kierkegaard, the difference between a person of faith and a tragic hero.

attempting to push it back into its repressed place. In this way, his denial of his paternity becomes a denial of himself, a violence to his very being, manifest in the self-applied scourgings performed in secret.

Dimmesdale lives in a world of pure signification.<sup>92</sup> Although he is tormented physically as well as mentally by the deception he perpetuates, "I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am," he cannot act on what his body tells him is in need of correction. His somatic response is ignored or repressed in order to maintain his appointed symbolic role within society. When Chillingworth suggests that his sickness might be due to "some ailment in the spiritual part," Dimmesdale refutes, "You deal not, I take it, in medicine of the soul!" (94) To Dimmesdale, the body and soul are two separate entities which have no connection to each other. He lacks the understanding that his bodily drives are a precondition of language and that denying the significance of the role they play, only creates the illusion of "pure signification" where the signified is believed to hold a platonic-like relationship to its ideal creating a metalanguage removed from human specificity or particularity.<sup>93</sup> There is no continuum for Dimmesdale between his mental disposition and his spoken words. Even though, time and again he attempts to reveal his involvement with Hester and Pearl, his words defy his very intention, causing a greater reverence in his congregation for him. In spite of these

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<sup>92</sup>Kristeva 45. Kristeva uses this term to refer to a repression of the physical aspects of language, to consider language as purely symbolic.

<sup>93</sup> Kristeva 45.

instances of linguistic unreliability, Dimmesdale persists in his denial of any gap between the word and the thing, the signifier and the signified, or of the relationship between the Ideal and the particular. In this denial the narrator gives us Dimmesdale's fatal flaw:

He had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity . . . Could there be plainer speech than this? Would not the people start up in their seats, by a simultaneous impulse, and tear him down out of the pulpit which he defiled? Not so, indeed! They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more. . . He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood.  
(99)

Dimmesdale's speech may be plain, but it is also devoid of the particular; speaking in generalities, he has left out the specifics of his crime. By relying on the universal precepts of his religion—that he is a sinner, like all men and women, an abomination in the sight of God—and neglecting the particular details of his relationship to Hester and Pearl, he exemplifies the subsuming of the detail by totalizing concepts and the violence or negation that is involved.

As Dimmesdale's character exemplifies, Hawthorne's attention to the inner workings of human behavior emphasizes the individual idiosyncrasies of people's actions even if they are conforming to an external norm. Application of Kristeva's psycho-linguistic theory helps us to appreciate what Nina Baym stresses as "Hawthorne's contribution to psychological understanding" which is "strikingly innovative and advanced" (73). Baym states, "The vast increase in awareness of, and attention to, the interior world was an offshoot of the general romantic

movement with its tremendous focus on the single self” (73,74). But Hawthorne cannot rest in the comfort of romantic tradition as his narrator explains in “The Custom-House,” “The impalpable beauty of my soap-bubble was broken by the rude contact of some actual circumstance” (29). His story would discover a place of suspension, a “neutral territory, somewhat between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet” (28) where ambiguity could reign and allow for a point of contact which does no violence to Realism’s detail while still leaving room for the possibility of the imaginary or the “hyper-real.”<sup>94</sup> In his effort to overcome the Ideal/material binary, Hawthorne looks past the literary period of Realism and foreshadows the later attributes of modernism and post-modernism.

Hawthorne was taken with ambiguous (con)textual framings as he unfolded a story set in the Puritan village in Boston. His narrator acts as a counterbalance in a world of moral absolutes. Therefore, his use of words such as “seems,” “appears,” “might have,” convey a sense of contingency that undermines the construction of an unyielding social system. We are prompted in this way to consider, on a larger scale, the harmful effects of totalizing belief systems. The Puritan elders mandated a society that knows no “maybe” or the possibility for thoughtful questioning. Hawthorne, through his narrator, condemns the certainty that absolves us from thinking, from being open to new possibilities or otherness. He is insistent on not allowing his readers to get away from his text

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<sup>94</sup> In religious terms, what Caputo calls the “hyper-real,” is the open-endedness which is attained through the *active* living out of faith, hope, and love. *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2006) 15-16.

without having to confront the unreliability of not only language, but their own motivations.

Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* enacts the shifting multiple meanings of language and turns our attention to our individual interpretations. His Puritan characters are representative of any who rely solely on a legalistic code based on a written text. By using the religious context of Puritanism and Anne Hutchinson and the antinomian crisis, Hawthorne not only questions the reliability of language, but the capability of Scripture itself to maintain a constant and universal application. By the way of contrast, he offers "Hester at her needle." "It was the art—then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp—of needlework" (57). Her needle is the implement which "writes" another "language," one which relies on the ornamental detail. Her text is not of the symbolic realm, but the material. Hester is aware that she is necessary for this Puritan society; they need what she has to offer. Her work adds a "richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics" (57). Hester's form of writing includes the text(ure) of her medium. It invites the sense of touch and lingering gazes, but leaves the appreciation/interpretation of her work up to the beholder.<sup>95</sup> It reminds us of the multi-faceted aspects of signification and

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<sup>95</sup> Caputo 99. Similarly, Caputo reminds us of the unreliability of the written word: For a book is something spelled out in words and letters, which is why theoreticians nowadays prefer to speak of a 'text.' By speaking of a text they mean to de-emphasize the reassuring unity and engaging authority of the 'author' of a 'book' and to accentuate the disconcerting effect of working with a woven product, from *texere*, to weave, to string together. For the written work is something interwoven, a bewildering web and complex fabric, sometimes the work of many different authors over the course of very different times stitched together into the illusory and comforting unity of the 'book.'

stresses the link between language and the physical realm. This comparison emphasizes the need for the physical sense of touch and the indeterminate aesthetic component of language, which necessarily involves personal biases and cultural influences in order to decipher linguistic meaning. Hester's needlework is a constant reminder of the ambiguous nature of all symbolic signification by its close identification with the letter A, and the illusory nature of constructed systems of belief.

Hawthorne's use of metaphoric language in *The Scarlet Letter* emphasizes the multivocality of the genre of novel writing. It is manifest in the contemporary reception of this work, which found it difficult to categorize it as novel or romance and which often remarked on its use of poetic language.<sup>96</sup> Through mimesis and metaphor the multiple meanings of language are achieved both in his actual use of language as well as in the narrative of the plot. This transmutability of language is the very aspect that directs us towards the semiotic element of language and the maternal/physical connection to human development and communication. Identifying the maternal aspects of pre-lingual signification helps us to understand Hawthorne's "consistent critique of a version of masculinity" (Millington). It becomes imperative that the feminine be the focus of change as Hawthorne's narrator proclaims, "The angel and apostle of the

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<sup>96</sup> Gary Scharnhorst, ed. *The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*, (New York: Greenwood P, 1992) lists several of the contemporary responses to this work. Many of these critics acknowledge a quality of *The Scarlet Letter* that surpasses any previous novel. Many of them also found it difficult to place it in a specific genre due to Hawthorne's use of language, which they most commonly referred to as a form of poetics. See, in particular, the review from the *Boston Transcript* (11), the *Salem Gazette* (13), the *Salem Register* (14), the *Boston Post* (17, 18), the *Literary World* (21), the *Portland Transcript* (24), and *Peterson's* (30).

coming revelation must be a woman” (177). But Hawthorne is not promoting the elevation of the feminine over the masculine. He is simply acknowledging the gendered mapping of the Ideal/material binary and bringing attention to what has been subsumed in this dualism. He is looking forward to the kind of dialectic, which does not negate an element of the binary, but creates a middle path. What the ambiguity intimates is his position of undecidability. It is a dynamic positioning that relies upon movement; like the mutations of meaning for the letter “A,” his ambiguity is the suspension of meaning that is produced by constant movement or deferral. His elevation of the individual, through characters like Hester, prefigures the particularism of Realism while his prose takes on the function of poetic language resisting both the idealization of Romanticism and the verisimilitude of Realism, and envisions the Modernist era of fragmentation. Modernism can be better understood as we locate it in the feeling of alienation, which permeates Hawthorne’s writing. His fascination with fringe elements of society in his novels reveals his concern with alienated individuals who stand outside the law and whose experiences often make a mockery of it; they expose the inadequacy of the law and rigid dogmatic codes (the symbolic) to account for the wide range of human experience (the particular).

The scene in the novel that most celebrates the detail and also creates the narrator’s longed-for “neutral territory” comes in the conclusion at the gravesite of Hester and Dimmesdale. If, as I have argued, Hester is representative of the particular, and the material aspect of language, and Dimmesdale of the universal

and symbolic function of language, their gravesite depicts the accomplishment of the cohabitation of these two polarities without one subsuming the other. Hester's grave "was near that old and sunken grave, yet with a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to mingle. Yet one tombstone served for both" (178). The common tombstone links the two bodies below, just as the symbolic and semiotic are linked by their common connection to language, but the "space between" maintains the distinct reality and viability of each. The tombstone is engraved with a shield bearing the words in translation "On a black shield, the letter A in red" (footnote, 178). What is supposed to "serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend" is only a description of itself. If the tombstone represents the common link of language, it does not convey any meaning about the people whose remains lie beneath it, but functions as a self-referential signifier; there is no extension of meaning or concept implied. This "motto" upholds the particular by refusing a moral or reading of the lives it represents, which would subsume the complex and multiple dimensions of their lived experiences, but instead is "exhaustive" in and of itself, a fitting pre-cursor to realism and modernism. This epitaph fulfills what Schor describes as the onset of realism: "Implicitly, realism in its formative stages had as its mission to demonstrate that the neo-classical opposition of particularity and the Sublime is not insuperable, in fiction this demonstration will take the form of a sublimation, indeed, a sacralization of the detail" (182). The letter "A" in red is carved in stone replacing the usual affirmations of faith in a restful hereafter or spiritual

references; the detail itself has become a sacred inscription set free from the telos of divine fulfillment.

