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## Sew speak! Needlework as the voice of ideology critique in *The Scarlet Letter*, "A New England nun," and *The Age of Innocence*

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SEW SPEAK! NEEDLEWORK AS THE VOICE OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE IN *THE  
SCARLET LETTER*, “A NEW ENGLAND NUN,” AND *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Doctor of Philosophy in English  
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ABSTRACT

**Sew Speak! Needlework as the Voice of Ideology Critique in *The Scarlet Letter*, “A New England Nun,” and *The Age of Innocence***

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In the Nineteenth Century, needlework, and embroidery in particular, became a signifier of feminine identity. Needlework was such a significant part of women’s lives and so integral to the construction of femininity in nineteenth-century America that both pictorial and narrative art demonstrate numerous representations of women embroidering. The sheer volume of these representations in the Nineteenth Century suggests that the practice of embroidery provides a way of speaking for women—a representation of the voice of subjectivity silenced by patriarchal ideology. Because needlework serves as a signifier of ideal femininity, it provides uniquely fruitful and previously unexplored opportunities for investigating how women negotiated with the constraints of ideal femininity, especially as represented in fiction. Indeed, needlework in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “A New England Nun,” and Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* reveals a character at odds with patriarchal ideology. In each of these three texts, the representation of the embroidering woman—Hester Prynne, Louisa Ellis, and May Welland—not only reveals the “falseness” of the gender ideology constructed around her but also suggests that the practice of embroidery in fiction serves to critique that ideology, opening a space of possibility in which women can negotiate their participation in or refusal of the ideological constraints of gender.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Few contemporary American women will learn how to wield a needle. Fewer still will appreciate the artistry that can emerge from the needle held in a skilled and fanciful hand. Granted, certain types of needlework have experienced cultural revivals, and it was not too many years ago that knitting, for example, was popular among certain groups of women. Embroidery has not yet experienced such a resurgence of popularity, and even if it should, its importance in the daily lives of American women and girls will likely never reemerge. Prior to the Twentieth Century, however, embroidery formed an integral part of many American women's lives. In fact, needlework in the Nineteenth Century, and embroidery in particular, became synonymous with femininity, a signifier of feminine identity.

Needlework was such a significant part of women's lives and so integral to the construction of femininity in nineteenth-century America that both pictorial and narrative art demonstrate numerous representations of women embroidering.<sup>1</sup> The sheer volume of these representations in the nineteenth-century suggests, moreover, that the practice of embroidery "says" something about the ways in which femininity was being constructed. Investigations into material culture, in fact, have become important places for scholars to gather information about a society's ideology, and embroidery provides ample "material" for examining gender ideology since sewing, as Mary C. Beaudry points out, is "universally associated with women" (2). Despite its status as a "universal" signifier of women and femininity, and despite its frequent inclusion in the representational arts, however, there does not exist a large body of scholarship on representations of

embroidery in the arts. There is no work of scholarship, moreover, that provides a close examination of the representation of embroidery in American fiction. I do not propose to provide a sweeping study of fictional representations of women embroidering, for while such a work would surely provide invaluable insight into the ways that fiction, material culture, and gender ideology in America intersect and interrelate, it is beyond the scope of my study to undertake a project of that magnitude. Rather, I will look closely at three works of American fiction—Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “A New England Nun,” and Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*—in which embroidery not only forms a conspicuous part of the narrative but also reveals a character at odds with ideology. For in each of these three texts, I will argue, the representation of the embroidering woman—Hester Prynne, Louisa Ellis, May Welland—not only reveals the “falseness” of the gender ideology constructed around her but also suggests that the practice of embroidery in fiction serves to critique that ideology, opening a space of possibility in which women can negotiate their participation in or refusal of the ideological constraints of gender.

Gender, as we know, is a socially constructed idea based in the particular ideology that informs a given society.<sup>2</sup> But the image of a woman at her embroidery represents a paradox in the formation of the female subject as constructed by the “ruling ideology,” which in America is patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, embroidery, indeed needlework in general, symbolizes the Feminine Ideal.<sup>4</sup> Many other activities, certainly, symbolize this ideal as well. Indeed, the image of a woman bent over a hot stove cooking dinner for her brood or the image of a woman patiently nursing a sick loved one also represents the Feminine Ideal, demonstrating characteristics considered “naturally” feminine like



nurturing, compassion, passivity, or selflessness. Yet needlework, especially embroidery even today tends to signify the female gender. Since the early 1980s, there have been several works written defining the relationship between embroidery and the Feminine Ideal. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, for example, in her book *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, traces the development of the Feminine Ideal in colonial New England, arguing that the “narrowing of [domestic] roles was accompanied by a heightening of the ceremonial meaning of housekeeping, a phenomenon which historians can glimpse in increased attention to the rituals of the table and the garden, but especially in needlework” (76). Embroidery in particular Ulrich claims became more and more a symbolic representation of the Feminine Ideal (77). Additionally, Roszika Parker discusses how “[e]mbroidery has become indelibly associated with stereotypes of femininity,” signifying the “passive, powerless woman just waiting to be selected” (2) in her book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Finally, in her 2006 book *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*, Mary C. Beaudry locates the emergence of the association of embroidery with femininity within the historical context of the Renaissance when “embroidery was used to inculcate femininity in young girls” (4). Since that time, Beaudry shows, embroidery has become inextricably linked with the ideal feminine so that “Artistic and popular images of women, alone or in groups, occupied contentedly and industriously at their sewing or needlework, along with histories of needlework and sewing tools, have created a lasting impression of sewing as the ultimate feminine domestic art” (169). On the other hand, however, embroidery symbolizes an “autonomy” that stands distinctly at odds with dependent, passive, innocently child-like ideal

femininity advocated by nineteenth-century American standards.

Embroidery has been long held to be synonymous with women and the Feminine Ideal that forms the female experience in America.<sup>5</sup> The American woman's experience has been diverse and complex, and no single work can hope to encompass completely the history and trajectory of that experience. Moreover, because, while women appear frequently in literature but are, as Virginia Woolf shows, "all but absent from history" (24), to literature we must look if we wish to reconstruct that experience. We must, according to Adrienne Rich, "re-vision" women's experiences as represented by literature, meaning women must look again at the ways that women's lives are described in literature of the past in order to recover a more authentic understanding of those women and their experiences than male-dominated scholarship has been able to provide (188-200). Why, one might ask, should we wish to embark on such a project? What value does such an inquiry into the material practice of embroidery hold? How can embroidery offer an interpretive window into the American woman's experience? What might the practice of embroidery say about women's experience in American patriarchy? In what ways does the practice of embroidery relate to patriarchal ideology in America? What can an examination of embroidery as represented in narrative illuminate about American women's history? And, finally, how might an investigation of the material practice of embroidery demonstrate ways in which women "voiced" their critical negotiations with the patriarchal ideology that informs their lives and subjectivities? For embroidery, like other types of material culture, can serve as a kind of voice for women, as a way for them to engage critically with ideology while still appearing to hold themselves true to the Feminine Ideal. In fact, the material practice of embroidery as represented in Nathaniel

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun," and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* offers us three distinct visions of American women—Hester Prynne, Louisa Ellis, and May Welland—in the process of negotiating an ideological space at odds with patriarchy, problematizing the Feminine Ideal that embroidery is supposed to symbolize.

Femininity, like gender, is a socially constructed idea based in the particular ideology that informs a given society. But the image of a woman at her embroidery represents a paradox in the formation of the female subject as constructed by the "ruling ideology," which in America is patriarchy. On the one hand, embroidery symbolizes the Feminine Ideal and demonstrated characteristics considered "naturally" feminine like nurturing, compassion, passivity, or selflessness. But on the other hand, embroidery serves to undermine the very Feminine Ideal it represents both in its content and in its creator. In her book *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*, Mary C. Beaudry tells us that sewing has become "universally associated with women" (2). As Beaudry explains, throughout history,

activities customarily performed either by men or by women have become associated with and deemed appropriate to members of one sex or the other. Through such customary associations various undertakings and responsibilities have become culturally designated as the "natural" province of one sex or another and therefore integral to the definition of gender identity through designation of gender roles. The processes, settings, tools, and materials employed in an enterprise are metonymically transformed into symbols of sex-specific tasks and so become emblems of

gender identity. (2)

Additionally, Roszika Parker explains, “When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity” (*The Subversive Stitch* 3). If needlework is an “expression of femininity” that has been “metonymically transformed” into an activity seen as “culturally designated as the ‘natural’ province” of women, then when we see a woman at her needle, we will immediately “read” femininity onto her, regardless of her placement on the scale of gender identity.<sup>6</sup> The material practice of needlework, then, takes part in the construction of the female gender in American patriarchal ideology. And by the Nineteenth Century, according to Parker, embroidery came to be considered the natural expression of femininity: “Women embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered” (11).

Neither Parker nor Beaudry, though, accept the common but fallacious parallel drawn between “nature and nurture,” and in their books they clearly demonstrate the ways in which the activity of embroidery provided women with the ways and means to negotiate the various constructions of ideal femininity to which they were subjected. Parker, for example, points out that embroidery is an art that “represents the beauty of the female imagination” (7), suggesting that embroidery serves as a material representation of a woman’s interior consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Parker points out, “Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness. Paradoxically, while embroidery was employed to inculcate femininity in women, it also enabled them to negotiate the constraints of femininity” (11). On the one hand, then, the embroidering woman, “Eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched,” suggests passivity and subjugation, and her silence might be interpreted as “a silent cry

for attention,” a longing to be interrupted by whatever man might come along; on the other hand, however, “the embroiderer’s silence, her concentration also suggests a self-containment, a kind of autonomy” (Parker 10). The silent, self-contained embroiderer enmeshes herself in a space of artistic creation where she can explore the meanings of the images and texts that grow from her needle. In fact, Parker says, the content of the embroidered item also serves to indicate the embroiderer’s embodiment of—or resistance to—socially constructed femininity. “If the content conformed to the ideal,” Parker explains, “it supposedly won the needlewoman love, admiration, and support” (12).<sup>8</sup> What Parker’s quote suggests, moreover, is that if the needlewoman’s content did not conform “to the ideal,” then it could cause disgust (or apathy or hatred), denigration, and a lack of support. Furthermore, Beaudry explains, embroidering women did not simply accept the ideological construction of femininity imposed upon themselves and their work: “embroidery has provided support and satisfaction for women and has served as a covert means of negotiating the constraints of femininity; women were able to make meanings of their own while overtly living up to the oppressive stereotype of the passive, silent, vain, and frivolous, even seductive needlewoman” (5).<sup>9</sup> For Beaudry, then, as for Parker, it is not only the embroiderer’s physical posture that indicates the contradictory way in which embroidery constructs femininity but also the meaning she invests into the content of the embroidered work. And if the embroiderer imbues her work with images or text or “meanings” that demonstrate women “negotiating the constraints of femininity,” and if femininity is part of socially constructed gender ideology, then the embroidering woman offers us a unique, rich opportunity for examining how women engaged critically with that ideology. What is more, if the practice of embroidery critiques ideology and

reveals it as “false,” and if embroidery traditionally signifies femininity, marking one as belonging to a particular gender, then in these three texts, the signifying chain that embroidery sets up becomes dislocated, becoming an unfixed signifier with no transcendent signified.<sup>10</sup>

The primary ideology with which this paper is concerned is patriarchy, and my methodology here will grow in part out of feminist theory as my primary focus will be on the ways that each of these women negotiates the patriarchal ideology that dictates her life. Since its earliest identifiable theorists, Feminist Scholarship has sought to problematize and change the notion that femininity is natural, innate, and biological, arguing instead that social ideology constructs, or “nurtures,” the feminine gender. Gender theory, of which Feminist Theory is a part, in fact establishes the difference between what we call “feminine” or “masculine” behavior, which is based in social norms and practices, and biological sexuality, “male” and “female” physiognomy which is based in biological and physical variations. It is not my purpose to enter into this debate here. A plethora of notable scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, Helene Cixious in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Luce Irigaray in “The Sex Which Is Not One,” or Judith Butler in *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, have written convincingly and eloquently on the subject. Hence, my project relies upon my belief that femininity is, indeed, a social construction rather than a biological predisposition, and I accept the division between gender and sexuality.

Yet I am also concerned with theories of ideology and the ways in which subjects participate in, or refuse to participate in, the various ideologies surrounding them.

Consequently, then, I will also utilize Louis Althusser's theory of ideology as explained in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Judith Butler's interpretation and extension of Althusser's theories as presented in her book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, and Slavoj Žižek's recent work on ideological theory entitled "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?" In particular, I am interested in Althusser's and Butler's theory of the "bad subject" since it is the "bad subject" who does not "work all by itself," meaning its beliefs—its ideology—do not correspond to its actions—its concrete practices are not properly "governed by the rituals of the ISAs" (Althusser 135). Althusser, of course, does not explore in depth the notion of the "bad subject," which is precisely what Butler criticizes in her reading of his work. Butler's chapter on Althusser takes up the notion of the "bad subject" and explores the ways in which the "bad subject" might disrupt ideology and the material rituals that allow it to function.

Althusser describes the "bad subject" as one "who on occasion provoke[s] the intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus" because it does not "work all by itself" through its subjection to ideology (135). In other words, the "bad subject" may not be successfully "inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs," and may not "recognize" "that they must be obedient" to the "existing state of affairs." These subjects, Althusser implies, may resist or misrecognize the interpellative "hail" of ideology, which results in a retaliatory "intervention" of the State (135).

Judith Butler re-theorizes Althusser's conception of the "bad subject" in chapter four of her book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Althusser argues that the subject comes into being through "the hail of the law," which causes his recognition of his need to "submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall

(freely) accept his subjection” (136). Butler refuses the necessity of the subject’s “subjection” in Althusser’s argument on the grounds that, first, his use of Christian theology to create his argument provides a false and reductive premise of subject formation, and second because Butler finds Althusser’s definition of the “bad subject” far too reductive. Butler proposes that a subject may, in fact, be able to refuse “the hail of the law,” unlike Althusser who prefaces his entire notion of the subject as one whose conscious existence begins and relies upon the hail of “the law.” Butler, in fact, proposes that the “bad subject” may be uniquely positioned to refuse the “hail” of the law, which for Althusser interpellates the subject and “ensures” the “functioning” of ideology.

If it is possible that a subject can exist apart from the hail of the law, then the possibilities for and the significance of the “bad subject” seem far greater and more probable for Butler than she believes Althusser allows for. Butler’s primary issue with Althusser’s theory of subject formation is he does not explore the idea and function of the “bad subject,” an exploration that she claims could have revealed the false premise within his use of Christian theology. I, like Butler, want to know if compelling evidence exists in the three fictional texts I have chosen to investigate regarding whether subjects can formulate identity apart from and despite of being named or interpellated. Moreover, I believe that examining “bad subjects” in literature might lead us in the direction of an answer.

Indeed, Nancy Armstrong, in her book *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900*,<sup>11</sup> offers just such an examination. For Armstrong, though, the possibility of the “bad subject” remains implicit, as she does not frequently use this particular term. As she defines it, the “bad subject” is one whose individualism is so



“extravagant” that it must be “destroyed in the name of humanity” (7). This “bad subject,” Armstrong explains, displays marked dissatisfaction with her “assigned position” in the social world, and because this subject contains an excess of personality—an excess of desire or aggression or ambition—she must either be destroyed or rehabilitated according to the ideological values of her society. Within the terms of Armstrong’s argument, for English society to preserve itself by creating “docile bodies” through the privileged creation of the “self-governing subject,” the “bad subject” must be subjugated within the narration. If we apply Armstrong’s model of subject formation to American fiction, however, we must modify it to account for the fact that at its very heart, the subject in American literature *is* the bad subject and consequently culls the very excess of individualism that British narratives subjugate and repress.

I agree with Armstrong’s argument that narrative constructs subjectivity and has been integral in the formation of the modern subject; however, rather than eradicating all traces of excessive individualism, American narrative and the subjectivity it constructs highly values and even sees as normative the excessive individualism that in British fiction becomes an engine of chaos and destruction. For the American national character—and by default the ideal literary character—is, essentially, romantic, as argued by Richard Volney Chase in his still valued book *The American Novel and Its Tradition*.<sup>12</sup> Appropriating D. H. Lawrence’s earlier description of the American novel, Chase describes it as “content to explore, rather than to appropriate and civilize . . . .It has not wanted to build an imperium but merely to discover a new place and a new state of mind”(5). Armstrong’s argument implies that the narrative creation of the self-governing subject is exactly “to appropriate and civilize,” evidenced by her extensive use of

Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant. Since the British novel ideologically grew out of the self-governance advocated by Enlightenment philosophers it only makes sense that the British novel would be engaged in such a project as well. The British subject as constructed within the novel, Armstrong demonstrates, develops from excessive individualism into a fully contained individual, elevating and idealizing the contained individual as self-governing subject while eliminating and undermining “competing notions of the subject—often proposed by other novels—as idiosyncratic, less than fully human, fantastic, or dangerous” (3).<sup>13</sup>

But American fiction—the novel and the short story—ideologically grew out of the rebellious ideologies of the Romantic era as well as out of the material reality of America’s revolutionary history and vast unknown geography. American cultural ideology, consequently, tends to value the “lonely wanderer,” the “explorer,” the subject who exists outside the bounds of the social order and whose excessive individualism in fact threatens that social order. Within Armstrong’s terms, then, the characteristics that make one a “bad subject” in the British novel become, in American fiction, characteristics that are admirable, even necessary for the survival of society. And while my purpose is not to provide a comparative study of subjectivity in the British and American novel traditions, it is important to understand the inherent rebelliousness of the American character. After all, the American nation and its culture originate in an act of rebellion that at its core erupted from a battle over ideology and only achieved success because of the overwhelming number of “bad subjects” who revolted, disrupting the “functioning” of ideology in order to institute their own “ruling ideology.”