The man who wrote *The Scarlet Letter* is himself a contradiction, an ambiguity whose personal life cannot be reconciled with his writing. It is plausible that Hawthorne used this novel as his “neutral territory,” the place where he could envision a different society. Hawthorne’s repudiation of Puritan and Transcendentalist certainty is a rejection of totalizing systems of belief and gestures toward a religion that can acknowledge its limitations and be content with ambiguity. For Hawthorne this is only possible through a diligent acknowledgement of the physical aspects of language, which in his culture, and still in ours today, returns us to the “feminine” function within language. The materiality of language is that element that constantly challenges the illusion of the paternal, or phallic authority of the law, the “fetishistic fixity of symbolic and psychic protections” and accepts the contingency of lived experience, the position of undecidability. (Ziarek, 69) The moral of *The Scarlet Letter* is, it seems, that traditional religion’s sublation of the physical will always have the effect of repressing the feminine. The post-structuralist philosophies that today are playing a crucial role in the understanding of fundamentalist tendencies in religious expression may play a role in understanding this connection.<sup>97</sup> *The Scarlet Letter* has generated volumes of criticism precisely because it has by its

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<sup>97</sup> Caputo 128. Caputo purports the ambiguous nature of religion, which Hawthorne hints at, stating, “Undecidability is the place in which faith takes place, the night in which faith is conceived, for night is its element. Undecidability is the reason that faith is faith and not Knowledge and the way that faith can be true without Knowledge.”

ambiguity made multiple readings inevitable and closure impossible. Hawthorne, though recalling the past, points ahead to some future society that had not been realized in his lifetime. He left his readers to discover, as if by chance, his sweet moral blossom.

## Chapter 4

### 'Alive' Verse from the Speaking Dead:

#### Dickinson's Escape from Conventional Religion

*While my thought is undressed—I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown—they look alike, and numb (L261)*

*“The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.” Jean-François Lyotard*

My discussion of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* proposes his writing style allows for a continual acknowledgement of the interpretive aspect of language. He refers to Anne Hutchinson and her exile from an early seventeenth-century Puritan community as an ideological forbearer of his fictional character, Hester Prynne. They both represent instances of the clash between universal application of Law and manifestations of particularity. I am following my discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* with a consideration of Emily Dickinson's use of language in her poetry because I see a continuation of the same emphasis upon the particular and the crisis of meaning that is often associated with particularity as it relates to interpretation. Both writers, despite their differing genres, display an attitude, and a resistance to the conventions of universalizing discourse through an emphasis upon the physical. Dickinson, like Hawthorne, exhibits a post-modern quality through her “incredulity toward metanarratives”<sup>98</sup> and

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<sup>98</sup> Jed Deppman proposes the post-modern quality of Dickinson's thinking as revealed in her poetry. “In the ways she refused either to accept or reject the powerful explanatory discourses of her time, for example, we can recognize the attitude Jean-Francois Lyotard finds definitive of

accomplishes it through her “presentation of the unrepresentable.” Students of Dickinson sometimes comment that she seems to have given up on life when they consider the morbid content of many of her poems along with her reclusive lifestyle. But I want to consider how her use of dead speakers in many of her poems acts as a resistance to what she considered stifling narratives that pervaded mid-nineteenth century America. Chief among these was the religious context that encouraged professions of faith and was intertwined with gendered social and domestic expectations. Dickinson’s posthumous speakers and her focus on death in her poems ultimately have the effect of opening up a space of creativity by representing the unrepresentable. By challenging religious tenets and even psychological conceptions of identity, these dead narrators create a space of uncertainty that, for Dickinson, is necessary for imagining a better life.<sup>99</sup>

It is not uncommon for Dickinson’s poetry to be seen as anomalous within the profusion of poetry being written (and published) during her lifetime. She has been compared to later, modernist poets such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens.<sup>100</sup> Both the content and form of her writing has been identified as anachronistic, but it is important to not ahistoricize Dickinson by neglecting her socio-cultural influences and her

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postmodernism: incredulity toward metanarratives” (86). “Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson.” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 14:1 (Spring 2005): 84-103.

<sup>99</sup> See Robin Fast, “‘The One Thing Needful’: Dickinson’s Dilemma of Home and Heaven,” *ESQ* 27:3 (1981): 160.

<sup>100</sup> Jay Ladin discusses the linguistic properties that place her in the company of modernist poets. (22) “‘So Anthracite – to live’: Emily Dickinson and American Literary History.” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 13:1 (Spring 2004): 19-50.

response to them. When we look for the ways that her writing is connected to her contemporaries it throws into relief the nuances that distinguish her writing from theirs and what these differences imply about her personal attitudes toward the larger cultural narratives of her environment. In particular, I am interested in her attitude toward religion and how she conceived of a Divine while rejecting the traditional Christian discourse of confession and salvation. Though there was a dramatic increase in “unbelievers” in the nineteenth century, I do not consider Dickinson among them. However, neither do I see her as assenting blindly to traditional, institutionalized religion. Like Hawthorne, Dickinson’s writing more closely conveys the kind of contempt expressed by Nietzsche or Kierkegaard toward the mediocrity of organized religion. But just as Kierkegaard parts ways with Nietzsche as his critique leads him to marvel in the absurdity of faith, so Dickinson emphasizes a kind of belief that does not rest on assurances, but James McIntosh states, is founded on the “absence of constant certainties.”<sup>101</sup> I see connections to her literary period, most notably to Hawthorne, in her attempts to contemplate Otherness and the unknowable while using the same topoi of many of her female contemporaries.

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<sup>101</sup> See James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000) 2.

Also, Shira Wolosky, “Emily Dickinson: the violence of the imagination” *Nineteenth-Century Poetry 1800-1910*, Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge UP, 2004 Cambridge Histories Online. Cambridge UP 23 June 2011 DOI:10.1017/CHOL9780521301084.014) 444.

Wolosky states, “Dickinson’s religious stance is not that of a determined unbeliever. She is not devout, but she is not secular. She attacks religious claims which continue, however, to keep their hold on her and which she never entirely discards . . . Dickinson remains, unusually, in a state of sustained religious crisis, with an intensity that rivals that of mystical devotion.”

We know from Dickinson's letters that she read Hawthorne's work, but her only mention of it on record is to say that "Hawthorne appalls – entices" (277). The appalling yet enticing nature of Hawthorne's writing finds an equal, if not a surpassing measure, in Dickinson's poems. Not only through the subject matter, but through her use of language, which teeters precariously between the comprehensible and the inconceivable, she accomplishes an effect similar to what she ascribes to Hawthorne. Through her dead speakers, she makes us aware of the gaps in language by emphasizing the bodily connection to constructions of abstraction undermining any sense of pure signification.<sup>102</sup> Instead of imagining her dead speakers as spirits, she presents them as corpses, upsetting notions of stable subjectivity that rely on symbolic abstractions. The overall effect of her poetry is similar to what Hawthorne achieves through his ambiguity: she gestures toward the physicality of existence and non-existence, a move toward a more chaotic and unreliable expression. She expresses, in this way, a preference for unknowability, or undecidability, the acknowledgement of the interpretive nature of any attempt at knowing. Her unorthodox poetic diction along with some of her unusually morbid poetic themes represents a unique navigation through a male-informed literary tradition and linguistic signifying practices. Her poetry can be seen as a resistance to, or even a dismantling, of schematic ideologies, and allows for an acknowledgment of the *process* of

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<sup>102</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Revolutions in Poetic Language." *The Portable Kristeva*. (Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia U P, 1997)

Kristeva uses this term to refer to a repression of the physical aspects of language, to consider language as purely symbolic.

signification and of subjectivity. An awareness of these processes is crucial to undermining fixed and totalizing theories of identity.

Where my discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* considers how Hawthorne's writing (in form and content) gestures toward the "feminine in language," my discussion of Dickinson's poetry will claim a feminist slant not only in terms of what her poems reveal through form and content, but also in the way she lived her life, which for her was commensurate with her writing. It is impossible to consider the feminine aspects of Dickinson's poetry without considering her life. Even though Dickinson wrote to her epistolary mentor, Higginson, that the speaker of her poems was a "supposed person," there is a subjectivity in poetry that cannot be extricated from a gendered subject.<sup>103</sup> Thus, to understand how her poetry re-inscribes the feminine, one must go beyond the content of her poems and consider how a woman managed to take up the poetic subjective "I," a masculine "I," and transform it to an effectual representation of the female author. I will argue that Dickinson accomplishes this by challenging the notion of a stable subjectivity. Rather than assert her own subjectivity, her poetry

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<sup>103</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar distinguish between the nineteenth-century woman who wrote novels and the woman who wrote poetry: "The lyric poem acts as if it is an 'effusion' (in the nineteenth-century sense) from a strong and assertive 'I,' a central self that is forcefully defined, whether real or imaginary. The novel, on the other hand, allows—even encourages—just the self-effacing withdrawal that society fosters in women. Where the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself as a subject, the novelist must see herself in some sense as an object . . . Even if the poet's 'I,' then, is a 'supposed person,' the intensity of her dangerous impersonation of this creature may cause her to take her own metaphors literally, enact her themes herself: just as Donne really slept in his coffin, Emily Dickinson really wore white dresses for twenty years . . ."

*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 548-49.

Dickinson wrote to Higginson, "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me, but a supposed person" (257).

questions the concept entirely. She challenges identities of womanhood as well as religious perceptions of self. While this process involved Dickinson's daily, lived experience, the speakers of her poems often hold commonalities with her own chosen position in the Amherst environment as she developed into a prolific poet. Her self-imposed isolation provided her with a unique perspective that immersion in society would never have afforded her. It also can be seen as a refusal of traditional expressions of womanhood.

This distant, but still proximal, positioning parallels in remarkable ways her poetic trope of posthumous speakers. Mourning poetry was a common genre for women writers in the Victorian period, and Dickinson's use of dead speakers in her poetry communicates this cultural emphasis on death. Ironically, the use of dead speakers in her poetry makes manifest the dynamic nature of language by pushing the thinking subject beyond the common boundaries of accepted social norms. Her posthumous speakers do not adhere to a transcendent narrative by offering comfort to those still alive as much Victorian mourning poetry did. Instead they stubbornly insist on their physicality. Dickinson rejected the duality of the transcendent and the physical; she was unwilling to sacrifice the material world in order to attain a supposedly better one.<sup>104</sup> Thus, without yielding their earthly connection, the speaking dead become the ultimate critics of a world full of shortcomings. They become mockers of the grand narrative and rhetorical answers. If the dead can speak,

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<sup>104</sup> See Shira Wolosky, "Emily Dickinson: Reclusion Against Itself" *Common Knowledge* 12:3 (Fall 2006): 446

the living can be caught in the rigor mortis of meta-narrative and linguistic constraint.

Dickinson's posthumous speakers, when placed in the cultural context of sentimental mourning poetry that was abundant in the nineteenth century, seem to be a response to the collaborative efforts of the writers and readers of this genre. Most sentimental mourning poetry attempts to suppress anxiety through the reassurance of mutual experience, but the dead speakers of Dickinson's poems emphasize, rather, the impossibility of maintaining human connection or constructed narratives that assuage the repressed experience of solitariness.<sup>105</sup> Dickinson's obsession with death is not what is unique about her poetry. Much poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth century eulogizes prominent figures who had died or expresses feelings of grief, hope, and Christian affirmations over the loss of loved ones. Phyllis Wheatley, Lydia Sigourney, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and William Cullen Bryant are but a few of those who participated in this genre of poetry. Mary Louise Kete identifies a common factor of writers who utilized the sentimental verse of eulogy and mourning as all being of part of the emergent middle class in America.<sup>106</sup> She particularly focuses on a manuscript compilation of poems handed down from the mid-nineteenth century that were contained within a book that was given as a gift, blank pages to be filled in by the

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<sup>105</sup> See Mary Louise Kete's *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) Kete offers insight into the pervasive use of mourning poetry in the Nineteenth Century and allows for a greater understanding of the cultural context of Dickinson's poetry, which focuses heavily on death.

<sup>106</sup> Kete preface.

receiver. This book, referred to by the original owner's name, *Harriet Gould's Book*, circulated among a group of friends and family members who added their own poetry. Thus, it became a "keepsake album filled with verbal 'remembrances'" (19). Just like Dickinson's poetry, much of the verse grapples with the experience of the death of loved ones or the knowledge of one's own impending demise. "Early" deaths were common and experienced much more immediately because the sick were cared for directly and after death their bodies were displayed in the home. Sentimental mourning poetry's popularity even became fodder for Mark Twain's acerbic humor as he parodied it in his "Evangeline" poem in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The frequent experience of premature death heightened the awareness of life's transience and directed people's hopes to their religious beliefs of eternal life. At the same time, however, a sense of individuality within the burgeoning middle class was promising more than bare subsistence in life. A tension resulted from the conflict of subjectivity gained through material possession and the self-effacing emphasis on the transcendent and led to what Kete refers to as "sentimental collaborations," or voluntary exchanges of "self" or self-giving.<sup>107</sup> Citing private poems, which circulated among friends, Kete proposes that through the loss of loved ones, especially children, nineteenth-century Americans created a sense of permanency by imbuing material objects (i.e. a lock of hair or

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<sup>107</sup> Kete 53 "This circulation of selves engages those who participate in a joint effort—a collaboration of sentiment—to convert something established under temporary conditions and through a voluntary action of will (the individual self in this case) into something permanent and eternal."

written verse) with symbolic import and thereby maintaining a subjectivity dependent upon the circle of friends who willingly participated in this construction of perceived permanency. Although death, she argues, was an event that allowed for the acknowledgement of doubt, the poems she cites often culminate in an assurance of being reunited with the dead in eternal life. Poems that begin in sorrow often end in hope as a way of participating in this “community” of sentiment. A fifteen stanza poem contained in the book and written by Harriet Gould, herself, upon the anniversary of her son’s death begins with:

Oh can it be a year has fled  
 Its scenes of grief and joy  
 Since we were bending o’er the bed  
 Of thow my sainted boy?  
 (l.1-4)

and continues in the fourteenth stanza:

That when I’ve trod life’s journey o’er  
 And at death’s portal stand  
 My Warren at the opening door  
 May wave his little hand.  
 (l.53-56) (qtd. by Kete)

It was not uncommon for these mourning poems to end with a vision of the deceased welcoming the narrator into heaven where they would be reunited.

The convention of the dead speaker as employed by Dickinson shatters the usual attempts at restoration found in the personal poetry of many nineteenth-century Americans who were dealing with the common experience of death, most notably, the death of children or death by “unnatural” causes. One

of Dickinson's earliest poems to use the convention of a deceased speaker<sup>108</sup> is "I often passed the village" and, by contrast, has an almost seductive invitation from the grave.

I often passed the village  
When going home from school –  
And wondered what they did there –  
And why it was so still –

I did not know the year then –  
In which my call would come –  
Earlier, by the Dial,  
Than the rest have gone.

It's stiller than the sundown.  
It's cooler than the dawn –  
The Daisies dare to come here –  
And birds can flutter down –

So when you are tired –  
Or perplexed – or cold –  
Trust the loving promise  
Underneath the mould,  
Cry "it's I," "take Dollie,"  
And I will enfold! (41)

The reference to "Dollie" which was the nickname for Dickinson's sister-in-law and life-long friend, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, suggests that Dickinson saw herself as the speaker of the poem, removed from the fellowship of the living and inhabiting a "village" of the remotest sort. Instead of giving comfort to the living by suggesting a heavenly reward for this dead narrator and ultimately for the reader, the dead speaker offers an unsettling invitation to join her "Underneath the mould." The matter-of-fact, emotionless diction contrasts with the poetry of

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<sup>108</sup> According to R.W. Franklin's chronology, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Variorum edition. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1998.

Harriet Gould's Book, which achieves a heightened sentiment through the use of interjections such as "Oh," and adjectives meant to attain the hearer's sympathy such as in the case of "little hand." Dickinson's narrator, who is implied to be of school age, utilizes no such sympathetic gestures common to mourning poetry in honor of deceased children.

Thus, it was not unusual that Dickinson's poems often focused on mortality, but in no way does she participate in this "collaboration of sentiment." If the loss experienced by death of loved ones allowed the writers of the private poems, cited by Kete, to acknowledge doubt, it provided Dickinson with an outlet to not only acknowledge doubt, but to deconstruct the assurances of structured, collaborative belief systems.<sup>109</sup> Dickinson's poetic subjects refuse the invitation, so to speak, of participating in any shared sentimental project, and express, rather, the experience of loss of communal identity. In rejecting the agreement of symbolic belief they express the very physical reality of their marginalization—a corpse abandoned in the grave.

This is not to say that Dickinson, in her letters, did not console and comfort her friends upon the death of loved ones. Her letters express a passionate attachment to her friends and when one died she was quick to send comfort. But like her poems, her letters focus more on the deceased person's presence in the physical world. In a letter to Mrs. Bowles upon the death of her husband,

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<sup>109</sup> McIntosh 7

McIntosh makes the argument that Dickinson used the softening effects of sentimentalism on Calvinism to reach a more heretical stance than her peers.

Dickinson writes: “I hasten to you, Mary, because no moment must be lost when a heart is breaking, for though it broke so long, each time is newer than the last, if it broke truly. . . Dear ‘Mr Sam’ is very near, these midwinter days. When purples come on Pelham, in the afternoon, we say ‘Mr Bowles’s colors’” (189). Instead of envisioning Mr. Bowles in heaven, Dickinson finds him still in her physical world. Similarly, as some of her poems are narrated by dead speakers who refuse to leave this world behind, Dickinson looked for the continued presence of her deceased loved ones in her physical world. Her grief did not lead her in the direction of heavenly assurance as it did with Gould and her friends.

The difference that is effected through the dead speaker, in contrast to traditional mourning poetry, can be defined by Freud’s description of the uncanny.<sup>110</sup> The dead speaker’s insistence on her physicality and sensory perceptions expresses a longing for what is familiar. In several of Dickinson’s poems, the tables are turned because just as the living long for heaven in Harriet Gould’s poetry book, the dead in Dickinson’s poetry long for their former life on earth. These dead speakers challenge the constructions of subjectivity and identity maintained by the usual consent to common religious belief.<sup>111</sup> This longing for material life parallels her refusal of the common Christian experience of confession and salvation and the usual hierarchical emphasis on a person’s

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<sup>110</sup> Freud, Sigmund. “The Uncanny.” *people.emich.edu/acoykenda/uncanny1.htm* “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” (Pt. 1)

<sup>111</sup> Fast 163

Fast makes this same point about Dickinson’s poem “I’m sorry for the Dead—Today—.”

spirit or soul over their earthly body. These characters are both beings and non-beings. They have gained nothing by their passing from the material world to the next. They have not been fulfilled by a knowledge that finally makes sense of all the chaos of life. They are still in want, needing to be made whole. In this way, they emphasize the inherent lack in the living.<sup>112</sup> In “I often passed the village” the only knowledge this speaker has attained is the very physical experience of lying in the grave—it’s “stiller” and “cooler.” This lack of transcendence calls into question the “loving promise” which is made even more ambiguous by being positioned “Underneath the mould.” This lack of “Imaginary mirroring”<sup>113</sup> that is normally achieved in mourning poetry by visualizing resurrected heavenly bodies, threatens one’s attempts at static subjectivity.