The “ruling ideology” that has remained entrenched in America since its inception is

patriarchal ideology, and women far more often than men face the brutal, physical retaliation of the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) as well as the more subtle repressive, subjugating oppression of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). American patriarchy as it constructs femininity has led to an internalization of the inferiority of women, making it appear as inherent, as the way nature intended things. Certainly there exists a long, rich history of the critique of patriarchal ideology, a seemingly endless list of women (and the occasional man) who have exposed patriarchy as nothing more than an ideological system. After all, the Western world, by and large, now considers women the intellectual equals of men rather than conceiving of them as intellectually inferior to men. Thanks to those who have critiqued patriarchal ideology, many qualities that were once considered inherent and natural to women (the desire to bear children, weak nervous systems, infantile intellects) now are recognized as ideological constructs. Those who still subscribe to the ideology of patriarchy are seen as woefully ignorant, and they need to be “enlightened” by those of us who have escaped this dreadful social inequity, or at least understood and pitied from a safely “objective” distance. Increasingly, in our culturally relative world, we advocate that latter strategy and refuse to force any kind of ideological shift upon another population. We increasingly strive to withhold our judgments, to refuse to critique another’s ideological system because it is no longer politically correct to judge another’s beliefs or practices from the standards of one’s own. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek warns in his introductory essay to *Mapping Ideology*, behind this political correctness, this refusal to judge, this supposedly “objective” and critical understanding of ideology *par excellence* lies something even more pernicious and dangerous—cynicism. The “cynical subject,” Žižek explains, is one who recognizes

ideology as ideology *par excellence* but continues to act as if the ideology is the actual “real” (18).

A logical question is, of course, what can a critique of patriarchal ideology in nineteenth-century America offer us today? What benefit to contemporary life could such a critique provide? Why is it important to understand how nineteenth-century authors provided their own critique of patriarchal ideology in the characters and stories they created? How do critiques of patriarchy in the Nineteenth Century inform our critiques of patriarchy today? Can the ways in which nineteenth-century authors grappled with the gender roles formed and maintained by patriarchal ideology lend insight into current ideological battlegrounds?

If, as Žižek claims, the Subject is a fundamental category that belongs to ideology, then the critique of ideology allows for an “empty space,” which is the subject. Choosing an ideology is clearing out a space for your own subjectivity. Choosing a truth means choosing an ideology. The subject fills itself with truths and empties itself with critique of those truths. So, can we say that the intellectual and/or emotional process of active ideology critique is the empty space that sits ready while the subject thinks to determine its decision and subsequent rejection or adoption of an ideology? Are Hester, Louisa, and May all in the empty space of ideology critique? If so, do they choose an ideology that we can see/perceive in the text? Are they in the process of navigating the empty space to determine the truths with which they choose to fill themselves? Or is the reader to fill up the empty space that each woman creates? Is the empty space created between the stereotype of the “bad subject” created by patriarchal ideology and a newly defined/created autonomous role for woman? Does each woman remain in an “empty

space” because it is a human’s right to continually transition through the empty spaces of ideology critique? Does each of these women as a subject reside in the “empty space” of ideology critique because she is in the process of questioning the social roles set for her by patriarchal ideology? Does the act of needlework, the unnecessary embellishment, the ripping and re-sewing of seams, the overtly unnatural way that May forces herself to embroider, signify that these women either reside in the “empty space” of ideology critique or that they are in the process of achieving this “empty space?” Does the odd behavior and agitation of the sewing activities combined with the actual male gaze or the consciousness of it suggest that it is the gaze<sup>14</sup> itself, the threat to autonomy and virginity and wholeness of Self that it represents, which motivates the critique of ideology that these women appear to experience? Does the gaze here represent a scene of “reading” or “reading onto?” Do the men (and others) who turn their gazes upon these women see the needlework as a mediating factor because the sewing contributes to something useful (or at least harmless) and appropriate to a woman’s role in society? Because they see the sewing as useful and appropriate, do they leave the women to themselves, thus contributing to the formation of the “empty space,” ironically? What understanding of contemporary women’s creative activities such as sewing, decorating, or baking can we gain from an investigation of these three nineteenth-century texts? What understanding of the way women today navigate patriarchal ideology and the empty spaces they are able to clear for themselves can we gain? Where do women today form their empty spaces? In what activities might we locate woman’s navigation of the spaces of subjectivity and ideology critique? I hope that the following investigation of three fictional representations of embroidering women will begin to provide answers to some of these

questions and in the process will reveal new places and scenes for interpretive possibility and for the investigation of the formation of subjectivity through a critical engagement with ideology. In the process, I want to demonstrate that one can indeed choose one's own ideology and that choosing an ideology that rebels against the "ruling ideology"—here, patriarchy and its inherent repression of women and The Feminine—is both individually rewarding and socially beneficial.

In the first chapter, I will examine the scenes of embroidery in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* as moments in the text when the formation of Hester's subjectivity becomes evident. In these scenes, I argue, embroidery symbolizes a performance of the Feminine Ideal, which the embroiderer herself does not actually embody. For, while embroidering overlays the performance of the Feminine Ideal onto Hester, leading other characters and many critics<sup>15</sup> to interpret her as fulfilling her role in "the cult of true womanhood," I interpret Hester's embroidering rather as a critique of that role, or at least as a critical negotiation with it, and the patriarchal ideology that creates it. Ultimately, I want to show that *The Scarlet Letter*, through the activity of embroidery, presents a model for the development of the American female subject as transgressive, rebellious, and disobedient—a model that, in other words, represents "the bad subject."

In the second chapter, I turn to Mary Wilkins Freeman's short story "A New England Nun." Of the three texts included in this study, Freeman's makes needlework the most central and the most important in the construction of her protagonist Louisa Ellis. Louisa both adheres to and modifies the model of transgressive subjectivity that precedes her in the form of Hester Prynne. Louisa's disobedience, granted, is far more subtle than Hester's; but like Hester, Louisa does disobey, and that disobedience becomes evident in

the moments she embroiders. After all, whereas Hester overtly breaks the law and thereby “provoke[s] the intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus” (Althusser 135), Louisa only breaks uncodified social “law” and provokes but the marginal “intervention” of the Ideological State Apparatus in the form of social ostracism and gossip. Nevertheless, the scenes in which Louisa works her needle become sites where we can see a critical subjectivity negotiating with ideology. And because Louisa finally chooses her embroidery over a husband, then she also participates in the creation of American femininity as rebellious and the American woman as the “bad subject” who disrupts the functioning of ideology.

Wharton’s novel gives us a final opportunity to view a disruption in the functioning of ideology through a scene of needlework, although May Welland does not embody the “bad subject.” May, in fact, conforms so completely to ideal femininity in nineteenth-century America that the transgressive possibilities she presents are virtually imperceptible. Indeed May embroiders in only one scene in the novel. That scene, however, reveals the “falseness,” the unnatural nature of ideology, more obviously than scenes in either of the other two texts. Furthermore, because May is prevented from engaging critically with ideology, the text suggests that on the eve of gaining legal citizenship, the oppression of women by American patriarchy flared up strongly before fizzling out—at least in this respect.<sup>16</sup> In fact, that Wharton decided to sublimate the transgressive spirit so deeply within artistic representations of her character implies the existence of a deeper phenomenon. Often, in moments when some revolutionary goal is nearly achieved, those in power in a last ditch-effort to prevent change will amplify retaliation on both physical and psychical fronts.

Indeed, if we conceptualize the three texts, *The Scarlet Letter*, “A New England Nun,” and *The Age of Innocence*, as distinct, progressive (or, more properly, regressive) historical moments in the construction of the American female citizen-subject, then we should consider that each text plays a role in the ideological construction of gendered subjects. In fact, what we might see is that as women in America came closer to achieving legal citizenship, the more they earned equality, the reactions against such changes became more intense. I would argue that each of these texts engages critically with patriarchal ideology, most evident in the scenes of needlework presented in the texts, and that each woman’s embroidery allows her to maintain the semblance of the Feminine Ideal while, paradoxically, her very behavior, the way she is described by the narrator as she sews, undermines the validity of that Ideal. For each woman, the performance of the Feminine Ideal<sup>17</sup> through needlework serves to demonstrate that it is possible to resist the “hail” of patriarchy by negotiating with ideology. The needlework and the performance of the Feminine Ideal allow each woman to “trouble” her traditional role within the patriarchy in various ways. Because each rebels against patriarchal ideology, each character serves as a marker to gauge the progression—or regression—in the development of female subjectivity and female citizenship in America.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Both pictorial and textual representations of sewing women have existed in the Western Tradition nearly since its Greco-Roman beginnings. An exhaustive list of those representations would be impossible, although from Homer’s Penelope onward, suffice it to say that women at their needles and looms seem always to have been a popular subject for art.

<sup>2</sup> I am using Louis Althusser’s still viable theory of ideology to inform my argument. Approaching the theory of ideology from both a Marxist-materialist perspective and from a Freudian-psychoanalytic perspective, Althusser argues that ideology is a “non-historical reality, i.e. an *omni-historical* reality, in the sense in which [its] structure and functioning are immutable, present in the same form throughout what we can call history;” but ideology is also akin to Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious, which is



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“eternal” and has no history (122). Ideology for Althusser is an “immutable” part of human history and the human condition. For the purposes of my argument, Althusser’s joining of Marxism and psychoanalysis will be integral when examining how the material practice of needlework participates in the (re)production of the normative feminine subject in nineteenth-century American culture. For, while Althusser, and Marx before him, focuses his essay on class rather than on gender, I believe that their definitions and explanations of ideology can support an argument about gender very well. After all, women have always been the lowest class, the most subordinate class in the history of human society, and I would argue that sex/gender struggles have been just as important in the history of human civilization as economy.

<sup>3</sup> According to Althusser, ideology exists as a tool for domination by the ruling class of society in order to “reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce,” which is necessary for a society to exist (101).

<sup>4</sup> The term “Feminine Ideal” means exactly what the words imply—ideal femininity as constructed by a particular society or culture. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* famously described the Feminine Ideal as a “myth” of “sacred womanhood” represented in the “ideal figure of the Mother” who is “only a moral personage” and never a “carnal” body. Implicit within de Beauvoir’s description is the idea that the Feminine Ideal represents a perfection that can be imitated but never duplicated, as with any Ideal in Platonic terms (302-03). Additionally, however, de Beauvoir suggests that the Ideal Feminine signifies a disembodied woman whose Ideality relies upon a lack of body and therefore upon an absence of carnality and sexuality. The Ideal Feminine is always and only the Virgin Mother, untouchable, incorruptible, and asexual, selfless, ever-industrious, and subjugated to the patriarchal ideology that elevates the masculine and the male over the feminine and the female.

<sup>5</sup> Texts that discuss sewing generally make class distinctions between embroidery and other more functional types of sewing like weaving. Embroidery usually symbolizes the genteel woman whose work does not provide the family with income but rather serves as a status and wealth indicator. For the purposes of my argument, I will make embroidery the focus for two reasons: first, because each of the characters about whom I write are mid-upper class women whose embroidery does not necessarily serve a practical purpose; and second because American women who sewed for pleasure usually chose embroidery rather than other types of decorative sewing like lace-making, which was more popular in Italy, Spain, and their colonies. In this paper, although I recognize that an investigation of sewing practices in relation to socio-economic class would yield material of scholarly interest, my purpose is, rather, to investigate the relationship between the embroiderer and her creation, American gender politics, female citizenship, and critical engagement with American patriarchal ideology as symbolized in the embroidery created by the three characters who form the core of my discussion. My interest here, then, will remain framed within gender theory rather than economic theory, and an investigation of sewing practices and social class must be left for a later time.

<sup>6</sup> By the gender scale, I am referring to Judith Butler’s theory in her book *Gender Trouble*. Butler proposes that sexuality should not be conceived in terms of a strict dichotomy—man or woman, male or female—but instead should be thought of as a scale. Rather than falling simply on one side or the other, most people’s sexuality falls somewhere in between the two poles. Butler’s theory became one of the founding texts in the development of Gender Theory in the 1980s.

<sup>7</sup> One of the primary points in Parker’s book is to address the classification of embroidery as either an “art” or a “craft.” Long classified as a craft, which is hierarchically below art in our culture’s valuation, women’s embroidery was not recognized as a significant creative activity, nor was it given any aesthetic or cultural value. Parker, however, shows that embroidery does indeed deserve to be classified as an “art” because of its frequently imagistic nature, and because “it is, undoubtedly, a cultural practice involving iconography, style and a social function” while also using raw materials to create distinct meanings (7).

<sup>8</sup> The content of embroidery—what things or ideas should be represented in an embroidered work—would of course depend upon the particular time and place. What would be deemed appropriate content in seventeenth-century America, for example, would not be considered appropriate content in nineteenth-century America. By and large, however, acceptable content for embroidery would include depictions of religious subject matter, flora and fauna, representations of idyllic domestic and/or pastoral scenes from either Greco-Roman mythology or the Christian Bible, letters of the alphabet, and simple poetic verses. Much of Parker’s book, in fact, is devoted to a historical survey of the content of women’s embroidery in Western Culture from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century. For additional resources that discuss expected and acceptable content for embroidered work, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s

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*Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (1980), Lynn M. Alexander's *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (2003), Susan Burrows Swan's *Plain & Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700-1850* (1977), Thomasina Beck's *Embroidered Gardens* (1979), and Mary C. Beaudry's *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* (2006).

<sup>9</sup>Beaudry, in fact, cites Parker's book copiously, and the stereotype of the seductive needlewoman that she mentions here is one she takes from Parker's study. According to Parker, "The silent embroiderer has . . . become part of a stereotype of femininity in which the self-containment of the woman sewing is interpreted as seductiveness" (10).

<sup>10</sup>I am using Jacques Derrida's language theory as presented in *Of Grammatology*. In particular, I refer here to Derrida's notion of "the trace" and of "the supplement" in regards to deconstructionist textual interpretation. According to Derrida, in examining a binary opposition, deconstruction manages to expose a trace, which is a rupture within metaphysics, a pattern of incongruities where the metaphysical rubs up against the non-metaphysical. The trace does not appear as such (65), but the logic of its path in a text can be mimed by a deconstructive intervention and exposed. A supplement is something that comes to serve as an aid to something "original" or "natural," which produces an ambiguity that ensures that what is supplementary can always be interpreted in two ways. It is always ambiguous, whether the supplement adds itself and "is a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence", or whether "the supplement supplements... adds only to replace... represents and makes an image... its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (144). Ultimately, Derrida suggests that the supplement is both of these things, accretion and substitution (200), which means that the supplement is "not a signified more than a signifier, a representer than a presence, a writing than a speech" (315). The point of the supplement for Derrida is that it opens the possibility for alternative textual interpretations by exposing the distance, or *differance*, between the "real," which is always absent in textual representation, and the supplement, which is all we have.

<sup>11</sup>Granted, Armstrong's book focuses on the novel tradition in England rather than in America, and it may seem problematic that I have chosen to use a work that investigates British fiction and the British individual subject in a project focused on American literature and the American subject. Yet because America's literary tradition emerges from the British, and because the novel developed as an Anglophone tradition similarly in Britain and America, then many of Armstrong's theories and arguments can be validly applied to the development of the American subject and the role of American fiction in the creation and reproduction of that subject.

<sup>12</sup>Chase limits his investigation to the novel genre, which may be seen as problematic since one of my chosen texts is a short story. The American short story, however, is built upon similar principles of character, plot, and narration as the American novel, and I believe that Chase's terms and claims apply to both genres.

<sup>13</sup>Mary Shelley's book *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* become for Armstrong representative of the way that the self-governing individual subject eliminates the other "idiosyncratic, less than fully human" subject. In both novels we see "less than fully human" individual subjects—Dr. Frankenstein's monster and the vampire—whose excessive desires—for human contact, for love, for blood, et cetera—threaten the societies in which they live. In order to ensure the orderly continuance of British society, these "fantastic and dangerous" individuals must be destroyed, and the self-contained, self-governing subjects live on to participate in the maintenance of the orderly society (3).

<sup>14</sup>The concept of the gaze I use here is Jacques Lacan's as he defines it in his lectures on Psychoanalysis.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Ralph Flores, Nina Baym, and Laurence Buell

<sup>16</sup>I am not suggesting that with legal citizenship patriarchal oppression disappeared, only the status of women as non-citizens.

<sup>17</sup>I am using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity here as laid out in her work *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues that gender is a social construction and that the performance of behaviors associated with a particular gender exposes the fact that gender is not a natural, biological fact but an unnatural social construction.