Another poem which exhibits a dead speaker’s insistence on physicality is “’Twas just this time, last year, I died.” In this poem the speaker is fondly remembering the details of her earthly life, but gives up on the possibility of being able to partake in these activities:

’Twas just this time, last year, I died.  
I know I heard the Corn,  
When I was carried by the Farms –  
It had the Tassels on –  
  
I thought how yellow it would look –  
When Richard went to mill –  
And then, I wanted to get out,

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<sup>112</sup> See Mary Loeffelholz, *Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991). Loeffelholz states that for Dickinson “Heaven is not the fulfillment of earth, but a continuation of her battle with the Law of the Father. Speaking again in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Dickinson’s poems tend to conclude with Symbolic lack, rather than the wholeness and coherence of Imaginary mirroring” (73).

<sup>113</sup> Loeffelholz 73.

But something held my will.

I thought just how Red – Apples wedged  
The Stubble's joints between –  
And the Carts stooping round the fields  
To take the Pumpkins in –

I wondered which would miss me, least,  
And when Thanksgiving, came,  
If Father'd multiply the plates –  
To make an even Sum –

And would it blur the Christmas glee  
My Stocking hang too high  
For any Santa Claus to reach  
The Altitude of me –

But this sort, grieved myself,  
And so, I thought the other way,  
How just this time, some perfect year –  
Themselves, should come to me – (344)

This speaker seems to inhabit some strange middle world where aspects of her physical life linger on to torture her. The uncanny position of the deceased is emphasized by her desire to “get out” but being held against her will. She longs for all the comforting images of home at times of celebration, but finally consents to the impossibility of being there and having to settle for the eventuality of her loved ones joining her. This poem consents to an afterlife but one radically different from Christian teaching that claims complete understanding and fulfillment and where being in God's presence fulfills beyond measure any longing for human companionship. It upends the Scriptural injunction that God must be a believer's first love,<sup>114</sup> as the deceased longs for the company of fellow

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<sup>114</sup> Mt. 10:37: “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me . . .” (RSV).

human beings, suggesting that in the afterlife God is nowhere to be found, or a non-factor at best.

Dickinson's posthumous speakers also represent a distortion of another common topic of women writers in the Victorian period--foreign cultures.<sup>115</sup> A fascination with what is foreign or "other" can be seen as a natural affinity for women writers, a segment of society that was aware of its own different status. Dickinson has pushed the "cultural boundary" often crossed in writing of foreign cultures to the extreme through her use of dead speakers who are not presented as resurrected spirits, but speaking corpses. The "other" in this case is not only one who is different, or lives across geographical borders, but one who disturbs notions of identity by crossing the ultimate border of death. She resists the temptation to represent the other, emphasizing instead how the truly Other is beyond representation. The trope of dead speakers can be seen as a parodic form of foreign culture writing. By choosing a speaking subject that is impossible to represent she suggests that attempts at speaking for another can only result in distorted renderings that serve the speaker's/writer's own purposes. Just as Levinasian philosophy links the irreducible alterity of the other to the Infinitely Other, the use of dead speakers, by extension, points to her rejection of

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<sup>115</sup> See Isabel Armstrong, *From: Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. From 12. "A Music of Thine Own": Women's Poetry—An Expressive Tradition? *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton & Co, 2007) 732-743. Armstrong offers an explanation for the popularity of foreign culture writing: "This insistent figuring of movement across and between cultural boundaries, with its emphasis on travel, could be seen as a search for the exotic, an escape from restrictions into the 'other' of bourgeois society. Allied, as it so frequently is, with a metaphor of the prison, or of slavery, it could be seen as an attempt to transcend restrictions in fantasy, or an effort to discover a universal womanhood which transcends cultural differences. But it is rather to be associated with an attempt to discover ways of testing out the account of the feminine experienced in western culture by going outside its prescriptions" (738).

traditional beliefs about God and religion. She could not find God in the reductionist ideas that were presented to her in the evangelical fervor that was present in Amherst in the 1840s. The trope of using dead speakers seems to speak, whether consciously or not, to the common genres of writing typical to women authors of the period. By using posthumous speakers, Dickinson parodies the confining writing strictures placed on women and what were considered acceptable topics for a woman author. Both the elegiac and the “exotic” writing genre are parodied through the use of posthumous narrators, the former by refusing the comfort of metaphysical conceits and the latter by pushing to the extreme the concept of the other or what is foreign and, conversely, questions of one’s own identity.

Dickinson’s poetic descriptions of death correlate with her experiences of loss. In a letter to A. P. Strong following the death of her friend, Leonard Humphrey, she writes:

You have stood by the grave before; I have walked there sweet summer evenings and read the names on the stones, and wondered who would come and give me the same memorial; but I never have laid my friends there, and forgot that they too must die; this is my first affliction, and indeed ‘t is hard to bear it. To those bereaved so often that home is no more here, and whose communion with friends is had only in prayers, there must be much to hope for, but when the unreconciled spirit has nothing left but God, that spirit is lone indeed. (L43)

Dickinson’s “unreconciled spirit” is expressed by her inability to accept traditional Christian explanations of the experience of death. Instead of being consoled by

the fact that she only has God to cling to, she admits that she is terribly alone. God does not represent Presence for her. Unlike those who look to a heavenly hereafter, Dickinson's home remains "here," thus, her poetry exhibits an understanding of death that parallels her life experience. She is unwilling to deny her preference for the physical over the abstract comfort of heaven and she stubbornly imagined this preference for those who should have no further need of it.

Dickinson reverses the psychology of mourning poetry by exhibiting a desire to re-think the importance of the phenomenal world and to reconsider how our detachment from the physical aspects of living have removed us from a full experience of our humanity. The speaker of "The grave my little cottage is" conveys an uncanny neurosis, where the dead speaker denies the physical realities around her and insists on her own version of reality. It exemplifies the unchanged scope of the dead speaker's experience.

The grave my little cottage is,  
Where "Keeping house" for thee  
I make my parlor orderly  
And lay the marble tea.  
For two divided, briefly,  
A cycle, it may be,  
Till everlasting life unite  
In strong society. (1784)

For this narrator not much has changed since passing from life to death; she is still "Keeping house." The poem ends with a reference to everlasting life, but the "strong society" that is promised is not the abstract idea of union with God as a spirit, but a continuation of quotidian life. As with most of Dickinson's

posthumous speakers, her focus on the physical has one motivating factor: to keep her connected to the people she loves. The dead speaker's insistence on continuing as if nothing has changed resists the metaphysical justifications of traditional mourning poetry.

Freud defines the uncanny as that which provides a sense of unease created by juxtaposing the familiar with the unknown.<sup>116</sup> Freud explains that we often assume that what makes us afraid is what is unknown, but, in fact, what disturbs our sense of comfort is when what we think of as familiar takes on a quality that is not expected, making the uncanny a kind of deconstructive sensation. In his essay, "The 'Uncanny,'" he refers to Ernst Jentsch's writing on the uncanny and the example of automatons, or wax figures that give the impression of a living being, but which are, in fact, inanimate, or conversely, objects we think to be lifeless that are actually alive. Dickinson's dead speakers fill this role, imparting a sense of dread by their unexpected sensory nature. The dead speaker in "The grave my little cottage is" combines the familiar comforts of home with the unimaginable experience of being buried in a grave. The unexpected combination of a warm, domestic scene with the putrefaction of the grave creates this uncanny sense. The uncanniness that we experience reading "The grave my little cottage is" is the result of Dickinson's attempt to make the most abject place one of familiarity. References to "the parlor" and "tea . . . For two" recall cozy images where one normally experiences the security of the

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<sup>116</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny." *people.emich.edu/acoykenda/uncanny1.htm* "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." (Pt. 1)

greatest sense of being—being “at home.” Thus, she overturns the religious rhetoric of dying as “going home” with its allusion to a heavenly resting place, and instead forces her readers to juxtapose very incongruous physical realities—the corpse and decay with warmth, friendship, and the physical space of home. Dickinson’s poetry also recovers a more physical emphasis on the here and now. Rejecting traditional religion’s sublimation of the metaphysical, she reverses the binary in this particular poem to elevate the mundane aspect of the everyday.

Posthumous speakers who are outside the boundaries of human society and refuse any acknowledgement of a comforting, heavenly rest, parallel Dickinson’s own life of reclusion, not only physically by her deference to privacy, but through her resistance to a public show of religious conversion and spiritual expression. The isolation she experienced was not only physical, but mental. The religious awakening that swept Amherst in the late 1840’s left Dickinson lamenting in a letter to Jane Humphrey in 1850: “Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered, even my darling Vinnie believes she loves, and trusts him, and I am standing alone in rebellion” (L35). (Vinnie was the nickname of her sister Lavinia.) Dickinson’s denial of any such conversion experience and her resistance to a public acknowledgement of her spiritual beliefs is consistent with the ways that her poetry challenges the master narratives around her.

In the same year as the above letter, Dickinson wrote to A.P. Strong complaining of having to take care of everyone while her mother was ill.

“Wouldn’t you love to see me in these bonds of great despair, looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance, and declaring by ‘Omai’s beard’ I never was in such plight? *My kitchen*, I think I called it—God forbid that it was, or shall be, my own” (Todd, 42, editor’s emphasis). It’s likely that her disappreciation for household work displayed in this letter played into her struggle with open expressions of religious fervor since the model of a domestic woman was entirely imbricated in religious ideology. She ends the letter asking her friend, whom she envisions “visiting the poor and afflicted, and reaping whole fields of blessings,” to pray for her. This last request indicates Dickinson’s sense of being less Christian, at least in the expected sense of the word, than her friend. There is a nuanced interrelatedness exhibited in this letter between Dickinson’s sense of being outside of mainstream Christianity and her atypical attitudes towards women’s work.

Ten years later, her rejection of traditional religion was complete as evidenced in a letter to T.W. Higginson. After giving a brief description of her family she writes, “They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their ‘Father’” (Todd, 254). Dickinson saw herself as outside of the traditional confines of domesticity and religion. Thus, the dead speakers of many of her poems express in an extreme degree this marginalization that she experienced. But they also represent an insistence on physicality, which was exhibited through her passionately close relationships with the people she did maintain contact with. This insistence on the physical kept her from being able to accept the idea of God that everyone around her

professed. Her analogy of the eclipse as her family's God, suggests, not that she could not believe in the concept of a divine but, that the "Father" idea that they prayed to was merely an obstruction to God's brilliancy. She could not reconcile a distant and impersonal father figure with her experiences of the Divine. She preferred to find God in the physical world of nature as many of her poems suggest. It also accounts for the fact that when she does express positive more traditional religious sentiment in her poetry, it is most often associated with the person of Jesus. This would indicate that in some way Dickinson saw the person of Christ in his particular physicality a deterrent against impersonal, generalizing, dogmatic declarations. Like her dead speakers, Jesus also accomplished posthumous speech. She preferred Jesus as the rejected, suffering servant, rather than the heavenly, transformed Jesus.<sup>117</sup> This is indicated in the fact that she owned and carefully read Thomas à Kempis' *On the Imitation of Christ*.<sup>118</sup> This preference resonates with her topos of death, which is not a cooperation with her peers in order to maintain a communal identity, but as an identification with abjection, or what is disdained.

The abject represent what threatens our sense of identity and stability. In psychology, it is that ego which has rejected the super ego's rules and

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<sup>117</sup> See Jutta Fraunholz, *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*, Ed. Jane Donahue Eberwein (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1998) 166.

<sup>118</sup> Shira Wolosky, "Emily Dickinson: the violence of the imagination." *Nineteenth-Century Poetry 1800-1910*, Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge UP, 2004 Cambridge Histories Online. Cambridge UP 23 June 2011 DOI:10.1017/CHOL9780521301084.014) 456.

conditions.<sup>119</sup> The abject stands in opposition to the subject, but not as object, which functions to situate the subject in the realm of signification. Instead, the abject, as that which has been excluded, draws the subject to a space of negativity where meaning collapses.<sup>120</sup> The dead speaker, as the abject, rejects the metaphysical narrative and insists on maintaining a precarious position of displacement. Death is the greatest horror, the unthinkable, and the corpse is the ultimate boundary. In psychoanalysis the corpse represents the breakdown of those borders that maintain subject identity. Particularly, when viewed outside of traditional Christian belief in the afterlife, the corpse is object only and one that threatens the “rules” of subjectivity by crossing a border between subject and object and even as object it is rapidly losing its delineation. Because the corpse so viscerally jeopardizes this sense of self, it is in psychoanalysis not merely an *object*, but *abject*.<sup>121</sup> By insisting on the physicality of her dead narrators, Dickinson emphasizes the corpse, rather than the spirit of the dead person. She asserts that which “disturbs identity, system, order . . . What does not respect borders, positions, rules” by taking the “most sickening of wastes,”<sup>122</sup> that which

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<sup>119</sup> In Freudian theory, the super-ego is that part of the psyche that enforces rules and functions as the moral inhibitor.

<sup>120</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Powers of Horror,” *The Portable Kristeva*. (Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 230.

<sup>121</sup> Kristeva 231-32. “If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled. The border has become an object . . . The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. . . It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”

<sup>122</sup> Kristeva 231-32.

constantly reminds us of our own dissolution and allows an encounter with it. It is as if she is requiring her readers to think of alterity in more frightening terms, terms that upend the attempts at rendering otherness manageable. Dickinson's dead speakers demand a different narrative written from the perspective of the other and that calls the presumptive discourse of social identity into question. By refusing the glorified, a-temporal "resurrected" beings of Christian discourse, she not only undermines its totalizing concept, but succeeds in identifying herself with the most abject—the dead corpse, a formidable other that the reader is required to encounter.

Dickinson's self-imposed reclusion also effects a similar operation of questioning borders and identity. Her reclusion is a form of self-abjection. It is a way of exiling oneself only in a reverse, inward direction. Society normally works to exile or marginalize what is considered abject or other. Dickinson's reclusion can be understood as a nineteenth-century, female, middle-class version of exile. If actual physical expulsion from society is not required, one can achieve the same *experience* of the exile from behind closed doors. The "pseudo-object" that continually recedes for the exile is that place of being at home,<sup>123</sup> where the subject normatively experiences being known and loved. Kristeva locates the instantiation of this longing for home with the absent mother. Whether she is physically absent, or absent-minded, or a distracted mother, she is not available to her infant. I do not wish to offer a psychological explanation for Dickinson's reclusion, but this connection to the maternal is helpful in understanding how the

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<sup>123</sup> Kristeva 235.

feminine principle plays out in her poetry. The exile (or foreigner) never ceases to “[seek] that invisible and promised territory, that country that does not exist but that he bears in his dreams, and that must indeed be called a beyond. The foreigner, thus, has lost his mother” (267). The theological application of this psychoanalytic theory is apparent, although not intended. For Dickinson, seclusion allowed her to occupy a space free of the reductionist determinations of her environment for both God and women, and to be free to seek through her writing a “promised territory” where she can envision with greater possibility.

The absolute irony of her seclusion becomes apparent. Although never leaving the security of her home, it can now be seen as the most threatening of places, if this is where she should have experienced that fulfillment of being known and loved, but did not. She did not have to leave The Homestead, as the Dickinson family home was called, to experience being exiled. Her exile took the form of removal from society and from the common ideologies that were prevalent. As a result, through her writing, her circumscribed, homogeneous space becomes diverse and heterogeneous. Her way of maintaining a sense of self was to remove herself from what seemed to her stifling, grand narratives that held no room for a female who had taken up the pen, not in the domestic convention, but in a more philosophical tradition.<sup>124</sup> She may not have strayed in the physical sense, but ideologically, she had wandered far from those around her.

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<sup>124</sup>McIntosh 11-12. McIntosh uses Dickinson’s poem 488 – “Myself was formed – a Carpenter –” to suggest how Dickinson saw herself as set apart from contemporary female writers.

Her alienation was impelled by a need for greater possibility, whether that be a woman who writes beyond the domestic and enters the intellectual realm, or one who seeks untraditional experiences of the spiritual. In many of her poems, “Possibility” is expressed in Dickinson’s poems as that which cannot be contained or fully comprehended. It is the excess that spills over from what is often suppressed in society and marginalized. The position of an exile is an expression of excess, something or someone that cannot be contained or accounted for within social norms. But it also affords a privileged positioning to observe and identify the “traces” of that which has been repressed and challenges the common structures of identity.<sup>125</sup> These traces are manifest as excesses, which escape social strictures.

Dickinson’s “I felt a Funeral in my Brain” uses the topos of death and the trope of a dead narrator to address this idea of limitless possibility.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
 And Mourners to and fro  
 Kept treading – treading – till it seemed  
 That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,  
 A Service, like a Drum –  
 Kept beating – beating – till I thought  
 My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box  
 And creak across my Soul

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<sup>125</sup> See Pamela Sue Anderson, “Writing on Exiles and Excess: Toward a New Form of Subjectivity” *Self/Same/Other: Re-visioning the Subject in Literature and Theology*. Ed. Heather Walton and Andrew W. Hass. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 106. Anderson quotes Kristeva: “How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one’s own country, language, sex and identity? Writing is impossible without some kind of exile” (107).

With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down –  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing – then – (340)

The repetitive actions of the mourners suggests a mindlessness and feeds a crowding, stifling sense that is imagined by someone being buried that is not quite dead. By identifying her speaker with death, she again takes up the case of the “other” and further identifies with the exiled who are silenced in their marginality in the lines “And I, and Silence, some strange Race/Wrecked, solitary, here –.”

But there is also considerable evidence that this entire poem be read as a metaphor for the “death” that happens to a person’s mind when they blindly accept truisms and encompassing ideologies. In this context the mourners treading and performing the “Service” compared to beating drums become those who repetitiously intone what they have heard in hopes of “enlightening” her. The speaker almost assents when she states “That Sense was breaking through –,” as a possible reference to “common sense” or mind-numbing belief. The metaphor of “Boots of Lead” in reference to the mourners feet as they pass over the grave of her soul circumscribed within a coffin weighted down by the finality of totalizing thought further supports this interpretation. The second to last

stanza could begin “As *if* all the Heavens were a Bell” but Dickinson compresses the meaning by taking the meaning for granted. There is no ambiguity only certainty being presented and her only necessary response is to hear (And Being, but an Ear), her mind is not needed, thus the funeral for the brain. The last stanza is ambiguous. It could be read as the ultimate death of the brain or critical thought; the consciousness descends through a kind of netherworld until it no longer exists. But if we accept that this poem is a call for the value of ambiguity or uncertainty, then the idea of being “Finished knowing” takes on a very positive aspect. Coupled with the open-ended “then –” the possibilities are endless. The “Plank in Reason” that breaks could reference the inability for meta-narrative to contain infinity or possibility. Dropping down and hitting “a World, at every Plunge, is the experience of being set free from any circumscription of ideology and discovering new worlds. The diction of falling conveys the traumatic aspect of realizing one’s worldview has been pulled out from under her. Dickinson simultaneously communicates the “violence” experienced with the loss of a secure master narrative while maintaining the hope of possibility.