## CHAPTER II

### “AT HER NEEDLE:” EMBROIDERY AS THE VOICE OF THE “BAD SUBJECT” IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Lawrence Buell, in his essay “Hawthorne and the Problem of ‘American’ Fiction: The Example of the Scarlet Letter,” famously defined Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as a myth of American origin, a classification that remains important and valid even in scholarship today (74). Indeed, many scholars have written of this originary narrative as a myth of national origin firmly based upon the myth of Christian origin—the birth of Original Sin. The origin of America, of its culture and its subjects, is, then, based within the Christian myth of sin, punishment, and redemption, and we may read Hester Prynne as our “original” mother—a model or prototype for the American female subject. Hester has, in fact, been called the American Eve by many, leading to an ongoing critical debate that inevitably polarizes between idealizing our Eve as the mother of the American nation and its culture and denigrating her as the temptress who introduces original sin and destroys the Puritans’ utopian dream.

I believe it is far too reductive, however, to attempt to fit Hester into either category. Hester contains a complex individual subjectivity, and understanding the complexity of her character and experience can be illuminated through an examination of what Ozzie J. Mayers calls the “unconscious, unarticulated, private modes of expression buried” inside women’s embroidery (665). Mayers argues that Hester’s embroidery serves to negotiate a space for herself within the repressive confines of her society, interpreting the act of embroidery as an “act of rootedness” (667). Mayers defines “rootedness” as a phenomenon that “may lead to provincialism, inertia, and powerlessness” that causes a

desire for escape, but it may also “foster a satisfying meditative mode of consciousness” that provides a space for free thought (667). Hester’s embroidering, Mayers explains, allows her to affect “a quiet revolution carried on within the domain of a domestic sanctuary” (674). I agree that Hester’s embroidery enables her to maintain herself and Pearl in exile, and I also concur with Mayers’ argument that sewing gives Hester “a satisfying meditative mode of consciousness.” Mayers, however, does not explore Hester’s embroidering carefully enough, for no close reading of the text is offered. *The Scarlet Letter* actually only appears marginally in Mayers’ article, which in itself seems problematic since Mayers proposes to examine the meaning of needlework in American fiction. And if *The Scarlet Letter* is in fact the myth of American origin, then a proper examination of needlework in American fiction should begin there.

Indeed the most notable absence in Mayers’ reading is “The Custom-House,” the prefatory sketch to the novel, which introduces, significantly, Hawthorne’s own conception of “rootedness.” The way that Hawthorne discusses rootedness, moreover, is distinctly similar to Mayers’. In fact, if we are fully to appreciate and comprehend the rebellious and transgressive nature of Hester’s embroidering, then we must begin with a close examination of the way “The Custom-House” prepares the reader to view Puritan ideology in a critical manner and to be hyper-aware of the particular customs and ideas that most desperately need uprooting. “The Custom-House” makes a strong case for the human’s need to uproot itself every so often and to “strike [its] roots in unaccustomed soil” (*The Scarlet Letter* 11). And just as “Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations” (11), nor will human customs or human society flourish if they also are not occasionally uprooted and

transformed. If uprooting allows flourishing, then rootedness creates stagnation, leading to “provincialism, inertia, and powerlessness,” degrading humans and, by default, their artistic and social values. “The Custom-House,” though, seems to point our attention towards a particular group of humans and their values as exemplary of the “evil” that can arise when “too long a series of generations” remain “rooted.” For “The Custom-House” mentions the Salem witch trials and specifically tells the story of “an incident of hard severity towards a woman of their sect” (9), suggesting that one of the customs that required change was the way that Puritan male authority figures treated women, their tendency to cast women as responsible for all the evils of their society. But in creating Hester, by tying her to the unjust dealings with women during the Salem witch trials and later to Anne Hutchinson, Hawthorne creates not just an argument for more compassion and “heart” in American society, he also creates an argument for woman’s ability to be autonomous while contradicting the myth—“so various, so contradictory”—that women are at once, as de Beauvoir says, “both Eve and the Virgin Mary” (*The Second Sex* 303). And though it may not be the specific object of attack in the text, patriarchal Puritan ideology is one of the blighted potatoes that has stagnated in its soil for far too long.

From the very first page of the novel, in fact, Hawthorne creates an atmosphere of failure, transgression, corruption, and decay. This failed “Utopia of human virtue and happiness” that is colonial Salem suggests, once again, the division between the imagined ideal and the “Actual” reality set up in “The Custom-House,” or, between “material practice” and ideology. Utopias, Hawthorne seems to suggest, are but fantasies, doomed to remain in the realm of the imaginary. The “Actual” reality is one in which the new colonists, recently flown from England in order to form what they had hoped would be a

Utopian community of perfect liberty, charity, and well being, were almost immediately confronted with the failure of that hopeful ideal. For the colonists “invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of the prison” (47). Here lie fundamental reasons that humans cannot realize or actuate a Utopia: because both the human body and its spirit/mind are subject to decay. Immediately, we find ourselves enmeshed in a tale in which the weakness of the flesh—represented both in Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s sexual transgression and in the hypocrisy of the Puritans’ embellished clothing. The failure of moral and legal codes becomes primary in importance. These failures require an edifice in which to lock offending bodies—or a plot of land in which to inter them—and a moral and legal system to justify putting them there.

This prison, the “black flower of civilized society,” conceals within its decaying, rusty door something beautiful, resilient, and independent—the wild rose-bush that grows near its door. And this is no ordinary rose bush but one that has, as the story goes, “sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door” (48). The mention of Ann Hutchinson here is significant for a number of reasons. Labeled a criminal by John Winthrop and other Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Hutchinson stands for Hawthorne as a symbol of righteous rebellion from tyrannical limitations on one’s freedom of religion. She serves, then, as a powerful figure for liberty, for self-reliance, and for civil disobedience to unjust laws, becoming a sort of Thoreau-like or even Rousseauvian heroine in her willingness to face exile and even death for rebelling against a tyrannical society. According to Rousseau, it is a citizen’s duty to rebel against a government that has violated the terms of the social contract and

who finds his liberty impeded against his will and to the detriment of his ability to function as a subject. Thoreau's essay "Resistance to Civil Government" echoes Rousseau's directive to rebel against a regime that does not provide benefits correlative with what the subject sacrifices in order to be part of civil society. The transgressive words and actions that make her a criminal to Winthrop and the other magistrates make her a hero to those who champion liberty and civil society and a "saint" to Hawthorne.

Hutchinson, though, is more than just an incidental champion and saint. In her refusal to submit to the customs and laws of the colonial government, she becomes the quintessential American subject—the rebel who refuses to subdue her excessive individualism and adhere to the rules of a society that has become corrupted from its initial Utopian ideal of freedom of religion. Her crimes become indicative of her steadfast adherence to her own individual morality, which, Hawthorne suggests, makes her a figure for future generations' adulation and respect.<sup>1</sup> Like countless fictional Americans created in her wake, Hutchinson gives up the benefits of citizenship in order to remain true to her own beliefs and morals, risking exile, starvation, Indian attacks, and the extreme difficulty of trying to survive outside of the bounds of society.

Of course, the fact that Hutchinson was not nor could ever become an equal citizen complicates this allusion, for, as a woman, she would be allowed legal citizenship but not on equal terms with men. Her sex, in fact, introduces another significant issue in the text, one that lies at the heart of this romance—the issue of women's status in America. Certainly I would not argue that sex and gender are Hawthorne's primary concerns, nor would I suggest that Hawthorne had any particular interest in women's suffragism. Indeed, Hawthorne himself was far more concerned with the degradation of the social

contract, the loss of individual liberty and self-reliance, the disappearance of piety, charity, and vitality from the American citizen/character/subject. Yet the early years of the colonies offered several transgressors from which Hawthorne could choose. Now, Hawthorne could have named Hutchinson simply because she and Hester are both women. But this is not so simple, for Hawthorne's project—to create a narrative history in order to supplement the official histories while also defending art as a valid and vital part of society—centers on transgressing women whose punishments were doled out by men whose principles have become irrevocably corrupt and who condemn anyone who refuses to heed their words. Hutchinson's own words, of course, sealed her fate, for not only did she rebel vocally, her intelligence and sharp wit during her trial proved that she was the intellectual superior of Winthrop, which must have added insult to injury, resulting ultimately in her banishment (Vowel 42-49). Hester's banishment, ironically, resulted from her silence rather than from her vocality. But this may be more a difference in form than in function, for while Hutchinson's revolt took the form of excessive words, Hester's takes the form of excessive silence: her words are to be found in her needlework rather than in her physical speech.

Hester's needlework creates for her a safe, isolated, domestic space in which she can interact with the community while still remaining outside of its bounds; however, while her embroidering represents a "quiet revolution" in the literal sense that she does not vocally rebel, both the narrative representation of Hester's performance in the chapter entitled "At Her Needle" and the fanciful images she creates place Hester's embroidery in the realm of signification, taking on and reflecting meaning. If Hester's embroidery



holds the power of signification, then it also becomes a voice in that it enters into a critical dialogue with the ideologies that structure Hester's community.

Indeed, we know that embroidery holds the power of signification in two ways: first through the performance itself; and second through the content created. On the one hand, since we know that the performance of embroidery was supposed to signify ideal femininity, and since performance, or "material practice" in Althusser's terms, is supposed to correspond to and represent ideology, then we might read Hester's performance as embroiderer as an embodiment of the ideology that produces the Feminine Ideal. We might assume that her "material practice" corresponds to patriarchal ideology and that she has become, finally, the good subject. Her superficial compliance, symbolized in her embroidery, may in fact be another reason the magistrates allow her to continue living as a part of the community, even if it is in relative isolation. On the surface, her "material practices" indicate compliance with both branches of the State Apparatuses, for if her performance of embroidery leads the magistrates to read her as embodying ideal femininity, then her past as "a force of darkness," as sinful and destructive as Eve, would seem to have given way to a present as "a force of life," as a saintly and selfless Virgin Mary. Hester's embroidery does make her "a force of life," for "she possessed an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for thriving infant and herself" (81). Her embroidery allows her to embody the ideal feminine as nineteenth-century ideology created it by making it her means for nurturing her child as does her choice to devote "all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them" (83).

Even more significant in the way that embroidery makes Hester appear as the Feminine Ideal is her supposedly penitent and perfectly selfless choice to use her time “in making coarse garments for the poor,” which “offered up a real sacrifice of enjoyment, in devoting so many hours to such rude handiwork” (83). Since these symbols of ideal femininity are so deliberately described, then it is tempting to see Hester as so many others have seen her: as a woman who begins as an image of feminine corruption and who transforms throughout the course of the story into ideal femininity. Carol Schafer, for example, calls Hester “an idealized matriarch whose loving nature and strength of character offer readers a vision of hope and salvation” (189). Adrienne Kalfopoulou, though she sees a revolutionary potential in Hester that Schafer denies, ultimately “insists that Hester’s true voice is ultimately appropriated by her author, as she retreats into silence and acquiescence” (881). By the end of the novel, it is true that her physical, literal “voice” recedes and that in the “Conclusion,” the overbearing narrative voice of “The Custom-House” reemerges to complete Hester’s rehabilitation by showing that she returns to Salem to “take up her badge of shame” voluntarily (262). Such interpretations, however, suggest that both recent critics like Schafer and Kalfopoulou and the narrator of the novel are unaware of the uncloseable and unresolvable issues with patriarchal ideology that Hester’s embroidery opens. These readings rely too heavily upon the superficial vision of ideal femininity imposed upon Hester by her selflessness, her nurturing motherhood, and, most importantly, her embroidery and consequently ignore the transgressive potential of the performance and the content.

While Hester’s embroidery generally does support the ideal femininity of which it is symbolic in that she does not embellish her own clothing and that she usually embroiders

only out of the practical necessity of providing sustenance for herself and Pearl, she does embellish the A, and Pearl's clothing she embroiders with a "fanciful," "fantastic ingenuity" (83). In Pearl's attire, the "rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic" of Hester's "nature" becomes through embroidery "a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life," even though "Like all other joys, she rejected it as sin" (83-84). If the pleasure of creating "gorgeously beautiful" things with her needle is a joy that must be "rejected" as sinful, then Hester's careful artistry both in the embellishment of her A and in Pearl's clothing suggests, possibly, that she questions the nature of sin as defined by patriarchal Puritan ideology. The narrator suggests, and many critics affirm, that there is a "morbid purpose" (90) in the way Hester's dresses Pearl and in the embellishment of her A. Because she deliberately draws attention to the emblem and product of her sin, they argue, Hester's fanciful embroidered works serve as a form of self-flagellation akin to Dimmesdale's, providing evidence that she sees and understands the crime she has committed, that she accepts the judgment and punishment imposed upon her, and that she symbolizes both ideal femininity and ideal piety. Certainly this interpretation is valid, and Hawthorne's usurpation of the narrative in the concluding chapter supports the idea that Hester does indeed repent and serve as a model for repentance, submissiveness, and passive acceptance of the ideological status quo. On the other hand, however, we know that the content of Hester's embroidery does not "conform to the ideal," and since "the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and if that is not the case, it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform," then we must attempt to understand what "other ideas" exist in Hester's "actions" (Althusser 126-27). If, moreover, the

subject's ideas do not conform to the "ruling ideology," then it suggests that the subject has not been entirely subjugated through the interpellation of the law and creates the possibility for "critical desubjectivation."<sup>2</sup> Hester's embroidery, because the content does not conform to the ideal and because her actions display that there are "ideas" guiding her actions other than those deemed appropriate by patriarchal ideology, not only implies that she may be undergoing a process of "critical desubjectivation" but also that urges that the reader undergo "critical desubjectivation" as well. Once we are able to step into this space of possibility, this space where the subject disentangles himself from the hail of the law and the guilty necessity of turning towards it, then we may begin to examine more carefully how the novel critiques the patriarchal ideology of colonial America.

Hester's embroidery reveals that a critique of patriarchal ideology is necessary. There are, additionally, several notable places in which the text problematizes patriarchy's mythical woman, allowing us to see a "change in the concept of sexual identity." Again, "The Custom-House" prepares the reader to comprehend the significance of Hester and her embroidery later in the text, introducing the idea that we must view our Puritan forefathers with critical eyes and focusing our attention upon the necessity of tough, enduring, rebellious women in the process of creating a more just society. Sitting just about the door of the Custom House, for example, is the "enormous specimen of the American eagle" who "hovers" over the building both menacingly and regally. She is described as follows:

Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With

the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes this unhappy fowl, she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community; and especially to warn all citizens, careful of their safety, against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking, at this very moment, to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow. But she has no great tenderness, even in her best of moods, and, sooner or later—oftener soon than late—is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrow. (5)

Indeed, Hawthorne seems to desire that his readers see the dangerous, violent, uncaring aspects of the eagle by selecting words like “truculency,” “mischief,” and “vixenly,” as well as by dashing his readers’ illusions that she will offer anyone “shelter” or provide a “healing presence.” It seems fairly clear that Hawthorne seeks to expose what he feels is the false illusion that the American government can and will shelter and protect any of its citizens. And yet might we not read the eagle as a metaphor for Hester as well? After all, Hester’s A is a sort of “shield before her breast.” She also has an “infirmity of temper” and is considered truculent in her attitude. Like the eagle, Hester seems “to threaten mischief” to the community who misjudges her “softness” and expect her to yield quietly first to giving up the name of Pearl’s father and later to giving up Pearl. Yet she resists them, and despite her usual “tenderness” in handling Pearl, Dimmesdale, and the less

fortunate members of the community for whom she provides charitable help and provisions, Hester reveals that, while she may have no “thunderbolts and barbed arrows” and while she may not have flung off her child, she has her own arrow in the form of her needle. With her needle, Hester created “an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself” (81), which must rankle like a “barbed arrow” in the breasts of those who believe she has not been properly disgraced, punished, or subdued.

Her very demeanor as she exits the prison suggests, in fact, that neither jail time nor the criminal “brand” nor the embarrassment of her illegitimate child—that “token of her shame”—has sufficed to squash the rebellious spirit out of her. In spite of the heavy male hand of authority upon her shoulder, “she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free-will” (52). In spite of the “burning blush” that spread across her face, with a “yet haughty smile, and a glance that wouldn’t be abashed, [she] looked around at her townspeople and neighbours” (52-53). The scene in which we are first introduced to Hester in the flesh establishes her as a rebellious, proud, dignified, self-willed woman whose demeanor and embroidery demonstrate that she does not represent the Feminine Ideal and, in fact suggests that she stands in opposition to that Ideal. The Ideal Woman kept her hands busy with embroidery—rather than with “bolts and arrows”—and her eyes cast down. Now, embroidery certainly kept Hester’s hands busy, but as a prisoner, her feminine act has little significance in relation to the Feminine Ideal as defined by American patriarchal ideology. Hester’s eyes are not downcast and humble but instead gaze evenly and unabashedly into the faces of her pious neighbors. These two details alone make it

impossible that she should represent the Feminine Ideal even though her embroidery links her indissolubly to it. Moreover, a careful investigation of the way that Hester embroiders—what she embroiders, how, and for whom—shows that her embroidery serves as an act of rebellion and a voice of critique far more significant than her defiant eyes and tightly closed mouth. For, though Hester refuses to speak her fellow sinner's name, though her voice does not, like Ann Hutchinson's, serve as a criticism of Puritan religious practices or patriarchy, her embroidery speaks for her, and her embroidery becomes an artistic engagement with the patriarchal ideology of her culture, creating a space in which ideology critique and the renegotiation of female subjectivity takes place.