The metaphor of death in this poem connects the trope of the dead speaker directly to Dickinson’s struggle between conformity/acceptance and free thought/isolation. This marginalized, abject, speaking corpse is the messenger of hope, who opens up closed and locked doors of thought, breaking free from the leaden decrees that require only to be heard and blindly accepted. The grave is not the location of the cessation of life, but the space where potential is

realized, although alone. And this association in Dickinson's poetry makes perfect sense in terms of psycholinguistic theory because what is abject, although disgusting, brings the subject back to its point of emergence from an existence dominated purely by physical "drive," the moment when the symbolic function allows the positing of the subject.<sup>126</sup> By confronting the abject, the subject confronts her own repressions, which the super-ego, through parental dictates, has imposed. In acknowledging what has been repressed, the subject is able to re-signify, re-establish meaning. In this way, the speaking corpse represents the liberator of the repressed and thus, the gateway to possibility.

It seems paradoxical to use the trope of dead speakers to express such a dynamic and positive theme as possibility, but in Dickinson's poetry, possibility always contains an element of danger or dissolution. It becomes clear that the possible in her poetry resides very closely and ambiguously to Impossibility. It seems that these terms are almost used interchangeably, in a way that questions the binary construction of the two words. "Impossibility, like Wine" speaks to this affinity between the terms and also the minutest delineation between them.

Impossibility, like Wine  
 Exhilarates the Man  
 Who tastes it; Possibility  
 Is flavorless – Combine

A Chance's faintest Tincture  
 And in the former Dram

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<sup>126</sup> Kristeva 241. In Kristeva's theory the abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. "It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance."

Enchantment makes ingredient  
As certainly as Doom – (939)

Possibility, described as flavorless, lacks the invigorating quality of imagining something different. In order for it to be known that something is possible, it has been accomplished already. But possibility is the basic formula to which “Chance” is added, which, if even a drop is present, the enchantment of the Impossible is as potable as the certainty of a final judgement or condemnation. This poem challenges the acceptance of the “last word.” Chance is the “ingredient” that creates appeal. But the use of the word “faintest” emphasizes how slight a change is necessary to move from the flavorless world of expectation to the enchanted world of uncertainty.

But, in “I dwell in Possibility –” Dickinson refers to *Possibility* as the space of unlimited expectations; it is used in a similar way that Impossibility is used in the previous example.

I dwell in Possibility  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the cedars –  
Impregnable of Eye –  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise – (466)

The comparison to prose in the second line suggests that the “Possibility” referred to here is that afforded through poetic expression. Dickinson’s use of language and her chosen genre of expression are crucial to her ability to imagine other worlds and her ability to establish her own idiosyncratic approaches to religion and the divine as her reference to Paradise suggests. Poetry’s extensive use of metaphor and metonymy are basic to its imaginative capability. By condensation and displacement, respectively, the poet calls into question the unity of the signifier/signified by emphasizing the shifting process of meaning in endless chains of association. In this poem “Possibility” is a house, with every physical aspect of the house shifting to something metaphysical. These linguistic functions act, not only as challenges to linguistic unity, but as challenges to a unified, static subjectivity, which gains significance within this symbolic realm. They act as reminders of the connection of language and the subject to the material world.

Dickinson’s poetic gesture opens up possibility for her because its challenge to both the patriarchal symbolic order and the constructions of identity that emerge from that order, allows her to envision a different paradigm within which to situate herself and, therefore, to imagine a different world. In the context of psycholinguistic theory, her poetry is not only an act of symbolic representation but a constant reinforcement of the corporeal element of language. The irony of Dickinson’s emphasis on the material that her posthumous speakers display is that she uses this emphasis to free her mind of

confining meta-narratives. To deny the physical is also at the same time to restrict the mind.

Dickinson's poems, which address this theme of possibility at first glance seem to offer an entirely different emphasis than her poems narrated by dead speakers. But as "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" expresses, the speaking dead are her messengers of possibility, and these poems often include images of uncontainable elements. In this way, she suggests that rigid forms and constructs cannot allow for the immense creative force that underlies the human experience and is often constricted unnaturally by cultural, social, or theological restraint. "The Brain, within its Groove" is left open-ended allowing the reader to imagine the thought processes that might be possible for anyone who breaks free from traditional modes of thinking.

The Brain, within its Groove  
Runs evenly – and true –  
But let a Splinter swerve –  
'Twere easier for You –

To put a Current back –  
When Floods have slit the Hills –  
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves –  
And trodden out the Mills – (563)

This poem contains both the element of possibility but also a sense of destructiveness. These two components exist close to one another in psycholinguistic development. Possibility dwells at the threshold of signification

where one is about to emerge from the negativity of physical drives<sup>127</sup> to the realm of subjectivity. In order for this to happen an act of positioning must occur, where signification takes place and the subject distinguishes between itself and the world around it.<sup>128</sup> To open oneself up to possibility requires mental proximity to the psychological space of negativity, of the physical drives. The metaphor of a flooding river spilling over its banks and “scoop[ing]” out a new course is analogous to the process of questioning the basis of subjectivity, of returning to a starting point and reconfiguring identity and a view of the world. The “Splinter” that causes this new course represents the thought or idea that cannot be contained within the forceful momentum of ideology. It is like the hidden trace that, once exposed, dismantles the seemingly unified system of belief. And once spilling its banks and plotting a new course, it is impossible for the subject to return to its former “Groove,” a word that implies the mindless behavior of repetition and habit.

For Dickinson this possibility she so often references in her poems is linked to her struggle with Christianity and religious expression and my application of psycholinguistic theory to reach this conclusion suggests the intricate ways that conceptions of the Divine rest upon perceptions of self and other. Her resistance to public avowals of conversion indicates her insistence on maintaining an open-ended understanding of God, and her posthumous

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<sup>127</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Revolutions in Poetic Language.” *The Portable Kristeva*. (Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia U P, 1997) 37-40.

Physical drives, although both positive and negative, generate a “destructive wave” overall because they work in tension with processes of positionality which allow for subject identification.

<sup>128</sup> Kristeva 40.

speakers in her poems suggests her awareness of the precarious nature of subjectivity that is aware of its relation to the physical. She rejects forms of religion that mandate a universal application, and relies instead on the individual response to God. This is apparent in “Better – than Music! For I – who heard it”:

Better – than Music! For I – who heard it –  
 I was used – to the Birds – before –  
 This – was different – ‘Twas Translation –  
 Of all tunes I knew – and more –

‘Twasn’t contained – like other stanza –  
 No one could play it – the second time –  
 But the Composer – perfect Mozart –  
 Perish with him – that Keyless Rhyme!

So – Children – told how Brooks in Eden –  
 Bubbled a better – Melody –  
 Quaintly infer – Eve’s great surrender –  
 Urging the feet – that would – not – fly –

Children – matured – are wiser – mostly –  
 Eden – a legend – dimly told –  
 Eve – and the Anguish – Grandame’s story –  
 But – I was telling a tune – I heard –

Not such a strain – the Church – baptizes –  
 When the last Saint – goes up the Aisles –  
 Not such a stanza splits the silence –  
 When the Redemption strikes her Bells –

Let me not spill – its smallest cadence –  
 Humming – for promise – when alone –  
 Humming – until my faint Rehearsal –  
 Drop into tune – around the Throne – (378)

The tune that the speaker refers to in the first two stanzas surpasses any composed music able to be continuously replayed. It is a music that is perfection

at only a certain point in time and once played it perishes.<sup>129</sup> The third and fourth stanzas contest the biblical claim to a purer time before the Fall. This reference to Eve and the rejection of the theological premise of fallen man and original sin also implies a rejection of the patriarchal narrative that uses Eve's disobedience as proof of an inherent feminine weakness. The poem suggests that the tune the speaker hears is very different from the Melody sanctioned by the Church. It is heard internally, hummed internally; it is not taught to her, and it cannot be sung until the day she comes before God herself. This implies a very particular response to God, not a faith response that is decreed by the Church and blindly assented to. So not only is the concept of God an unknowable proposition, but any individual response to God is also unknowable by others. Here, Dickinson upholds a particularity much like the individual response to God adhered to by Anne Hutchinson, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The case has been made that Dickinson emphasizes particularity not only in the themes of her poetry, but through her stylistic use of language as well. E. Miller Budick states, "In Dickinson's hands poetry becomes a way of transforming what she considered the false and distortive assumptions of certain forms of symbolism into the logical, precise, and theologically reverent premises of a radically different symbolism" (preface). "Forms of symbolism" or language that claim more than can possibly be known, become, contrary to their intended effect, dead ends for the creative mind. Budick explains how Dickinson's use of

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<sup>129</sup> McIntosh 2

McIntosh refers to this quality of Dickinson's principles of belief as "evanescence."

dashes have the effect of highlighting the “units of discourse,” the individual words and not the “objects and events signified by words” (1). Also, by combining words with very dissimilar meanings, she causes her readers to linger on the individual words and these juxtapositions work to prevent total, complete images in the mind. The effect of such combinations is not, however, utter chaos, but Budick terms it “aliveness” and refers to it as being of particular concern to Dickinson in her first letter to Higginson, where she asks if he thinks her “Verse” is “alive.” Budick explains that “The very liveness of the language seems to threaten the cohesiveness of the poetic structure” (4). I would suggest that this “liveness” is also the result of poetic language’s reliance upon a more physical expression, where form and order are subjugated to rhythm and cadence which “threatens the cohesiveness of the poetic structure” (4). It allows for greater free play in meaning, a greater possibility for meaning, and the emergence of new subjective positions as her posthumous narrators exemplify. The “aliveness” of poetry is that element that frees the words from the banality of statements of fact and allows for the ambiguity of multiple meanings. For Dickinson, this multiplicity of meanings is essential to her understanding of the Divine.

As this discussion indicates, there is a correlation between particularity and poetic language in the structures (or lack thereof) of articulation that characterize Dickinson’s poems. By resisting the impulse to create a wholeness or single unifying principle within the poem, she emphasizes the meaning of the individual words; the reader is forced to linger upon each word before he/she can

attempt a broader meaning from the poem. It is not hard to see how Dickinson's poetry is a precursor to modernist poets like Gertrude Stein.<sup>130</sup> This emphasis upon the units or details of the written work maintains a connection to the semiotic element, expresses the formlessness of physical drives, and gestures toward a physically-informed way of knowing through its connection to the maternal.

Probably the most penetrating poem in regards to our ability to comprehend absolute Otherness, or the Divine, is "This World is not Conclusion". A single twenty-line stanza addresses our (in)ability to know the unknowable. The first line states forthrightly that we cannot make conclusions about infinity based on what we know of this world. The speaker assents to something, a puzzling presence, in the first twelve lines of the poem, which defies apprehension, a seeming affirmation of the Divine. The last six lines of the poem, however, personify Faith as awkward, self-conscious, and self-deceiving.

This World is not Conclusion.  
 A Species stands beyond –  
 Invisible, as Music –  
 But positive, as Sound –  
 It beckons, and it baffles –  
 Philosophy – don't know –  
 And through a Riddle, at the last –  
 Sagacity, must go –

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<sup>130</sup> Susan Howe has observed their similarities stating: "Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein are clearly among the most innovative precursors of modernist poetry and prose . . . Dickinson and Stein meet each other along paths of the Self that begin and end in contradiction . . . [They] also conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of Saying's assertion? In very different ways the countermovement of these two women's work penetrates to the indefinite limits of written communication." (11, 12) *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985).

To guess it, puzzles scholars –  
 To gain it, Men have borne  
 Contempt of Generations  
 And Crucifixion, shown –  
 Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –  
 Blushes, if any see –  
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence –  
 And asks a Vane, the way –  
 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –  
 Strong Hallelujahs roll –  
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth  
 That nibbles at the soul – (373)

It is worth noting the end stop on the first line. Dickinson rarely uses periods in her poems and even more infrequently does she use one at the end of the first line. She is much freer with question marks, exclamation points, and dashes.<sup>131</sup> The use of the period conveys an unemotional statement of fact by the speaker. It is ironic that the infrequent statement of fact is used to claim that we cannot come to a “Conclusion.” She comes to the conclusion that we cannot come to a conclusion. Although unseen by her, the speaker acknowledges a “Species” that is positively present. But what she knows ends there; what follows is an expansion on the elusiveness of the “Species,” the unknown Other. This description sets up the introduction of “Faith” as the somewhat bumbling character who in spite of this uncertainty expressed in the metaphor of “slipping,” puts on a façade of assurance even though it must seek directional guidance from a “Vane.” The animated gestures of preachers and the congregation are described in the typical call and response worship format not to conjure up

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<sup>131</sup> This fact has also been noted recently by Elizabeth Willis in “Dickinson’s Species of Narrative.” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 18.1 (Spring 2009).

confidence in their message, but as “Narcotics” that drown out thoughts of doubt, “the Tooth/That nibbles at the soul – ”

Dickinson’s depiction of faith as a stubborn resistance to the evident impossibility of solving the riddle of what lies beyond our physical experience of life expresses her own approach to religion. She was adamant in her resistance to scripted, formal religion, but unwilling to give up on the possibility of a benevolent God. As “The World is not Conclusion” suggests, she rejected all the extraneous affirmations of belief associated with organized religion when those affirmations refused to acknowledge a person’s physical experience of God which was based on lack of presence and uncertainty.

For Dickinson, certainty was not a place of comfort, but a place of confinement and finality, a death. Much like the environment of the grave feeling confining to her posthumous speakers, the belief that one could be certain about the spiritual realm was a stifling proposition. Dickinson rejected the clear division of the material world from the realm of the spiritual. She insisted that the physicality of the dead not be bypassed with affirmations of a transcendent afterlife, but she also experienced a spiritual dimension to the world of nature. If traditional religion insisted that she separate these worlds she could only reject it. Her attempt to come to terms with this dialectic is similar to Hawthorne’s “neutral territory.” Rather than the spiritual and the physical being opposed and exclusive of one another, she presents these concepts as intermingled and fluid, creating a kind of chaos and uncertainty to her experience of life. To submit her mind to a leaden certainty was to be truly dead because it did not allow for this dynamic

exchange. Another poem that can be interpreted as a likening of certainty to death is “’Twas warm – at first – like Us –:”

’Twas warm – at first – like Us –  
 Until there crept upon  
 A Chill – like frost upon a Glass –  
 Till all the scene – be gone.

The Forehead copied Stone –  
 The Fingers grew too cold  
 To ache – and like a Skater’s Brook –  
 The busy eyes – congealed –

It straightened – that was all –  
 It crowded Cold to Cold –  
 It multiplied indifference –  
 As Pride were all it could –

And even when with Cords –  
 ’Twas lowered, like a Weight –  
 It made no Signal, nor demurred,  
 But dropped like Adamant. (614)

This poem follows a similar riddle format employed in “I felt a Funeral in my Brain” and in many of her poems. She does not identify the subject but simply describes it and in this way engages the reader. The obvious answer to the riddle of what “’Twas” is a corpse. But as with many of her other poems, her main reason for emphasizing physical death is because it is such a fitting metaphor for what she considered a death of the mind. Also, if for Dickinson there was not a clear delineation between the physical and the spiritual, these “deaths” were closely linked. The third stanza in this poem refers to the “indifference” and “Pride” of the corpse, which is described as a setting in of rigor mortis. Either she is personifying the corpse or “unpersonifying” a living being who has stopped thinking as an individual and instead taken a rigid, dogmatic position, which has,

in turn, become an occasion for pride. Besides commenting on this “person’s” mental state, she also makes a connection to the sense of touch and sight, which have lost their capability to function without the mind’s critical ability. It is not a renunciation of the body, but an acknowledgement that humanity is adversely affected when we suppress our physical experience of life and conceive of the spirit/mind as superior. At the same time, our bodies are no more than corpses if our mind is not active and open. Dickinson emphasizes the physical by way of recovering the mind from ideologies that do not respect the mind/body connection. Dickinson’s third person descriptions of death are often living bodies that have stopped thinking, while her dead narrators are still speaking because they are still thinking.

Much of Dickinson’s “death” poetry can be seen as an attempt to locate the person beyond the barriers of traditional concepts of being by re-evaluating the Ideal/material binary. Unwilling to separate the physical body from the mind, her poetry playfully crosses boundaries of subjectivity and identity. She expresses a deference to physicality in her poetry, and her letters repeatedly plead with the addressee to come to see her in person. As much as she relished the presence of beloved family and friends, she gradually ensconced herself in her room. And although she lamented physical separation from her friends, she seemed to revel in mental interaction with them that surpassed the constrictions of physical presence. “A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and

accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone,” she wrote to Thomas Higginson. (313) Like her poetry, her letters were ambiguous. It is not clear in this statement if written communication is referred to positively or negatively; it hinges on whether immortality and its association with all that is ethereal is being used positively. If, as I have been arguing, Dickinson insisted on a physical apprehension of life and afterlife, the “spectral power in thought” which is associated with immortality takes on a dubious nature. Immortality is thus rendered a very lonely prospect.

Dickinson’s resistance to traditional attitudes toward transcendence and spirituality cannot be separated from her discontent with the prevailing patriarchal society in which she lived. Her reclusion can be seen as a passive act of defiance against participation in the dominant socio-cultural norms of nineteenth-century America, which in many ways relegated women to roles of support and assent while being pacified by sentimental adulation. In a society where women were idealized as “angels of the hearth,” Dickinson’s response is to re-evaluate the role of the physical in her poetry. She seems to have intuitively sensed the danger of idealizing women and her poetry is persistent in focusing on the physical aspect of subjectivity. Seemingly, apolitical, she nonetheless challenges cultural assumptions with her pen in both her poetry and her correspondence. She did not address women’s issues outright; she simply ignored the assumptions and lived in a way that did not provide either advice or consent. She was aware of her difference also, when it came to spiritual beliefs; in her correspondence she often remarked to her friends how inadequate she felt as a

Christian. “You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more. I’m afraid he don’t love me *any!*” (53) Though she felt different, she preferred this position to that of conformity. Preceding the above quote she used a metaphor of being at sea to express her chosen disposition: “The shore is safer, A., but I love to buffet the sea – I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!” (53). She took pleasure in knowing that she was living a life that required her constant vigilance.

Dickinson allowed her mind to go where it would, even if her physical body rarely left her room. The poetry she wrote there becomes her manifesto left for later generations to ponder. Based on comments from her letters it is not hard to imagine that Dickinson may have considered the possibility of literary recognition after death. “It’s a great thing to be great” she remarked to her cousin in 1859 (194), and later to her sister-in-law states, “Could I make you and Austin—proud—sometime—a great way off—’twould give me taller feet—.” “A great way off,” she is recognized as a unique and creative voice thinking outside socially-sanctioned parameters. Her posthumous fame re-enacts her literary trope of using dead speakers. While living she ensured a voice for herself after death to impart a message that was very much alive and to challenge the living caught in the death grip of certainty.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Central to understanding the texts I've discussed are the expectations of both author and reader for language to convey a univocal meaning. Language is the pre-eminent feature of the human mind, underscoring our superiority over animals and nature. Our ability to convey meaning is at the heart of our understanding of ourselves, our subjectivity. It is not surprising that those with strong religious convictions often adhere to a model of language that assigns it a strict univocal transmission of meaning. For them, language is not about the play of words and individual interpretation, but its ability to create stable connections between the signifier and signified as a way to buttress human conceptions of self that elevate us beyond the immanence of this life and connect us with the Divine. Those who revel in the poetic, or the ambiguity of language within this model are often those who reject any concept of transcendence.