That Hester's needlework expresses her subjectivity in opposition to patriarchal ideology seems obvious in the way the narrator describes it:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. (53)

This passage is significant for several reasons. First, the "elaborate" and "fantastic" embroidery, created from a fertile and luxurious imagination moves beyond the realm of the craft and reaches towards the status of art. In colonial America, women did not create art, so the fact that Hester's embroidery is allowed the status of art makes a noticeable albeit very subtle critique of patriarchal ideology, which denies that women have the

necessary imagination and intellect to create art. The embroidered “flourishes” of gold are not the product of pre-defined sampler patterns or copies of pre-existing art works or biblical scenes, which would have been the accepted and expected content of embroidery during colonial New England (Ulrich 27). This “artistically done” embroidery is the product of Hester’s own “gorgeous luxuriance of fancy,” a design that she created organically from her own imagination that, it appears, springs directly from her “inmost Me.” And Hester’s “inmost Me” contains “a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic—a taste for the gorgeously beautiful, which save in the exquisite productions of her needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon” (83). In fact, the embroidered “decoration to the apparel which she wore” reflects her rebellious spirit in that it defies the sumptuary laws of the colony and the unwritten law of mimetic embroidery. But Hester’s embroidery also offers her the only creative, expressive outlet for her “taste for the gorgeously beautiful” (83) and for her “gorgeous luxuriance of fancy” (53). These details are particularly significant, for they indicate first that Hester’s imagination desperately needs something “to exercise itself upon” and second that as a woman, she has virtually no way of doing so that would not demonize her even more (83). The Ideal Woman, after all, was not supposed to have such an imagination or such a taste for creating art, nor was she supposed to desire doing anything that served her own interests, needs, or desires. Finally, that her “elaborate embroidery” oversteps the bounds of “what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony” shows Hester’s blatant willingness to break the rules of her community (53). It demonstrates that her time in prison has done little to make her a “good subject” and indeed suggests that it has only further “enclos[ed] her in a sphere by herself” (54).



What is more, the “rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic” of her imagination that manifests in “the exquisite productions of her needle” suggests that embroidery provides not only a source of “support and satisfaction” for Hester but also “a covert means of negotiating the constraints of femininity” in which she can “make meanings of [her] own while overtly living up to the oppressive stereotype of the passive, silent, vain, and frivolous, even seductive needlewoman” (Beaudry 5). On the one hand, the act of embroidery serves as a performance of the Feminine Ideal, which leads to more lenient treatment by the men of the community. The men are, of course, more kindly disposed towards Hester than the women from the beginning. Hester’s youth and beauty certainly goes a long way in softening the men’s disposition towards her: ““this woman is youthful and fair, and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall’,” the magistrates explain, and, ““moreover, as is most likely, her husband may be at the bottom of the sea”” (63). The magistrates have mercy upon Hester in both cases because she is young, beautiful, and without a husband to keep her chaste. On the other hand, then, the act of embroidery may also symbolize “the seductive needlewoman,” for in colonial New England, “Women needed protection, not because they were innocent but because they were not. They were physically and sexually vulnerable, easily aroused, quick to succumb to flattery” (Ulrich 97).<sup>3</sup> If it was commonly accepted that “Women needed protection” because of their lack of innocence, then the magistrates’ leniency may result from their own recognition that both Hester’s absent husband and her current community, themselves included, did not properly protect Hester from herself.

Now, from Hawthorne’s mid-nineteenth-century standpoint, women are simply the “sweet moral blossom” of society, and despite the prevalent stereotype of “the seductive

needlewoman,” nineteenth-century novelists tended to use embroidery to embody women’s moral and spiritual superiority (Parker 8). In the Nineteenth Century, the health of the nation was gauged by the moral health of its women, or in women’s ability to create moral beings out of naturally aggressive and violent men. And one could interpret the focus on women in this romance, and especially the focus on their transgressions, as either an admonishment to women who were not doing their duty as the moral centers of society or a critique of a nation whose policies are crippling women’s ability to be moral at all. Like the stagnant atmosphere of the Custom House that corrupts young, active, inspired men, turning them into useless, sleepy old men, the stagnant “rootedness” of patriarchal America corrupts the very beings who are supposed to be in charge of the moral health of the nation, rotting the bud of morality before it blossoms. Regardless of Hawthorne’s intention, however, the text itself seems to offer a meaning far in excess of this charge against the vitality and morality of the nation. For, if Hawthorne wants to create a narrative history of America’s origins, then the fact that he placed rebellious, transgressive women in such prominent positions in the text suggests that, while it may have been man’s rebellion against injustice and tyranny that drove the founding of this country, it was women’s rebellions that shaped the country as it developed.

Women, in fact, figure prominently in the primary scene of punishment with which the romance opens. Hawthorne introduces us to a society where only “[m]eagre . . . sympathy” would be offered to a “transgressor” of their rigid laws and customs, and since women are supposed to be the tender and sympathetic members of a society, the fact that they “appeared to take a peculiar interest in whatever penal infliction might be expected to ensue” (50) suggests something more significant about their role in society. These

women, “those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding,” are of a “coarser fibre” than their nineteenth-century counterparts. And though they are less refined than nineteenth-century women, they are also hardier:

for, throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother has transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity, than her [the women of Hawthorne’s time] own. The women, who were now standing about the prison-door, stood within less than half a century of the period when the man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of the sex. They were her countrywomen; and the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet not a whit more refined, entered largely into their composition. The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks, that had ripened in the far-off island, and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England. There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech month these matrons, as most of them seemed to be, that would startle us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone.  
(50-51)

Echoing the ambiguous tone that Hawthorne takes towards his Puritan ancestry in “The Custom-House,” this description of the colonial women asks the reader to recognize the complexity of “these matrons” who, like the early Puritan culture of the colonies, cannot be labeled simply as “good” or “evil.” They may be less “delicate,” but they are more

robust. They may have an unrefined “moral diet,” but their characters have more “force” and “solidity.” The women of Hawthorne’s time, he seems to lament, have lost the strength of both body and character that defined their ancestresses, and if they are not “altogether unsuitable” representatives of their sex, as “the man-like Elizabeth,” then the implication is that it may be precisely the loss of the “man-like,” or masculine, qualities of those early women which makes nineteenth-century women seem weak by comparison. Just as Hawthorne laments his own less forceful and auspicious masculinity in comparison to his sword and Bible carrying ancestors, he appears to lament also a loss of strength and force in the women. In other words, Hawthorne seems to suggest that women should have some “man-like” qualities, and if women should have some “man-like” qualities, then we can infer that the above description also provides a critique of the Feminine Ideal so prevalent in the nineteenth century. The Feminine Ideal of nineteenth-century America, after all, requires women to suppress and erase any qualities that might be classified as masculine, including “boldness and rotundity of speech,” robust and “broad” shouldered bodies, forceful and solid characters, any qualities affiliated with ruling or leadership, personality traits like aggression, argumentativeness, or a desire to actively pursue self-interest, and, perhaps most significantly, the imagination, intellect, and vision necessary to create great art.

Yet there appears to be far greater implications for women in the Nineteenth Century, especially when one considers two things: one, that the protagonist of the romance is a woman whose physical and moral strength compliment her artistic activities, which in turn enable her to live as an outcast; and two, that Hawthorne often and vehemently expressed his disdain for the “damned mob of scribbling women” of his own time.<sup>4</sup>

While the connection between these ideas may not seem obvious, since *The Scarlet Letter* can be read in part as a forum for Hawthorne to exercise and argue for his own aesthetic vision, and since the Puritan colonial past offers his imagination the food it requires to flourish, we can infer a sort of didactic message to Hawthorne's artistic contemporaries in general and to literary women in particular. Yet the lesson also appears directed, more broadly, at a critique of the Feminine Ideal and the society that created it. Just as nineteenth-century American society has sapped the virulent masculinity that Hawthorne associates with his Puritan ancestors, it has also sapped the "man-like" qualities from its women. Women of Hawthorne's time—women whose bodies and minds have been shaped according to the Feminine Ideal—have lost the robustness of body and character that defined their English-bred ancestresses. Their ancestresses may have been more coarse and unrefined, but that very coarseness made them capable of both enduring the harshness of the New England climate and of withstanding and even sometimes rebelling against the male authority figures who sought to restrain and constrain them. For, the Feminine Ideal constrains female subjectivity and restrains it from functioning independently or autonomously. And if the citizen-subject by definition functions independently and autonomously, then women who embody the Feminine Ideal of the Nineteenth Century cannot be citizens. Ann Hutchinson, one of those "man-like," forceful, solid, robust colonial women, and her literary counterpart—Hester—exhibit the rebellious, tenacious, independent characteristics signified in the rosebush, which suggests that they and women like them contain the qualities necessary for citizenship, qualities that exist in excess of the Feminine Ideal. The Feminine Ideal, after all, is but a *supplement*,<sup>5</sup> an inferior and inauthentic symbol of woman that seeks to conceal and erase

the essence of human subjectivity by creating woman as an object and denying her interiority and subject-hood. And if she cannot be a subject, then she certainly cannot become a citizen.

The possibility for a female citizen, or at least for a woman who rejects the supplementary identity allotted to her by the Feminine Ideal risks harsh punishment for asserting her independence from the constraints imposed by that Ideal. Strangely, some of the harshest reactions against women whose independence leads to transgression of social norms and laws are exhibited in the other female members of the society. Ulrich details several court proceedings against transgressing women in which the other women in the community demand far worse punishments than the men actually dole out. Likewise, the goodwives of colonial Salem, like their actual historical counterparts, express their anger that Hester's punishment was not more severe.

The uncanny composure with which she meets her persecutory neighbors, however, in addition to the "SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom" actually "had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself" (54). Significantly, Hawthorne removes Hester from the "normal" sphere of human action and interaction, setting her apart by her appearance, her demeanor, her imaginative artistry, and her "rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic." In other words, Hester becomes firmly established as a romantic protagonist, and if she is a romantic protagonist, then the very enhanced sensitivity of her mind, emotions, and fancy as well as the exile she undergoes necessarily allow her the ability and the right to turn a critical eye—and critical hands—upon the self-righteous and unsympathetic multitudes that surround her. But the

“illuminated” letter and Hester’s dignified defiance draw the especial anger of the village women. To them Hester is a marked woman, and the physical mark of ignominy that she wears on her bosom should serve to chastise and shame her into groveling, humble submission. And Hester’s embellishment of the mark of shame serves to mark her even more noticeably as different, as unlike them, as Other, which they can only perceive as an attack on themselves and the patriarchal, Puritan morality that so rigidly limits and defines their lives. ““It were well,”” grumbles “the most iron-visaged of the old dames, ‘if we stripped Madam Hester’s rich gown off her dainty shoulders; and as for the red letter, which she hath stitched so curiously, I’ll bestow a rag of mine own rheumatic flannel, to make a fitter one!’” (54). It would be more “fit,” these women believe, if Hester had used a plain, poor piece of rag to mark her shame—more “fit” according to sumptuary laws; more “fit” according to Puritan asceticism; more “fit” for a woman whose shameful transgression should make her desire to be as unremarkable and invisible as possible but who instead draws attention to herself and to her transgression by using shining, glittering gold thread to make her badge of crime into a beautiful, subversive work of art.

It is as if, in fact, Hester desires to call attention to her crime, as if her artistic embroidery were designed specifically to draw accusatory eyes toward her body in an act far more subtly defiant than wresting her shoulder away from the officer who leads her out of the prison and far more damaging to the vengeful hopes of the other women than her physical beauty not “dimmed or obscured by a disastrous cloud” as they had expected (53). Every aspect of Hester—her appearance, her behavior, her artistry—destroys the community’s expectations and invites their anger and persecution. But, the text, rather than suggesting that Hester is properly sensitive to this punishment and interiorizes the

guilt in any significant way, she, “[k]nowing well her part,” takes her place on the stage where the drama of her crime will play out. By casting this scene as a scene in a play and by making Hester an actress who only plays her “part,” the text constructs Hester as one who only goes through the performative motions of the convicted criminal rather than as one who genuinely feels herself to be the criminal adulteress that she has been labeled. Moreover, arguing that Hester actually interiorizes her criminality and identifies herself as such denies the subversive possibilities of the bad subject and closes the space of ideology critique that her embroidery opens. For, the space of ideology critique opened when Hester’s “inmost Me” peeks out from behind the veil of the Feminine Ideal created by her dignity, her seeming adherence to a proper sphere of feminine employment—embroidery—, and her physical beauty is a space into which the reader may step. And the careful reader can see that the space opened is so wide that Hawthorne cannot close it.

The text, then, offers a careful reader the opportunity to investigate critically why these women seem so cruelly disposed towards Hester. Admittedly, it is difficult to look past the cruel, penal demands of these wives who, had ““the hussy [Hester] stood up for judgement [sic] before us five, that are not here in a know together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!”” (51). Indeed, had these women had the power to decide Hester’s fate, they would have ““[a]t the very least . . . put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead’,” and, at the very most, would have put her to death since there is ““a law for it”” (51). The way the goodwives are presented here—as “gossips” who have “no virtue . . . save what springs from the gallows” (52)—seems designed specifically to align them with the cruel



and bloodthirsty men described in “The Custom-House” who harm simply because they can.

Now, the goodwives may very well inflict harm simply because they can, but there exists a far more significant reason for their vengefulness, and that reason lies within their dialogue: ““What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead?’ cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. ‘This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it?’” (51). It is indeed tempting to interpret the narrator’s description of these women as entirely negative. Such an interpretation, however, obscures the actual circumstances of colonial women’s lives that make such cruel vengeance against transgressing women part of their very survival. For, though women in colonial America held a slightly more elevated status and were seen, if not as the equals of men, as at least capable of undertaking men’s duties when necessary, unlike their infantilized nineteenth-century counterparts, women in the colonial era were viewed as potentially polluting forces who were responsible for man’s fall and who, consequently, must be denied independence and freedom and must be punished severely and immediately for any transgression relating to sexual misconduct (Ulrich 42-50). It was not men who were responsible for sexual crimes against women, nor were men responsible for having inappropriate sexual relationships with women. According to the mentality of colonial Puritans, men were aggressive, uncontrolled, and sexually desirous by nature and so could not be blamed for sexual transgressions. Women, therefore, must be responsible for conducting themselves in a way that discouraged sexual advances, and any sexual advances that women did not resist—regardless of whether the sex act was an

act of rape or of consent—were ultimately blamed upon the women themselves. Members of oppressed groups, because they are denied power over their own lives, because they are, in a sense, denied subjectivity by their oppressors, will turn against members of their own group if they perceive that the minimal and marginal rights that they have been able to keep as oppressed peoples are being threatened by one transgressive individual. The transgression of one individual could be used by the oppressors as a reason for retaliating against the entire group, and so to avoid punishment by association, the oppressed will turn against their own.

The goodwives who demand such harsh punishment for Hester operate under this mentality. ““This woman has brought shame upon us all’,” one says, and this statement stands as a key to understanding these women and as a reason for judging them far more sympathetically than the narrator does. If one woman commits adultery, then so might others, and the women in colonial Salem live in far too precarious of a situation, have far too little independence, and have far too few rights to risk losing any of their “meager” rights because one refuses to embody the Ideal of the “goodwife.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, by the time this book was being written, the Feminine Ideal in America had undergone substantial changes. Gone were both the “good and evil” aspects of women’s status in colonial America. Whereas women in colonial America had a more equal partnership with their husbands, they also were labeled as the origin of all sin and thus were treated as potentially evil and corrupting influences. And whereas women in nineteenth-century America were labeled as the “moral blossoms” of society and thus were held responsible for the moral health of the nation, they had also lost the relative equality they had enjoyed in the colonial past. Women in Hawthorne’s time, then, were even less capable of being

citizens than they had been during the era that created women like Anne Hutchinson and Hester Prynne.

Hawthorne, of course, cannot imagine a world in which women can be citizens or even independent subjects. He, like Rousseau, believes that the Feminine Ideal should complement Man, that her softness and morality will balance his aggression and immorality. Hawthorne's Feminine Ideal makes woman the supplement of man, his "*raison d'être*."<sup>7</sup> She supplements his subjectivity by infusing it with "moral blossoms," and in return, he acts as the patriarchal protector of her virtue. Indeed the end of the novel demonstrates what appears to be Hawthorne's conception of the Feminine Ideal—a woman whose natural "recklessness," whose "wild and picturesque peculiarity" have been tamed by a solitary, self-reflective life of isolation and selfless, charitable work. This Ideal Woman retains the robust independence of mind and strength of body of her uncouth ancestresses but also develops the selfless compassion and moderate morality of her nineteenth-century descendants. We cannot, in fact, look to Hester entirely as the space of possibility from which ideology critique issues and from which citizenship can arise. We must, rather, look at Pearl as the critical, independent force of subjectivity that makes up a necessary part of the citizen-subject, for it is Pearl, like Ann Hutchinson, who rebels against the patriarchal system and thereby allows a space for ideology critique to be created. Once that space is opened and critique begins, moreover, the possibility for an American female citizen emerges.