This religious viewpoint is based on the assumption that what we experience through our senses is only a baser version of what is to come in the afterlife. Plato's philosophy of the Ideal relegates the physical world to an inferior rank while elevating what is intangible and symbolic. Language within this paradigm becomes paramount as humans reach for what is beyond. Thus within monotheistic religions we often see emphasis placed on their sacred scriptures and insistence on strict interpretations. It is no wonder within this model that the novel and poetry both come under scrutiny, the novel for its

polyphonic ability and poetry for its metaphoric slippage. On the other hand are those who reject any religious expression because they consider the hermeneutic quality of language to be incompatible with belief in a Divine. They, too, see matters of faith as requiring a strict interpretation that is threatened by suggestions of contingency. To embrace human contingency, for them, requires letting go of any possibility of a divine being.

This dissertation analyzes three American nineteenth-century authors who exemplify varying approaches to this relationship between language and faith. What becomes apparent is the dangers of language when it is made to adhere to a strict interpretation. Language is an agreement or consent between speaker and listener, writer and reader. When this agreement is forgotten language loses its human connection. Its symbolism becomes a tool in the hands of those in power. And this is when language is most carelessly used; it no longer requires consent by two parties but becomes a powerful tool of manipulation. Cliché is relied upon; stereotypes and archetypes are put forward at the expense of understanding and appreciating the individual nuance of others, objects, and ideas as I have argued is manifest in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The ambiguous emphasis of language rests upon this acknowledgement that language requires human agreement. It is an acknowledgement of the other. This quality of language found in the writing of Hawthorne and Dickinson emphasizes individual response and responsibility. Their texts are caught up in the multiple interpretations of experience. The effect this ambiguous language has on the reader is to keep us from coming to a conclusion. In actual life, it is

difficult to take action if we find ourselves in a state of indecision or suspension. And this relates to the charge of these authors' writing as apolitical. It is not writing that intends to incite readers to action, but to cause them to slow down and consider the finer nuances of experience because that is where they will encounter difference. Sentimental language, by contrast, takes this linguistic agreement for granted. It assumes common ground and does not entertain the possibility of difference or disagreement; it simply calls for action. Much of the sentimental language of nineteenth-century literature ignores the hermeneutic element of language, which derives from individual experiences with physical drives and sensations. Without acknowledgement of this human, physical connection, language becomes a tool for power and dominance.

Acknowledging the agreement inherent to language brings us back to the materiality of language and the physical drives which impel the need to communicate. Emphasizing the materiality of language calls into question the Platonic Ideal upon which much theology has based its propositions of the Divine because language, like religion, is based upon a set of symbols. The binary oppositions that emerge from Plato's Ideal have underscored Western religious thought with the Ideal/physical binary being preeminent and informing all the rest. However, if there is not a clear delineation between the symbolic and the physical realm as Kristeva suggests in her language appropriation theory, this has implications that should not be ignored by scholars of other disciplines. And the manifestations of the principles of her theory reveal themselves to us more clearly in language that has been preserved in writing, texts that express an

insistence on multivocality and uncertainty. It is no wonder that these texts often deal with issues of sexuality or physical desire. It is the physical side of this binary that has been repressed and is manifest in texts that emphasize the need for uncertainty. Hester Prynne's "sin" and her resulting punishment bring together the clash of the physical and Ideal. The symbolic letter is placed upon her body to subdue it, but through a slow process of her quotidian actions the physical transforms the symbolic. Dickinson's poems often leave the reader questioning if her topic is spiritual or physical desire. This happens, I believe, because for her there was no clear delineation. It is in the everyday human experiences, the details of living, and the imminent condition of our lives that, for Hawthorne and Dickinson, the sacred is found.

Azir Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, (2004) relates her experiences as a professor of English in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution in the early 1980's. As her students began to delineate their political leanings, their ideologies spilled over in the classroom. Novels like *The Great Gatsby* and James' *Daisy Miller* posed problems for the Islamist Republic supporters for their lack of moral clarity. Ambiguity was considered a "Western" evil to be eradicated, not unlike the response to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* by religious leaders of the mid-nineteenth century. The insistence on clarity and moral judgment is indicative of the conflation of language with the Ideal Symbolic and provides assurances of subjective identity. From a position of subjective certainty, strong assertions are born. However, when the physical aspect of language in the development of subjectivity is acknowledged, the subject is never far from his/her dissolution. In

this posture, the tentativeness of subjectivity and language is omnipresent, acting as a check at every turn, every moment of decision and judgment.

That Hawthorne and Dickinson stress a concept of religion that is comfortable with uncertainty is not a mere return to pre-modern theologies, which as William Placher reminds us was a world where “Christian theologians supported oppressive social structures and all sorts of bigotry; the male bias of the tradition is only one of its most obvious faults” (2). Rather it suggests a re-thinking of the underlying philosophic structures which in the Platonic tradition oppose the physical to the spiritual in a battle that has for centuries required either a mistrust or even total rejection of physical pleasure or an assessment of the spiritual that deprives it of all otherness. This boundary between the physical and spiritual has been fortified in spite of the “domestication” of the Divine because, in part, while the Divine was being domesticated, the domestic arena became ever more sacralized as is evident in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Besides selecting these particular authors and these particular texts for their theistic expression, I chose them because they also convey, in varying degrees, suggestions of gender’s relevance to religious expression. The historical conflation of women with the material, carnal world and all the attendant cultural expressions that have emerged from this conflation can only be fully addressed by close attention to organized religion’s role in propagating and maintaining this association on the one hand while also promoting an other-worldly conception of women and motherhood, on the other. Both approaches I believe to be equally detrimental. This is not a “women’s issue” but is of concern

for all human beings as it effects our lived realities even into the twenty-first century. It is my belief that the most elemental form of marginalizing happens in regards to gender in our understanding of early human development and moves outward from there to include race, belief systems, and gender identity, to name some of the most prominent examples.

In regards to this, it is worth taking note of the differences in Stowe's and Dickinson's biographies and how they maneuvered in a male dominant society as authors. Stowe was immersed in the public arena through her engagement with the issue of slavery, while Dickinson lived the life of a recluse for most of her adult life. Dickinson's poetry, for the most part, is "countersentimental" in contrast to Stowe's sentimental and didactic prose. The question arises whether Stowe's acceptance of the Victorian model of domesticity required her to write in a style that, as Berlant describes sentimental writing, "reproduce[s] the sublimation of subaltern struggles into conventions of emotional satisfaction and redemptive fantasy" (55). And equally important, was Dickinson's countersentimental poetry accomplished only by removing herself as much as possible from the context of the Victorian domestic model? How women author's traversed the male-informed world of writing in the nineteenth century and how the social environment of these different literary periods responded to the pressure these women writers were insistently applying to the restrictions placed on them is a topic I would like to further pursue. The interaction of culture, the arts, and religion in this time period is complex and muddies our understanding of

women's rights issues. I see literary criticism as crucial to furthering our understanding of the dynamics of these ongoing gender issues.

Stowe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson provide us with texts that seem to engage each other. They enact both linguistically and within their themes and plots the connection that language holds to understanding ourselves and others, whether that otherness be of gender, race, or the contemplation of a Divine.

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**ABSTRACT**

**FAITH AND (UN)CERTAINTY IN THE WRITING OF HAWTHORNE,  
DICKINSON, AND STOWE: THE INTERSECTING  
LANGUAGE OF FEMINISM AND THEOLOGY**

by

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**Major:** English

**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

This research considers how Hawthorne's, Dickinson's, and Stowe's writing express the prevailing culture's attitudes toward the operation of meaning in religion. It poses the question: Is a crisis of meaning threatening to the religious sensibility? Looking at Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and specific poems of Dickinson, I show how their writing gestures to a kind of religious sensibility that is not threatened by such a crisis, but suggests, rather, that it is essential to a genuine openness to otherness, and ultimately to the Divine. The fiction and poetry of these two authors express this both negatively, as an attack on conventional religion as well as particular nineteenth-century trends in religion, but also positively by expressing themes of possibility and hope in a posture of uncertainty. It is also expressed through their particular use of associative language and metaphor. By emphasizing the ever-shifting

mechanism of signification, their writing emphasizes the contingency of language and of subjectivity. This contingency is experienced in the chaos of physical desire and suggests that it is not antithetical to religious belief but the very foundation of it, challenging the common religious binary of the spirit and the flesh.

The historical conflation of the material realm with women leads this discussion in areas of feminist thought and theory. In particular, due to my emphasis on language materiality, the strain of feminist theory known as *l'écriture féminine* has been particularly applicable.

Stowe's writing in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* supports another stream of religious thought that relies more on discreet boundaries and assurances of belief. By appealing to common Christian principles in the novel, Stowe relies on and reinforces universal religious and ethical constructs. Her use of sentimental rhetoric is based on assumptions that clearly delineate between right and wrong, male and female, and even black and white.

All writing around the same time, Hawthorne's, Dickinson's, and Stowe's texts express attitudes toward religion that would later burgeon within American culture and are still prominent today.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

I received my Bachelor of Science in 2002 in English with a minor in writing, *summa cum laude* from Eastern Michigan University. I continued at Eastern acquiring a Master of Arts in English in 2004. From there I was accepted into Wayne State University's Ph.D. program in English, receiving a graduate assistantship in the second semester of my studies. This dissertation is the culmination of my instruction and research in my goal of achieving a Ph.D. In this project my focus has been on particular nineteenth-century American authors and the ideas of transcendence that are conveyed through their writing. I hope to further develop this project into a publishable manuscript. My main areas of interest include American literature spanning from the late eighteenth-century through the early twentieth-century, the history of American religion, and writing by and about women in this period.