In fact, Hawthorne's very choice of language opens the space of possibility from which a critical female subjectivity and possibly a Female Citizen can emerge.

Hawthorne, as we know, was himself critiquing certain aspects of both Puritan colonial

ideology and nineteenth-century ideology through this text. As “The Custom-House” makes clear, things are not all well in the City on the Hill, nor have they been entirely well since the initial founding of the colonies. Active, self-reliant citizenship has been destroyed by a too-active government and a too little active citizenry. The reader is made firmly aware before even turning the first page of the romance that the text proposes to offer a criticism of both current and past American society. But so many who have read and written about this text can only see its critique of *The Citizen* in general or of the *Male Citizen*, denying or ignoring the possibility for a female citizen-subject who can refuse the interpellative hail as well as or even better than her male counterpart. Not only has Hawthorne created the possibility for a male citizen to refuse the hail, however, he has also created that possibility for a female citizen whose very crime, whose refusal of the hail, is indicated in the suggestion that she perform the motions without actually believing in the ideology that requires them. Hester’s artwork along with her refusal to speak the name of Pearl’s father shows that she yet resists that hail. Ironically, here, good citizenship seems equated with the “good subject” who turns toward the hail and thus becomes fully interpellated as a properly docile body that adheres to the unwritten laws of ideology. For, when the narrator describes the scaffold and stocks erected to punish transgressive “bad subjects,” the reader becomes aware that this “platform of pillory” with its horrible “instrument of discipline, so fashioned as to confine the human head in its tight grasp” is, like the cemetery and the prison, indicative of a corrupt and inhumane society. “[T]his scaffold,” the narrator tells us, “constituted a portion of a penal machine, which now, for two or three generations past, has been merely historical and traditionary among us, but was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent in the promotion of

good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France” (55). But “good citizenship” in this context means faithfully believing in, following rigorously, and rigidly obeying the laws and customs of society. The “penal machine” of the pillory, like the guillotine in France, becomes an instrument not of self-reliant, independent citizenship but an instrument of blindly faithful, dependent subjection in which “good citizenship” means the empty performance of the rituals of ideology and the absence of critical engagement with those ideologies.

Since “The Custom-House” has already asked us to be critical of the Puritan’s “harsh severity” towards transgressive women, and since these first two chapters of the romance have asked us to be critical of the blind, un-self-reflective vindictiveness of the village women, then the text asks us to be critical of a social ideology that removes the power of critical, subjective engagement with the world from half of its members, thereby effectively denying them even the possibility of becoming full subjects or citizens. The women of this community “obey!” and they do not question why. These women have no power to refuse the hail because any indication that they might do so results in the swift and severe activation of the “penal machine” and the wrath of the “terrorists” who operate it. And though Hester seems to silently accept her ritual punishment, wordlessly ascending the pillory platform without visible or audible resistance, nevertheless her embroidery suggests that she does not entirely “act according to [her] ideas” (Althusser 122).

If she does not “act according to her ideas,” then we must assume that she has already begun to dissociate herself from the ideas—or, rather the ideology—that justifies placing her upon the pillory in the first place. It also suggests, though, that Hester’s public

punishment has not turned her into the “good subject.” There is no doubt, of course, that at the beginning of the novel, Hester is the bad subject, for her regular time on the pillory as well as her exile result from her criminal violation of the sexual laws of her community. The Repressive State Apparatus, embodied in the magistrates who, though they have not “put in force the extremity of [their] righteous law against her” by sentencing her to death (63), have intervened because she is a subject who does not “work alright by herself.” Yet Hester’s imprisonment and subsequent punishment do not cow her effectively, for she yet refuses to name the father of her child. And since naming, as Althusser explains, functions as the hail of ideology that interpellates the subject, then the fact that Hester refuses to name the father of her child suggests that she is critical of the ideology that drives the magistrates to demand her acquiescence and that her child may in fact escape interpellation into the rigid patriarchal ideology of Puritan colonial America. Hester’s adamant refusal to speak, moreover, shows that she remains the bad subject, for unlike the “(good) subjects” who “are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs” and who “‘recognize’ the existing state of affairs . . . and that they must be obedient” (Althusser 135), Hester refuses to “recognize” the legitimacy of “the existing state of affairs” and will not “be obedient.”

Hester’s disobedience, though, appears righteous—she enacts Thoreau’s model of civil disobedience in her obstinate silence, a model which the reader easily recognizes and already sees as righteous because of the preparatory work done by “The Custom-House.” Because the prefatory sketch has already turned the readers against our stern Puritan forefathers—embodied in the magistrates who dole out Hester’s sentence—then her rebellion seems righteous and turns our critical eye toward the already decaying

ideological values of the community. Her embroidery, when it appears, guides us, showing us the space of possibility from which we may critique ideology and directing our critical gaze at the customs, behaviors, and ideologies of which we should be critical. For instance, Hester's embroidery appears conspicuously upon the bodies of respected community members, suggesting that the sumptuary laws which so rigidly dictated the "sable simplicity that generally characterized the Puritanic modes of dress" (82) have already begun to crumble:

Public ceremonies, such as ordinations, the installation of magistrates, and all that could give majesty to the forms in which a new government manifested itself to the people, were, as a matter of policy, marked by a stately and well-conducted ceremonial, and a somber, but yet studied magnificence. Deep ruffs, painfully wrought bands, and gorgeously embroidered gloves, were all deemed necessary to the official state of men assuming the reins of power; and were readily allowed to individuals dignified by rank or wealth, even while sumptuary laws forbade these and similar extravagances to the plebian order. In the array of funerals, too, — whether for the apparel of the dead body, or to typify, by manifold emblematic devices of sable cloth and snowy lawn, the sorrow of the survivors,—there was a frequent and characteristic demand for such labor as Hester Prynne could supply. (82-83)

The passage indicates a prominent incongruity between the ascetism that Puritans are supposed to embody and the lavish "ruffs" and "bands" and "embroidered gloves" with which they embellish their appearances, demonstrating that corruption and hypocrisy in

the “material practices” of the “individuals dignified by rank or wealth” have already begun to chip away at the ideological core of the community. Even further evidence for such corruption lies in the tone of the above passage, which is decidedly ironic and leads us to recognize that there is something inherently hypocritical in seeking and displaying such “extravagances.” If those who stand as the figureheads of society—both morally and politically—do not set a proper example for their subjects, if their behavior becomes criminal and thereby deserving of criticism, then the subjects who rebel against their corrupt ideas and behavior become positive forces who undermine and sometimes destroy the decaying “rootedness” that frequently drives such corruption and hypocrisy.

Our ability to see and understand the inherent criticism of “rootedness” as well as the critique of patriarchal Puritan ideology results from Hester’s needlework. Observing her actions and the content of her embroidery reveals the falseness of the ideological system that dilutes the robust, imaginative human being into the passive, empty-headed Feminine Ideal of nineteenth-century America. But “The Custom-House” creates a necessary link among Hawthorne’s own story, the history of America and its colonial ancestors, Hester’s story, Puritan ideology, and the American subject. The injuries that Hawthorne suffered at the hands of political machination within his own office reflect the injuries that Hester suffers at the hands of the magistrates and the townspeople. “But it is a strange experience,” he said as he began to feel the persecutory influences of the political changeover that lead finally to his removal from his official post,

to a man of pride and sensibility, to know that his interests are within the control of individuals who neither love nor understand him, and by whom, since one or the other must needs happen, he would rather be injured than



obliged. Strange, too, for one who has kept his calmness throughout the contest, to observe the bloodthirstiness that is developed in the hour of triumph, and to be conscious that he himself is among its objects! There are few uglier traits of human nature than this tendency—which I now witnessed in men no worse than their neighbors—to grow cruel, merely because they possessed the power of inflicting harm. (40-41)

While his statements here are overtly directed at the Whig party's "cruel" supporters, I would argue that these lines also apply to Hester and her treatment by the magistrates and the townspeople who treat her cruelly "merely because they possessed the power of inflicting harm" (41). Like our narrator, Hester also has "pride and sensibility," and like our narrator, her "interests are within the control of individuals who neither love nor understand" her. As our narrator would "rather be injured than obliged," so too would Hester, which we can infer from the way that she handles the insults of the goodwives, as she turns her cheek to those less fortunate villagers who insult her while they accept her charity, as she advises Pearl to ignore the taunts of the village children. And if Hawthorne sees his own removal from office as a benefit, as offering a "remedy and consolation" rather than a "misfortune," then we might also see Hester's exile from the village as a "remedy and consolation" as well and look to understand what benefits she receives from her removal. The ways in which he benefitted, he tells us, were both intellectual and spiritual, and stimulated his ability to create art. The primary benefit, he implies, is an increased freedom of those intellectual and spiritual faculties that had, ironically, made him ill-suited for the official post in the first place—his "tendency to roam, at will, in that broad and quiet field where all mankind may meet, rather than confine himself to those

narrow paths where brethren of the same household must diverge from one another” made him a problematic Surveyor even when his own political party was in favor (42). His inability, or unwillingness to conform himself to the “narrow paths” of either the political doctrine of his party or the professional doctrine of his office ill-fit him for the job, but they also ill-fit him for confining himself into conformity in general. In other words, our narrator is too self-reliant, too independent, too free-thinking to conform to the ideology of any established institution, be it Custom House or Puritan colony, and such independence and isolation are required to make great art. They are also necessary, however, to enable us to embody the refusal of the bad subject to “work” according to an ideological system that subjugates us entirely, to enter that “space of possibility” in which ideology critique is possible so that we may undergo a process of “critical desubjectivation” and discover new possibilities for being and subjectivity.

Hester’s embroidery, her defiance, opens this space, creating the possibility for the “critical desubjectivation” that can lead to an “ethical existence” by embodying the bad subject. She draws “the intervention of an arm of the (Repressive) State Apparatus” and she is held up by it as an example of “the taint of human sin in the most sacred quality of human life” so that “the world was only darker for this woman’s beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne” (56). Hester, in other words, cannot embody the Feminine Ideal, for the “image of Divine Maternity,” which formed an irreducible part of the Feminine Ideal, was corrupted by a child not born from “Divine” power and grace but from “human sin” and frailty. Yet Hester is anything but frail. What the narrator terms “sin” stemmed from a sexual act that resulted because a young, beautiful, passionate, wild-spirited woman followed her human instincts rather than adhered to the rigid rules

of a corrupt patriarchy. Indeed, Hester's sexual transgression, I would argue, can be classified as a Romantic act and one that firmly establishes her as a protagonist who embodies the Romantic ideals of self-isolation, highly developed sensibilities, and rebellion against unjust and corrupt social ideologies and laws. Her case surely demonstrates that colonial society is indeed in transition, evidenced by the fact that her punishment was far less severe than what the law allows. Not only does Hester's embroidery defy sumptuary laws, the punishment administered to her in addition to the magistrates' leniency and ultimate incorporation of Hester's embroidery into their own clothing suggests that Hester's story signifies a community in flux. This community demonstrates a particular historical moment when dependence upon material pleasures and goods begins to replace self-reliant independence and self-sufficiency, when Americans began to redefine their reliance upon religion and imagination with a reliance upon social status and practical materialism, when externally defined wealth and material dependence began to replace internal wealth and self-reliance. Congruent with the rise of *amour propre* and the material definition of success, of course, was the transformation of the Feminine Ideal from one that depended upon internal qualities like economy, charity, and piety to external qualities like delicacy, gentile manners, and ornamental beauty—in other words, when women ceased being the hardy, beautiful but thorny rose bush, the fierce but maternal eagle, and became the refined, hyper-sensitive, ornamental orchid, the soft eider-duck whose soft, tender bosom is meant to succor and sustain. Hawthorne's romance participates in this redefinition of women and unfortunately assists in the creation of the nineteenth-century Feminine Ideal. And while Hawthorne may have been critical himself of the way that Ideal was constructed, as his descriptions of these hardy

women suggest, he obviously believed that women, while they should be valued as the “moral blossoms” of society, had no business asking for any kind of independence or autonomy. Hawthorne, much like Rousseau, believed that women were incapable of autonomy, that they were formed FOR men and as the complements of men. Femininity should be defined in opposition to masculinity, and the only “man-like” qualities acceptable in women were those that allow her to resist and defy injustice when she saw it so that she could remain the “moral blossom.”

Indeed, then we might read this text as a lesson Hawthorne has provided for the women of his time, especially those “damned scribbling women” whose works dwarfed his own both in sales and in proliferation. Like his sketch “Mrs. Hutchinson,” *The Scarlet Letter* may serve as a warning to women who dare to defy the constraints of the Feminine Ideal by aggressively seeking independence and success in their own rights through their art. Such flouting of social customs, the text seems to warn, can only result in sin, shame, exile, poverty, and a “darker” world. The works written by those “damned scribbling women” become aligned with Hester’s child, and Hawthorne seems to imply that the world will be “darker” and “more lost” for the literary “children” born of these women’s fancies. Women’s beauty, both of body and mind, are, after all, only to be enjoyed by the men to whom they belong, and this beauty belongs in the privacy of the home, not traipsed out through the community to be held up on the pillory of public shame. If women must exercise their imaginations in artistic ways, then it should be appropriately directed towards the selfless beautification of the home and family. And while readers in the Nineteenth Century (and, indeed, many in the Twentieth) could satisfy themselves with this moral lesson about the dangers of allowing women to live without the paternal

protection of men and the consequences of uncontrolled passions and fancies, today's readers can examine how this romance stands as a monumental moment in the creation of a rebellious American female subjectivity.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Hawthorne was actually a great critic of Anne Hutchinson, roundly chastising her and her rebelliousness in his essay "Mrs. Hutchinson." The way he presents her in *The Scarlet Letter*, however, is almost idealistic. While no satisfying reason exists to explain why Hawthorne characterizes Hutchinson so differently in these two texts, I would suggest that, as he does in his description of the hardy women who populate colonial America, Hawthorne wants his readers to be aware of both the good and bad qualities in people, places, traditions, and "customs." Therefore, while he may describe and explore Hutchinson's bad qualities in his essay "Mrs. Hutchinson," in the *Scarlet Letter*, he focuses on her good qualities.

<sup>2</sup>"Critical desubjectivation" is a term defined by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Butler proposes a scenario of being in which the subject need not remain subjugated to the law. The subject, having been inside the law—or, in other words, having been interpellated into the identity categories of the law of ideology—turns a critical eye upon that law, turning away from it rather than hearkening to the hail. The subject then becomes just being without the negating powers of identity categories produced by ideology.

<sup>3</sup>Ulrich investigates court transcripts detailing cases in which colonial courts doled out more lenient punishments for young women, especially those who had no prominent male guardian, though the death penalty was the legal punishment for adultery. For example, in 1663, a young, newly married woman by the name of Mary Rolfe was sexually assaulted by a visiting Englishman named John Greenland. While women were frequently blamed and punished for sexual transgressions—even rape—Rolfe's attacker was convicted instead, and she was exonerated. The justification given in the court records for this unusual outcome is as follows: left alone by her husband who had gone on a sea journey, "Her dilemma was created by the coexistence in one rural village of a hierarchical social order (by no means limited to New England), a conservative religious tradition (not exclusively Puritan), and sex-linked patterns on sociability (rooted in English folkways). All three elements determined her behavior. Accustomed to deference—to her mother, to her husband, to the selectman next door—she was easily dazzled by the genteel appearance and apparent good name of Greenland. What right had she to question his behavior? Though taught to fear God, she had not yet acquired the kind of confidence in her own sense of right which propelled her mother to challenge both a popular gentleman and a respected neighbor by bringing the case to court. Finally, in her easy compliance with Greenland's initial advances, Mary Rolfe was responding to a lifetime of instruction in femininity" (93). Ulrich's explanation of the unusual verdict in Mary Rolfe's case also illuminates Hester's rather lenient treatment as well as suggests that her affair with Dimmesdale was, ironically, an act of compliance with social norms rather than a crime against them. Hester, like Rolfe, was young and trained in the English ways of femininity, hospitality, and deference. Like Rolfe, she must have been "dazzled" by Dimmesdale's sensibility and eloquence and probably felt no right to "question his behavior." Hester also was "responding to a lifetime of instruction in femininity," which would have taught her to defer to a man's wishes and commands, to make herself agreeable to him. Overawed by Dimmesdale's charisma, his seeming godliness, his inspiring words, his kindness, and his probably longed-for masculine attentions, one would almost have to ask how any young, abandoned woman in Hester's position could have resisted.

<sup>4</sup>Hawthorne actually repeated this phrase more than once. The first record of it is in a letter to his publisher, William D. Ticknor, in 1855.

<sup>5</sup>Here, I'm using Jean Jacques Rousseau's conception of the *supplement* rather than Derrida's. For Rousseau, the *supplement* was complementary but inferior to the category of the Real.

<sup>6</sup>According to Ulrich, a good wife would be defined by such abstract values as "Holiness," "Public-Spiritidness," "Faithfulness and Charity," "Neighbourliness," and "Chastity." The true good wife, though, is one who would be notable or noted only in her epitaph, for "A good wife earned the dignity of anonymity" (3).

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<sup>7</sup>In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir describes how women, because they remain mysterious to men, because neither their experiences nor their subjectivities have been allowed into discourse, become like mythic creatures to men: “The myth is so various, so contradictory, that at first its unity is not discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena—woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man’s prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation, his *raison d’être*” (303).

### CHAPTER III

#### “SENSELESS OLD MAIDEN WAYS:” NEEDLEWORK AND THE REJECTION OF FEMININITY IN MARY WILKIN’S “A NEW ENGLAND NUN”

“A New England Nun,” by noted New England Regionalist Mary Wilkins Freeman, has received much critical attention during the past thirty years, primarily investigated either as the tale of a neurotic woman whose unfounded fear of her sexuality leads her into a tragic denial of life, or as the tale of a heroic woman whose celebratory rejection of her sexuality and social role leads her into a glorious, self-imposed spinsterhood. David H. Hirsch, for example, in his essay “Subdued Meaning in ‘A New England Nun,’” uses archetypal criticism and psychoanalytic theory to argue that Louisa’s old dog, Caesar, “can be taken as a phallic substitute” and that “the unjustified terror inspired by a manacled Caesar suggests that the price paid for unqualified repression of sexual impulses is fear and anxiety” (116). Ben Couch, moreover, argues that the way Louisa treats Caesar, the way she over exaggerates his ferocity, “transformed him from a simple chained dog into a powerful image of sexuality,” that Louisa also exaggerates in order to justify avoiding it (188). Even Freeman’s most recent biographer, Leah Blatt Glasser, who proclaims in her preface that she will be providing a feminist reading of Freeman and her fiction, accepts Hirsch’s popular claim, saying that “A New England Nun” is about “repressed sexuality” (32). Whereas most investigations of the story focus exclusively upon Louisa’s repressed sexuality as a fearful avoidance, symbolized by her pets and by her meticulously ordered domestic space, I find, rather, that Louisa’s needlework illuminates her avoidance of sexual initiation as a refusal of the hail of the law that exposes the subtle ways women in late nineteenth-century America negotiated

the social-sexual roles imposed upon them by patriarchal ideology. Louisa's sewing—both in her performance and in the content she produces—can offer new insight not only into the metaphoric connection between her sexuality and her dog but also into the oppressive ideology that forced fictional representations of women's transgressions against American patriarchy to manifest in subtly constructed metaphors rather than in narrative renditions of overt crime.

The possibility that Louisa's sewing represents a conscious, active, even violent refusal of the patriarchal ideology of late nineteenth-century America—passive wife, selfless mother, dependent woman, chaste lover; in other words, all the characteristics that the Feminine Ideal portrays—has thus far been overlooked. Violence and active agency do not, indeed, seem to hold a primary place in “A New England Nun.” In fact, the narrative itself seems to obscure the hints of violence by focusing instead on “the soft air,” on the “soft,” “slow and still” habits and movements of the protagonist, the “methodical orderliness” of her home and solitary life. Previous critics of the story focus on the “serenity and placid narrowness,” the peaceful quiet with which the story ends. They view this end with suspicion, showing what Simone de Beauvoir articulates as man's inevitable “repugnance” for the “mystery” of a woman who “has bloomed and faded without finding a place in the world of men” (*The Second Sex* 311); but they are also pacified by the knowledge that Louisa “sat prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun” (17). For, if her sexuality has been denied to men, at least it has been safely “caged” and devoted, if informally, to God. Yet even those who do not aggressively deprecate Louisa's choice of spinsterhood read it pessimistically as a senseless and wasteful denial of the self, of life, of vitality and agency. For example,



Hirsch argues that Louisa's personality is neurotic and compulsive. Her compulsive personality, Hirsch concludes, leads her to reject Joe and to accept "the price that must be paid for the rejection of life" (115). He, like so many men who view spinsterhood as "repugnant," or at least as "arbitrary and useless" as her need for domestic order (108), sees Louisa's acceptance of spinsterhood as a material loss, implied by his use of economic terminology.

More recent feminist critics, on the other hand, read the ending of "A New England Nun" positively as an uncomplicated and happy avoidance of domestic responsibility and of sexual maturity. Susan Allen Toth values protagonists like Louisa because they demonstrate an "emphasis on the positive drive towards fulfillment that motivates her strong characters, a fulfillment of what they believe to be their own true selves" (in *Critical Essays* 128). Further, Marjorie Pryse argues that Louisa "establishes her own home as the limits of her world, embracing rather than fleeing domesticity; discovering in the process that she can retain her autonomy" by maintaining her virginity (*Critical Essays* 139). Louisa's virginity may be safe, and her ending may be peaceful. But peace does not reign throughout the entire story, and no critic as of yet has taken the trouble to look more deeply into the violence and blood that characterize Louisa's terrible fantasy about her dog beyond seeing Caesar and the blood as Louisa's shy and dispassionate avoidance of sexual maturity.

But sexual maturity, the breaking of the hymen in particular, often occurs through violence. This breaking, moreover, serves as a necessary step, a necessary initiation into a woman's new life in which the blood of the broken hymen will be followed by the blood of childbirth. And Louisa's vision of Caesar freed seethes with blood and violence:

Caesar at large might have seemed a very ordinary dog, and excited no comment whatever; chained, his reputation overshadowed him, so that he lost his own proper outlines and looked darkly vague and enormous. Joe Dagget, however, with his good-humored sense and shrewdness, saw him as he was. He strode valiantly up to him and patted him on the head, in spite of Louisa's soft clamor of warning, and even attempted to set him loose. Louisa grew so alarmed that he desisted, but kept announcing his opinion in the matter quite forcibly at intervals. 'There ain't a better natured dog in town,' he would say, 'and it's downright cruel to keep him tied up there. Some day I'm going to take him out.'

Louisa had very little hope that he would not, one of these days, when their interests and possessions should be more completely fused in one. She pictured to herself Caesar on the rampage through the quiet and unguarded village. She saw innocent children bleeding in his path. She was herself very fond of the old dog [ . . . ] still she had great faith in his ferocity. She always warned people not to go too near him. She fed him on ascetic fare of corn-mush and cakes, and never fired his dangerous temper with heating a sanguinary diet of flesh and bones. Louisa looked at the old dog munching his simple fare, and thought of her approaching marriage and trembled. (11-12)

Now, most critics argue that Caesar represents Louisa's own sexuality, reading her fear that Joe will "take him out" and her mental and physical discomfiture at the end of this passage as meaning that Louisa is afraid of her own sexuality because it is "chained" and therefore seems "darkly vague and enormous." Louisa transforms her own little home into a haven of solitude and transforms her "dim," "sleepy" dog into a menacing monster. Louisa seems to perpetuate the local children's fear of him, actively maintaining the myth of Caesar's violence, which keeps the children away from her yard and isolates her realm from the rest of the community. Louisa's home, because of Caesar, is a place of fear and perceived danger for the residents of the community.

Louisa, though, rather than giving any indication that she laments her isolation or that she misses the company of her neighbors, seems to enjoy the quality of dangerous romance that Caesar's reputation affords her and her home. Caesar's "considerable cheap fame" results from the fact that "chained, his reputation overshadowed him, so that he lost his own proper outlines and looked darkly vague and enormous" and he becomes "the very monster of ferocity" (11). Caesar's ferocity, the narrator tells us, is likely only a sort of romantic village folk tale that developed only because he is "chained." Caesar's mythic "ferocity" serves as a warning for encroachers into Louisa's space, causing children to pass "Louisa's house stealthily" and "[w]ayfarers chancing into Louisa's yard eyed him with respect, and inquired if the chain were stout" (11). Caesar's "chain," his "enormous" "reputation" that "overshadowed him" serves Louisa's solitary purposes very well and she even indirectly contributes to Caesar's "reputation" of "ferocity" by "warn[ing] people not to go too near him" (11).

By keeping people away from Caesar, by perpetuating his "reputation," Louisa also

keeps people away from herself and her home. Caesar, as part of her home, comfortably restrained within the confines of her yard through which any visitor must pass, helps Louisa maintain the solitary and secluded environment that she loves and on which her creative energies may thrive. If we accept that Caesar is the physical representation for Louisa's repressed sexuality, then by perpetuating the myth of his unpredictable violence, she may be hinting that her own sexuality has the possibility of becoming deviant in the eyes of society, a suggestion made by both Hirsch and later by Ben Couch in his article "The No-Man's-Land of 'A New England Nun'." Hirsch and Couch believe that Louisa fears her own sexuality, and they claim that she egregiously over-exaggerates Caesar's dangerous past because it is, rather, her own sexuality that she feels is dangerous and so must be "chained."

But the sheer violence of the image—the "rampage" that will leave "innocent children bleeding"—suggests more than a simple denial of the destructive aspects of her own sexuality. Louisa's sexuality, in fact, is more properly represented by her canary who "woke up and fluttered wildly" whenever "Joe Dagget came into the room" (3). And if the canary represents Louisa's fearful, fragile sexuality, then Caesar seems to more properly represent Joe Dagget's sexuality, or the phallus as Hirsch suggested—a comparison that appears even more likely when we acknowledge that Caesar is a male dog. Furthermore, if Caesar serves as a representation of Joe's sexuality, then Louisa's "forebodings of Caesar on the rampage" suggest that what she fears about her marriage is not simply losing her virginity or her "pretty senseless old maiden ways" but that she will be violently torn from her autonomous and self-directed life after the violent tearing of her hymen in the marriage bed.

Granted, there exists no concrete evidence within either the story itself to suggest that Louisa was ever the victim of overt sexual violence or that she consciously feared becoming such a victim, especially since Joe Dagget's bear-like clumsiness is combined with a gentle and loyal character. Nor did Freeman herself ever suffer from such violence. Freeman led a remarkably quiet life while in the secluded feminine realm of the Wales farm, which was the period in which she produced most of her best-known fiction, including "A New England Nun" (Glasser 10). And the relative calm and ease of her all-female domestic situation has led critics to skip around the marital violence for which Caesar serves as a metaphor and to avoid any interpretation of the bloody rampage that Louisa envisions other than her fear of defloration.

The images of blood produced from the sharp ripping and tearing of Caesar's teeth, however, can offer a new interpretation if viewed through the lens of Susan Gubar's article "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity." In this article, Gubar presents a reading of Isak Dinesen's mid twentieth-century short story "The Blank Page," which Gubar uses to investigate the meaning of women's blood in women's literature. For Gubar, the bloody sheets in the convent demonstrate the sacrificial nature of marriage, and the story "implies that many women in patriarchy experience a dread of sexuality" (301). Moreover, Gubar establishes a link between the classical stories "of the blood sacrifice of daughters" in Greek and Roman mythology and the sexual violence inherent in all heterosexual unions within patriarchy (302). While we have no evidence that Louisa or Freeman herself read the classical myths that Gubar cites, Louisa and Freeman would have been familiar with the accounts of the Salem witch trials, yet another instance in which women received violence from the hands of men. Moreover,

Freeman also knew the narrative history of her country, meaning that she was very familiar with Hawthorne's works, and certainly with Hester Prynne and the violence done to her in the name of patriarchy. Freeman, then, in part because of her familiarity with her mythic mothers, had a firm concept of what happens to women who disobey the rules of their social communities.

On the surface, the link I wish to create between Louisa's sewing, artistic expression, patriarchal ideology, and sexual violence appears like a stretch. After all, nowhere in "A New England Nun" does actual violence occur, and Joe seems to be innocuous enough. He may track dust into her house, and he may think her habits "silly" or "needless." But Joe treats her with kindness, respect, and loyalty. However, Joe's approach to her home appears in ominous terms: his footsteps are "heavy," and her canary "woke up and fluttered wildly, beating his little yellow wings against the wires" (3). When he finally rises to leave, "he stumbled over a rug, and trying to recover himself, hit Louisa's work-basket on the table, and knocked it to the floor," and all of her sewing implements that she had earlier she had so carefully put away go "rolling" away in every direction (5). The narrator has already established that the items in her work-basket, her "thimble and thread and scissors," her "feminine appurtenances," are "a very part of her personality" (1). But her personality also consists of the "methodical orderliness" of her home, the essences of plants that she distills from her own garden (seeds which she has surely sown herself)—in short, her personality consists of all these creative domestic activities that Joe and his mother think are "foolishness," "pretty but senseless old maiden ways" (9). And if Louisa's personality is symbolized by her work-basket, then Louisa's personality—her subjectivity—risks being as violently disrupted, fragmented, and lost as

the items that spill and roll from her work-basket, from the dust that Joe tracks on her spotless floor, from the incursion of his “coarse masculine presence” into her carefully created “delicate harmony.”

Louisa’s personality, then, can be defined not just by the items within her work-basket but also by the art she creates with these “feminine appurtenances.” Her orderly home and the orderly work-basket as well as the pieces she creates with her needle results from a subjectivity that has matured outside of the community and independently of the ideological framework that guides that community. And Louisa is creating art, even if Joe, nor his mother, nor anyone in the community realizes it. Gubar, though, in her explication of “The Blank Page,” establishes that, “The art of producing essentials—children, food, cloth—is woman’s ultimate creativity” (306). Gubar’s argument is not unique. In the past forty years, feminist scholars have shown that women’s domestic activities like child rearing, sewing, decorating, and cooking do indeed represent women’s imagination and creative vision and have affirmed that it is valid to examine those things as artistic creation.<sup>1</sup> Gubar focuses on the art of sewing in her article, and for her, the silent act of sewing in the story creates the blank page, which she characterizes as an empty space of possibility upon which patriarchal ideology cannot inscribe itself (306).

Louisa’s sewing is also silent—and solitary—she creates her own blank page both in the “white linen apron” she wears and in her “white-linen lap” (3). Not only does the image of white linen suggest virginity, purity, and sexual innocence, it also creates a sort of blank page over Louisa’s lap, concealing the genitals and reproductive organs. Like the one sheet in the convent that has no blood, Louisa’s white linen apron, which she

presumably sewed with her own hands, represents Gubar's claim that "the blank place, a female inner space, represents readiness for inspiration and creation, the self conceived and dedicated to its own potential divinity" (307). Louisa, then, creates this "blank place" for herself by encasing herself in her own artistic blank page. But her orderly home, her distilling of essences, in combination with her sewing, with the solitude that Caesar provides for her, also become a sort of blank page in which the meaning ascribed comes entirely from her own subjectivity. If Louisa's sewing and other domestic activities are her art, then Louisa's art has enabled her to remain a "blank page" and to dedicate her life as "an uncloistered nun" (17) to "its own potential divinity."

Louisa's silent exit from the world of compulsory heterosexuality, her silent escape from a life of drudgery, of caring for a mother-in-law and a husband, is "the subversive voice of silence, and we can associate it with the silent sound of Philomela's shuttle," says Gubar (307). And here we can return to Louisa's bloody fantasy of Caesar on a rampage. If, as Gubar argues, "artistic creation often feels like a violation, a belated reaction to male penetration rather than possessing and controlling" (302), then just as Philomela wove the record of her rape into a tapestry, Louisa sews the sign of her resistance to the possibility that she will be violently deflowered by Joe into every seam that she sews and rips out and re-sews.

If the seam, then, as a representation of the unbroken hymen, or as the hymen that can be sewn back up once it is torn, represents Louisa's symbolic protection of her virginity, then we must see that Louisa's sewing takes on yet another role in the text. Louisa, who presumably sews her own clothes, including the white linen apron that she wears when she meets Joe and the white linen tablecloth on the table that sits between them at their



awkward meeting (3), seems to create her own body as a “blank page.” For, with her body encased in multiple layers of fabric—she wears three aprons over her dress—Louisa’s body, covered in the white linen that she sewed with her own hands, becomes an image that resists classification of her as a sexual woman. If she is emptied of sexuality, then she cannot symbolize the Feminine Ideal, for the ideally feminine woman will make her sexuality passively available to her husband. And when Louisa finally realizes that she will not have to marry Joe, she stopped sewing on the wedding dress, the only sewing in the story that gives no overt pleasure (15). The wedding dress, in fact, like the “Lady’s Gift Book” on the table symbolize both the romantic ideology that Adrienne Rich sees as tools of compulsory heterosexuality, and Louisa’s mother as well as Joe Dagget and his mother serve to demonstrate that marriage was not simply expected—marriage was destiny.

But this is a destiny of silence, of possession, and of oppression. Not only do the “exquisite little stitches” that Louisa puts on her wedding dress prevent her from sewing seams, from embroidering pretty flowered borders for her tablecloths, aprons, and handkerchiefs, and from distilling essences, they represent the fact that her entire way of life, her art and her creativity, will be silenced by her marriage. And marriage, so the story shows, has always silenced Louisa. Louisa “listened with calm docility to her mother’s views,” which urged that marriage was “a reasonable future, and a probable desirability of life” (7). After Joe proposed to her and told her he would go seek his fortune in Australia before he married her, Louisa “listened and assented” (6). If Louisa constantly listens, then she rarely speaks. She allows the marriage to go forward despite the fact that “the old winds of romance” “had never more than murmured” for her (8),

which suggests that she never really desired marriage in the first place. Here again, we are faced with a subversive possibility—the possibility that a nineteenth-century woman could have defeated compulsory heterosexuality by not desiring marriage regardless of the external pressures upon her. Like so many other women in patriarchy, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert urge in “The Female Swerve,” Louisa “cultivated accents of acquiescence in order to gain freedom to live their lives on their own terms” (291). Now, if Louisa knew or suspected that Joe would go to seek his fortune abroad before he married her, then her seeming “acquiescence” to her mother’s wish and to Joe’s desire can be seen as a possible strategy for guaranteeing herself “freedom to live [her] own [life] on [her] own terms.” The haste and indifference with which she sends her fiancée away suggest that this desire for “freedom” exists strongly within Louisa’s consciousness. Her happy solitude, her love of directing her own life, demonstrate that Louisa thrives in the freedom of her self-created environment away from the demands of conformity from her neighbors, her mother, or by the marriage directive of patriarchal society and compulsory heterosexuality.

Louisa’s self-created environment, her neatly ordered home and carefully bordered garden, in a sense become the blank page. She makes her body a blank page in front of Joe, encasing herself in white linen to obscure her body and to prevent Joe from writing onto her the bloody demands of the patriarchy. But it is not just her body that faces being violently despoiled but her home, her very way of life, the site and symbol of all her artistic creation. Indeed the violation of her home appears in terms of a disruption that smacks of destruction. For, not only does Joe knock her work basket over—a definite violent disruption of her “personality” and her subjectivity—and track dust all over her

floor, threatening to destroy the “fairy web[s]” and “hedge[s] of lace” with which she fills her home, he would also remove her from her home altogether where she would be “obliged to relinquish” all her “graceful but half-needless” tasks for “sterner” ones (9). He would remove her from her “maidenly possessions,” which are like “the faces of dear friends.” She must leave behind her distilling and her sewing, her gardening and her peacefully chained dog. If Louisa does not have her home or her things, however, then she does not have her personality either, nor does she get to continue living as a free, autonomous subject. Moving away from her home and her things would destroy the narrative of female creativity and self-sufficiency that her home represents and would place her body in his own home to write the story of patriarchal ideology upon it.

The violence done to women’s bodies and subjectivities by patriarchal ideology, though, has not informed prior scholars’ interpretations of Freeman’s story. If they have explored the aspect of violence in the story, it has always only been in the discussion of Caesar. By viewing Caesar only as a representation of Louisa’s sexuality, Hirsch and Couch as well as countless others have failed to consider that Caesar may symbolize more than Louisa’s sexual energy. Caesar, in fact, may also represent an excess of creative energy, an aggressive desire to “create art for art’s sake.” In order to create art simply for the pleasure of doing so, Louisa requires the solitude and space that Caesar helps to provide for her and that her impending marriage threatens to destroy.

Understanding Caesar as a metaphor for Louisa’s creative energies—and the necessity of maintaining her own independent space to exercise them—appears justified by the fact that the description of Louisa’s vision of Caesar’s bloody rampage is immediately preceded by a scene in which she contemplates her future as Joe’s wife:

Louisa had a little still, and she used to occupy herself pleasantly in summer weather with distilling the sweet and aromatic essences from roses and peppermint and spearmint. By-and-by her still must be laid away. Her store of essences was already considerable, and there would be no time for her to distil for the mere pleasure of it. Then Joe's mother would think it foolishness; she had already hinted her opinion on the matter. Louisa dearly loved to sew a linen seam, not always for use, but for the simple, mild pleasure which she took in it. She would have been loath to confess how more than once she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it together again. Sitting at her window during long sweet afternoons, drawing her needle gently through the dainty fabric, she was peace itself. But there was small chance of such foolish comfort in the future. Joe's mother, domineering, shrewd old matron that she was even in her old age, and very likely even Joe himself, with his honest masculine rudeness, would laugh and frown down all these pretty but senseless old maiden ways.

Louisa had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home. She had throbs of genuine triumph at the sight of the window-panes which she had polished until they shone like jewels. She gloated gently over her orderly bureau-drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity. Could she be sure of the endurance of even this? She had visions so startling that she half repudiated them as indelicate, of course

masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter; of dust and disorder arising necessarily from a coarse masculine presence in the midst of all this delicate harmony. (9-10)

The sexual undertones present in the end of this passage force their way to the surface, helping to confirm to critics such as Monica M. Elbert that “[t]here is something unsettling in Louisa’s obsessively orderly existence and simultaneously onanistic behavior, which prevents union with another” (202). Implicitly arguing that Louisa should, if she were a good, normal woman, desire such a union, Elbert characterizes Louisa’s existence as “meaningless,” her behavior as “compulsive” and “fetishistic” and “without any purpose” (201-02). Agreeing with Hirsch and Couch, Elbert sees Louisa’s repudiation of Joe and his “coarse masculine belongings” as neurotic and purposeless, and each of them cites Louisa’s ripping out and re-sewing of seams as exemplifying her obsessive, anti-social neurosis. Their claim, however, rests upon the assumption that everything we do, everything we make should be for a recognizable purpose. Yet such an argument, I believe, reduces all to material practicality and leaves no space for imaginative or aesthetic exploration, embarked upon simply for the intellectual and spiritual pleasure such explorations provide. Louisa’s life up to now has been one in which she could do things “for the mere pleasure” of them. She accomplishes these things, moreover “with the enthusiasm of an artist” because she has “peace” and solitude. Elbert, Hirsch, and Couch view Louisa’s “pretty but senseless maiden ways” in the same light as Joe’s mother—as “foolish comforts” that must be abandoned in the name of practicality and duty.

But Louisa is an artist, and as an artist, as one who contains an excess of creative

intellectual energy, she requires a “still” place and plenty of “long sweet afternoons” to be able to create. Elbert does not allow Louisa the status of an artist, calling her creativity “thwarted” and “stunted.” Yet Elbert does not explain why it is that Louisa’s distilling of essences, her needlework, her gardening, and her creation of “order and cleanliness” in her domestic arrangement cannot be thought of as art. In fact, Elbert’s lack of explanation on this subject suggests that she does not consider these things to be art, a judgment that Gubar as well as other feminists have fought against. In honing in on the seams Louisa rips and re-sews endlessly, Elbert misses the other needlework to which the story alludes. The text offers evidence that Louisa does delicate, imaginative, creative embroidery, hinted at by the “border pattern of flowers” on her tablecloth and the “exquisite little stitches” she sews “into her wedding-garments.” Moreover, while sewing seams does not produce any content containing symbolism or meaning for the viewer, the activity itself gives pleasure; because it is done simply for the sake of the pleasure, it does not serve practical, material ends, but rather some personal, individual, subjective end. If it is done for its own sake, for simple pleasure, and if it symbolizes Louisa’s individual subjectivity, then it does indeed produce meaning and, thus, should be viewed as an artistic activity through which subjectivity can be viewed.<sup>2</sup> Indeed the act of sewing itself, the performance of needlework, becomes the means and ends in itself, providing an avenue for and evidence of creative subjective expression.

Ozzie J. Mayers, in fact, offers one of the only positive interpretations of Louisa’s sewing, calling sewing “an act of survival.” Mayers points to Louisa’s sewing as a way to express herself creatively, urging that the “creative spirit is that of the female artist who in her reclusiveness has created another feminine world, one which distressed women

seek” (674). Louisa, Mayers shows, is “distressed” because she does not properly fit into the social categories laid out for her by ideology. Thus, Mayers claims, Louisa, and other sewing women in American literature, display “paradoxical needs to escape and to root” (678). Their creative intellects require liberation from the strictly limited activities allotted for them by their private social sphere while their human spirits require envelopment in the community to give them a sense of belonging and safety. Sewing becomes a way in which women were rooted within the society, culture, and community that surrounded them even if their personalities or actions did not allow them to be integrated into the community. Therefore, sewing serves as a sort of safe haven for a woman who may not adhere to the role or category laid out for her by society. Furthermore, Mayers suggests that women use sewing as a sort of artistic outlet that serves both as a mode of self-expression and as a means of exploring their own subjectivities (667). In order to undertake this kind of exploration, though, Mayers argues that a woman must be firmly “rooted,” or established comfortably and permanently within society. Only under the auspices of relatively secure living arrangements and as a part of her community can a woman have the luxury of embarking on this artistic exploration. Sewing, Mayers concludes, offers women a sedentary activity of artistic invention that allows them a stationary, safe space in which they can explore their subjectivities while also enfolding them in the community as permanent, peaceful, and productive women.<sup>3</sup>

Louisa’s sewing, though, does far more than Mayers allows. Her sewing does indeed serve as a means of subjective, creative expression, and it also may form a part of the domestic safe-haven she has ordered around herself. But I think that a closer examination

of the subjectivity symbolized by the sewing can yield more specific ideas about the rebellious ways that American women subjects negotiated with the very ideologies that make rootedness necessary. Louisa, like Freeman herself, is a sort of village outcast since she does not follow the normative patterns of behavior of her village neighbors. And one of the primary characteristics that differentiate Louisa from her neighbors is that she orders her days around activities that have no practical purpose. New Englanders of the Nineteenth Century, after all, are solidly shaped by the old Puritan virtue of diligence and a solid practicality in their lifestyles. For, in that Puritan tradition, activities that have no practical purpose were considered frivolous. Frivolity was, of course, sinful since it indicated both a sacrilegious interest in material luxury and impious self-interest, which, especially for women, was both impious and nearly criminal according to the patriarchally defined Feminine Ideal of selflessness. An idle woman was, after all, a dangerous threat because her dangerous sexual energy might actually find an outlet if she was not kept constantly occupied. A woman who had no family to keep her occupied and who instead devoted her time to her own self-interest, furthermore, was a great threat indeed because not only was her sexual energy not properly channeled, her self-interest posed a significant threat to the value of the Feminine Ideal and the ideology that produces it. The fact that Louisa engages herself in ‘purposeless’ activities demonstrates a rebellious subjectivity—one that understands the normative practices and ideas of her community but who chooses to engage in other behaviors—and suggests that she “has other ideas in her head” than those of the dominant, patriarchal ideology. Louisa is, in other words, a “bad subject.”

If the ideology of nineteenth-century America demanded passive, productive



selflessness and dependence upon community and male authority, then Louisa's practices, serving self-gratifying, independent desires, reveal that she does indeed have "other ideas" that guide her material practices. In fact, our introduction to Louisa demonstrates that she, as an unmarried, independent woman, has the luxury of ordering her days strictly around her own needs and amusements, showing from the first page of the story that she is a "bad subject:"

She had been peacefully sewing at her sitting-room window all the afternoon. Now she quilted her needle carefully into her work, which she folded precisely, and laid in a basket with her thimble and scissors. Louisa Ellis could not remember that ever in her life she had mislaid one of these little feminine appurtenances, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality. (1)

This introduction to the protagonist is significant for what it reveals about Louisa's subjectivity as well as for the contrast it provides when, later in the story, we see how Louisa's personality and lifestyle would be affected by marriage. Louisa as a spinster revels in her peaceful, tidy sitting-room where she can devote entire afternoons, maybe even entire days, to her self-fulfilling needlework. Her careful organization of her sewing implements and the fact that she had never "mislaid one of these little feminine appurtenances" show her preference for an orderly and "precisely" organized home. And as we step further into Louisa Ellis's little orderly home, we can also see that she is a creature of habit who truly enjoys the mundane, domestic rituals that make up her everyday life as a solitary and independent woman. Despite the fact that Louisa's connection with her "little feminine appurtenances" aligns her with the Feminine Ideal

always evoked by embroidering women, her home and her lifestyle subtly subvert that Ideal, revealing a rebellious “personality,” albeit it a mild and rather silent rebellion, which estranges her from the community.

Louisa’s rebelliousness becomes even more evident in the way that she prepares her tea and eats her dinner: “Louisa was slow and still in her movements; it took her a long time to prepare her tea; but when ready it was set forth with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self” (2). First of all, the notion that Louisa is a “guest to her own self” suggests that she values herself and her own pleasures far too much to be considered a properly selfless Feminine Ideal, and the pleasurable ritual of leisurely preparing her tea shows that not only does she have far more leisure time than her more traditional neighbors but also that she chooses to use her leisure time for personal enjoyment rather than for diligent, charitable work or other types of community participation. The community, in fact, views Louisa with suspicion and disapproval: “Louisa used china every day—something which none of her neighbors did. They whispered about it amongst themselves. Their daily tables were laid with common crockery, their sets of best china stayed in the parlor closet, and Louisa Ellis was no richer or better bred than they. Still she would use the china” (2). Louisa’s material practices clearly violate the normative practices of her community, suggesting that she has “other ideas” in her head, that she does not share the same ideology as her neighbors. Her neighbors, of course, represent public opinion, or dominant ideology, and Louisa’s whisper-provoking behavior shows that she has, in some measure, resisted their hail or at least that she is critical of the law the hail represents. Furthermore, Louisa’s rejection of marriage at the end of the story seems the ultimate refusal of the hail of the law,

establishing her as a “bad subject” who will not “work alright by [her]self.” If patriarchal ideology demonizes spinsterhood and establishes the necessity and desirability of marriage, then a woman who refuses marriage, regardless of the circumstances, would be viewed as abnormal, “bad,” and possibly even as criminal.

To further strengthen this claim, one need only look to Louisa’s creator. Mary Wilkins Freeman, like many of the fictional characters she creates, stands in contrast to the expectations and norms for women during the late nineteenth century in America. First, her talent as an artist sets her apart not only from other women but from most humans in general; and second, she, like Louisa, appears never to have harbored a strong desire to marry. Admittedly, these claims are very difficult to support because so little is known about Freeman’s youth. Her collected letters begin when she is already in her twenties, severed from her family by death and already successfully publishing and being paid for children’s poems. The scarce information we do have about her youth comes from the letters and anecdotes of others who knew her, and there is remarkably little of that as well. This has driven her three biographers—Edward Foster, Perry D. Westbrook, and Leah Blatt Glasser—to read into Freeman’s stories for evidence of her own personal life. In the only feminist critical approach to Freeman and her work, *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Works of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, Leah Blatt Glasser claims that so little is known about Freeman’s young life that we must use her fiction to illuminate it (2). Faced with a lack of details from which to reconstruct Freeman’s life, un-illuminated even by journals or diaries or by her letters in which she was oddly silent about her childhood, Glasser turns to Freeman’s fiction to understand her.

Freeman’s young life, Glasser demonstrates, was fraught with death and loss—she

was the only Wilkins child to survive to adulthood, and her parents both died before she was twenty-five. Glasser also makes a point of showing that young Mary Wilkins, hopelessly over-protected by her mother who raised her to believe in her own fragility, also became the target of teasing for neighborhood children (9). This establishes Freeman's early alienation from the social world in order to explain life through fiction and fiction through life. Freeman was fascinated with socially isolated characters and women in particular, Glasser argues, because she herself remained a social outsider. Her status as an outsider, Glasser suggests, led an adult Mary Wilkins with little income, no living family, no husband and no children, to retire to the home of her life-long female friend Mary Wales with whom she lived in relative autonomy for "the most productive twenty years of her career" (10).

Women's autonomy certainly was an arena about which Freeman could write confidently since she herself avoided marriage until she was nearly half a century old and also because she successfully supported herself by her writing for many years. The later half of the nineteenth century was, after all, a time when an unprecedented number of "scribbling women" managed to make an independent living through their writing. And while Freeman's biographers have argued that she remained unmarried for so long more because her early hopes for love and marriage were thwarted,<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that Freeman had no strong desire to complicate her successful and independent life as an artist by getting married and shouldering the multitude of domestic tasks which would have prevented her from writing.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Freeman's remarkable success as a writer, as a woman who successfully lived "by her wits," likely resulted from the fact that she had "money and a room of her own."<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite the fact that Freeman was renowned

for her realistic portrayals of New England people, and particularly of New England women, her spinsters and wives alike always seem to have a level of independence and visible, sometimes aggressive, creative energy that our history and literature suggest was not the norm. For though there were many women in the late nineteenth century who made their livings by writing, several of whom supported themselves, these women represent only a small fraction of the population. Marriage and a life of private, selfless domesticity were still the expectation for and likely the desire of most women.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, both Foster and Westbrook claim that Freeman herself desired marriage as a young woman, and believe that Freeman's preference for female protagonists who were unmarried social outcasts reflects Freeman's own wish that she had avoided that life herself. Both Foster and Westbrook make too much of Freeman's attachment to the Naval Ensign Hanson Tyler for whom young Wilkins harbored a romantic attachment—both believe that all of Freeman's spinsters come about as the result of her intense and long-lasting pain over being rejected by Tyler. Since Freeman maintained a melancholic attachment to Tyler, Foster and Westbrook believe, her fiction serves as a cathartic reflection of her tragic rejection. Glasser, on the other hand, seems to offer only a passing mention of the illustrious and handsome Tyler. Glasser speculates on the depth of Freeman's feelings for Tyler, but wishes to prove that Freeman was always intensely resistant to the idea of marriage because of her innately rebellious spirit that revolted against her parents' religious strictness and demand that their daughter marry young and well (16-17).

Whether Freeman's resistance to marriage results from a rebellion against her parents or from a rejection by a young love remains unprovable, but her letters do reveal a lack of

enthusiasm for marriage which, whatever its causes, shapes Freeman as an individual subject and defines the rebellious subjectivity displayed by so many of her rebellious female protagonists. In letter 51, for example, she writes to Kate Upson Clark in December 1889:

I suppose the first thing you'll want me to tell you is that I am not going to get married, and as far as the signs of the time go, I do not see any reason to apprehend that I ever shall be married. I simply cannot support a family yet, and just now all my powers are engaged upon the great American Drama[referring to *Giles Corey, Yeoman*], but you must not tell anyone. I have nearly completed my effort. (100)

Freeman's use of the word "reason" here suggests that she sees marriage less as a romantic idea and more as a logical decision. If she sees no "reason" that she should be married, then we can imply that she has reasons *not* to get married, and she offers one overt and one implied reason that she should not. First, she "cannot support a family," which, since as a wife her job would not be to provide monetary support but emotional and moral support, means that she "cannot" provide the emotional and moral support required by a wife in the patriarchal hierarchy. Second, and perhaps more significant, all her "powers" are devoted to her creative endeavors, which would surely suffer if she married and had a family.

Freeman's words suggest a strong autobiographical connection to Louisa. Both Freeman and the protagonist of "A New England Nun" know that their creativity and self-guided, self-serving work will suffer with the addition of a husband and family, and they know that creating art takes all one's "powers," leaving none to create the selfless

Feminine Ideal demanded by marriage in patriarchal nineteenth-century America. Later, in the same letter, she writes, “It is so much trouble to run one’s self in all the departments! Talk about getting married! If I had to see to a man’s collars and stockings, besides the drama and the story and Christmas and the new dress, in the next three weeks, I should be crazy” (100). Her very sanity is, in fact, at stake in marriage. For any woman, but especially for a woman with a creative vocation, a vocation that requires total devotion to it to be successful, adding the mundane, daily responsibilities that attend domestic life would not only drive her “crazy,” it would prevent her from creating art, which would, of course, contribute to her insanity. One need only read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” published only a few years after “A New England Nun,” to understand the consequences of domesticity and patriarchy on women’s sanity and, of course, on their ability to create art of any sort. Indeed, even men who were artists struggled to balance their creative vocations with their family lives. Henry James, in fact, never married in part because he was unwilling to allow mundane family life to detract from his vocation as a writer. Freeman also was an artist who faced such dilemmas. She recognized that having increased domestic responsibilities would take away from the creative “powers” necessary for her to continue her life as an artist. One of the reasons that her ten years at the Wales farm was the “most productive” time of her life was that there she was absolved of most domestic chores. There were no children, no husband, and no carping mother-in-law to demand that she devote all her time to their wellbeing and none for her own. The Wales farm provided Freeman with a “room of her own,” which, in turn, allowed her to create successful art from which she earned her living.

Freeman’s own financial independence and her creative drive provides us with

another autobiographical connection to Louisa Ellis—and to Hester Prynne—one which has not as of yet been explored by scholars. Louisa, we know from the story, has some level of financial independence, for she has lived alone for nearly fourteen years without the financial support of a husband. The reader never discovers the source of Louisa's financial independence. Her late brother and mother may have left her an inheritance, although their lower-middle class status seems to deny any possibility that she received a sizable inheritance. More likely, Louisa inherited the modest home from her dead relatives, and she probably provides her own survival basics from her garden. Possibly, she sold the essences she distills or some of her delicate embroidered pieces to provide things she could not grow or make herself, much like Hester sells her embroidered pieces to the townspeople in order to provide necessities for herself and Pearl.

But in addition to assisting with life's survival necessities, needlework provides Louisa, as it did Hester, with a creative outlet that ensures her mental and emotional survival.<sup>8</sup> The deeply descriptive scenes of her "at her needle" seem to be the most interesting and revealing scenes in the story. Freeman's narrative attention to Louisa's sewing suggests that the act of needlework in the story says things about Louisa that the narrator does not. The needlework symbolizes aspects of Louisa's subjectivity, which, in her adherence to the rules of literary realism, Freeman will not explain outright. Additionally, Louisa's embroidery serves as a sort of speech—it represents the voice of her subjective encounter with the world, her position in it, and her critical negotiations with the restrictive ideologies that inform her world. That subjective encounter as represented in Louisa's sewing, both in the content and in the performance of her needlework, reveals a process of "critical desubjectivation" akin to Hester's, and Louisa



joins Hester in the ranks of rebellious American female subjects—“bad subjects” who do not “work alright by themselves.” But, whereas Hester’s embroidery and the critical negotiations with ideology that it symbolizes occurs after her crime and punishment, Louisa’s embroidery forms the primary scene of the story, prior to the commission of her “crime.” Her rebellious engagement with ideology, then, leads her to reject the Feminine Ideal and to violate the terms imposed upon her by the Ideological State Apparatus rather than occurring as a consequence of provoking the Repressive State Apparatus.<sup>9</sup>

The story begins with an idyllic pastoral New England scene at which our protagonist, Louisa Ellis, sits gazing from her window. As she looks out from within her carefully constructed domestic order, Louisa sews. She is synonymous with her needlework—the “feminine appurtenances” that fill up her sewing basket are “a very part of her personality.” The narrative description Freeman offers of Louisa—as a woman who defines herself through needlework—suggests important ideas about the Feminine Ideal and about the formation of American female subjectivity. On the one hand Louisa does appear to embody the Feminine Ideal. She is passive, demure, chaste, humble, kind, keeps an immaculate home, and, most importantly, she sews. On the other hand, though, she sews, and when she does so, it is for herself alone, for her own aesthetic pleasure as an independent, autonomous subject. Her identity as a subject, like Hester, relates integrally to needlework, which in its content and performance ultimately reveals that Louisa rejects the Feminine Ideal, the ideology that defines it, and the material practices that symbolize it. The material practice of needlework, in fact, frames the story, and so, too, by default, does the rejection of ideal femininity and patriarchal ideology.

When we meet Louisa she sews, and when we leave her she is back at her needle. But

the events that occur throughout the story reveal a defining moment in her life, a moment when she must choose to either accept her assigned social role within patriarchal culture as the selfless, dependent wife (and ultimately, probably as a mother as well) or refuse to fill that role, thereby refusing the hail of patriarchal ideology which creates the Feminine Ideal. The subjective process—or “critical desubjectivation”—that leads Louisa to refuse marriage appears to remain concealed, however, because Louisa remains silent throughout most of the story. Both because her dialogue is so sparse and because her conversations with Joe are confined to what courtship standards deemed appropriate, the symbolic meaning produced by her needlework becomes a *supplément* for her voice, allowing us to look “inside” of her from “outside” the signifying categories that seem to define her.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the “blank page” as defined by Susan Gubar seems to fit Derrida’s notion of the *supplément*. The “blank page” in Gubar’s article literally refers to the single un-bloodied sheet that hangs in the Carmelite convent. Because women’s existence in patriarchy gains meaning only through their bodies, and because the bloody sheets signify those patriarchally defined meanings, then the single bloodless sheet refuses the inscription of patriarchal ideology. For Gubar, this “blank page” signifies “a blank place,” which is a space of possibility that eludes meaning. It exposes the failing of language to provide totalizing definitions and signifying categories, which, by default, exposes the failing of patriarchal ideology to define and signify women’s lives. The appearance of a “blank page” signifies a space of possibility in which the subject is free to negotiate with the ideologies that inform her existence. Louisa’s needlework, then, offers us the opportunity to examine her critical negotiation with patriarchal ideology, the

categories it creates for her, and her subjective engagement with the circumstances in which she has been thrust by creating a “blank page” upon both her body and her subjectivity as revealed by her needlework. And only as a solitary outcast can Louisa create and maintain the “blank page” that enables her subjectivity to negotiate freely with the Feminine Ideal imposed upon her by ideology.

That Louisa has this choice available to her indicates that women’s roles and status within American patriarchy has changed from mid-century. Hester, after all, could not have chosen to remain unmarried in colonial New England, and Hawthorne, writing at mid-century before women’s suffrage gained any strength, would not have envisioned such a possibility of autonomy by choice for his protagonist. In one sense, then, Louisa’s ability to make this choice without facing intense, invasive social sanctions indicates that, by the time Freeman wrote this at the end of the century, women had gained at least the freedom to refuse marriage. In another sense, though, Louisa demonstrates that such freedom comes only at the price of denying one’s own sexual existence. Moreover, it shows that independent women who refused the hail of the law, represented in this story by Joe Dagget and his offer of marriage, still required the protection of the Feminine Ideal that sewing symbolized so that their autonomy and any excess of creative energy were made to seem innocuous.

Louisa, created by Freeman at the end of the Nineteenth Century, allows us to see a transformation in the woman as “bad subject.” Hawthorne in 1850 could only give his protagonist independence as a result of having committed a crime and being sentenced with public shame and exile. In order to explore the positive possibilities of the “bad subject,” Hester must first be threatened with death and then forcibly ejected by the

community. Hawthorne must create the literary precedent for an American female subject, and his inability to conceive of a world in which women could choose not to marry results in part because such a choice would not have been an acceptable option to women in the 1840s while he was writing *The Scarlet Letter*. But because he created Hester, and because she is the mythic mother of American women, then her rebellious, critical negotiations with patriarchal ideology open a space of possibility that ultimately allowed Freeman to create Louisa Ellis. Both of these women, however, existed in a strange, liminal place outside their respective societies, which implies that some of the social limitations and pressures that drove Hawthorne's writing were still in force half of a century later when Freeman took up her pen. We see a society that has progressed. Freeman's society is one in which women have more freedom to exist outside of the roles that society dictates for them and that they need not feel badly about doing so; but we also see a society that privileges women who remain firmly and safely entrenched in the private sphere, exhausting all their energies, creative and sexual, on their families rather than on any creative expression that may lead them to feel comfortable as social outcasts.

Louisa exists, according to Monika Maria Elbert, "without society of any kind" (201). And Hester remains "enclosed in a sphere all by herself." Their refusal to adhere to the ideological restraints upon their lives makes it impossible that either shall ever be reintegrated into the community and that they will remain "bad subjects." Louisa, though, does not care to place herself in the socially acceptable category represented by the Feminine Ideal. Hester cleared the way for Louisa because she too is an artist with her needle. Hester and Louisa both enjoy the imaginative expression of their excess of creative energies through the art they create. Hester's "critical desubjectivation,"

represented in her needlework, creates the space of possibility that led to Freeman's creation of Louisa. Though at mid-century the only possibility available to Hawthorne was to re-place Hester within society, ultimately burying her existence as an artist and as a "bad subject" underneath a vision of selfless femininity that he creates, Freeman at the end of the century was able to re-open and widen the space of possibility that Hester's rebellion created. Louisa may not yet have the benefits of citizenship. She may not be able to vote or get a rigorous college education or even become a famous writer adored by the public. But she is able to choose to refuse marriage and gain her autonomy by her own choice rather than because it was forced upon her. Louisa's needlework allows her a voice to negotiate with ideology when her physical speech is restrained by ideological conventions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The additional value of women's domestic activities in terms of exploring women's creativity is that, because women were historically denied either the right or the ability (due to lack of education, lack of experience, and lack of time) to create more traditionally defined arts like sculpture or painting or even literature, they infused their creative energies into their domestic tasks. So, not only should we view things like needlework and decorating as Art, we also need to understand that these are the only sites in which women's creativity manifests.

<sup>2</sup> Parker and Beaudry both discuss the long-held cultural debate over whether embroidery and other sorts of needlework should be accepted into the realm of Art or should be relegated to the realm of Craft. According to their investigations, the late nineteenth-century saw this debate begin to come to a head, and embroidery in particular became implicated in women's suffrage in the last decade of the century. On one side, women's suffrage activists cited embroidery as symbolic of the repressive and oppressive lifestyles imposed upon them by the patriarchy; but on the other side, many activists for women's rights argued that embroidery was an Art that "symbolized the beauty of the female imagination" (Beaudry 3), viewing those who denied it Art status as serving traditional patriarchal ideology that denies the aesthetic validity of women's work. This debate is significant because even though Freeman was rather a recluse, her letters indicate that she carried on a lively correspondence, read widely, and was an embroiderer herself, meaning she was likely aware of such a debate. Furthermore as a woman artist herself, and because she uses the term "artist" to refer to Louisa, we can imply that Freeman would have supported classifying embroidery as an art comparable and as valuable as the predominately male arts of sculpture and painting.

<sup>3</sup> By productive, I refer not to Hirsch's or Elbert's materialistic view of productivity as producing useful goods and services. Rather, as established by Beaudry and Parker, sewing symbolized diligence, in part, which was an integral part of the Feminine Ideal in the nineteenth century. Sewing was viewed as a

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means of preventing idleness in young women. As long as her hands were busy, a woman not only displayed the lingering Puritan value of diligence, she also avoided the various transgressive temptations thought to be borne of idle hands and idle minds.

<sup>4</sup>All three of Freeman's biographers, Edward Foster, Perry D. Westbrook, and Leah Blatt Glasser, suggest that young Mary Wilkins was in love with Colonel Tyler Hansen, and that his lack of romantic interest in her drove her into her long years of solitude at the Wales's family farm. In other words, they believe that Wilkins's long years as a single woman resulted from the rejection by her chosen man rather than from any actual rebelliousness regarding marriage. Her letters, however, reveal another possibility. Not only does she only mention Hansen twice in all her letters, she refers to him with casual interest as "my friend." Her letters offer no indication that she was ever 'love sick' over him nor do they suggest any hint that her single life was anything other than an active personal choice. In fact, her letters suggest that she clearly recognized the incompatibility between the wife's and mother's domestic role and the role of the artist.

<sup>5</sup>In letter six, written to Mary Louise Booth on April 21, 1885: "Last week, a lady about a mile above here died, and Mrs. Wales, her daughter and I took turns in nursing her for some days previously . . . My day of nursing seemed to almost use me up." Yet again, we see evidence from Wilkins's own pen that she well knew the toll that taking care of others will have upon her and her creative energies. All in all, then, Wilkins's letters demonstrate that being responsible for others saps the energy necessary to create her art. If she knew that caring for others would require her to sacrifice her writing, and if we recognize the lack of motivation to marry that her letters indicate, then we should understand that Wilkins was a woman who believed her calling was to be an artist rather than a wife and mother who conformed to the feminine ideal.

<sup>6</sup>In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that in order to become successful writers, women needed money and rooms of their own. Woolf's essay is, of course, a foundational text of Western Feminism. In the essay, Woolf describes the historical conditions that have prevented women from writing works of "genius." Woolf cites the history of physical and social repression that denied women money, space, time to themselves, and even the right to think independently, which is the primary component of the modern subject according to the Enlightenment. Because women have been little better than slaves, Woolf argues, they have not been able, or even capable, of creating works of literary genius. Moreover, because women have been left out of the history books, because it is nearly impossible to find tangible evidence of women's existence, let alone their subjective encounters with the world, they have been unable to break out of the submissive, objectified role that society has established for them. Woolf provides some notable exceptions to the rule of history, though—Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, George Eliot—in order to prove that women are indeed capable of genius, that they are thinking, active subjects, and that all young women of her day need to do is to look to those shining examples and, like Aphra Behn, "Go out and make a living by [their] wits."

<sup>7</sup>I understand that I am making a very broad and very arguable generalization here by claiming that most women likely desired marriage. However, in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich convincingly argues that society at all levels—the family, the media, the legal system—forces patriarchal ideology, of which heterosexuality is an integral part, upon women so that heterosexuality and its culmination in a male-female union, passive femininity, and childbearing pressure women both externally through rigid social norms and internally through ideology to conform to heterosexuality and to the patriarchal hierarchy that shapes their roles in society.

<sup>8</sup>Louisa does not actually perform much embroidery during the story, leading me to expand my investigation of the intersection between needlework and gender identity to include the other types of sewing that Louisa does as well as the way she handles her sewing implements. While it is true that embroidery more than other types of sewing was most integrally connected to ideal femininity, Parker, Mayers, and Beaudry all confirm that sewing of any sort almost universally symbolizes femininity. Moreover, the sewing activity that most clearly alludes to Louisa's sexuality is not embroidery but rather the sewing of seams, which would usually be done in the service of necessity and practicality—not an artistic or creative activity at all. However, the text makes perfectly clear that the sewing and ripping out and re-sewing of seams is entirely impractical and

<sup>9</sup>I am taking for granted that Hester's adulterous act was one of impulse rather than one preceded by a critical negotiation with ideology. If Hester truly represents a Romantic protagonist, then her actions

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should be construed as the result of a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” rather than as the result of an intellectually rationalized decision.

<sup>10</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that the point of the *supplément* is that it allows us to think outside ‘inside’ categories created by signifying systems. It is an excess of meaning that eludes our ability to signify it because it comes from outside of logos/language. Unlike Sausseure and Rousseau who believe that the *supplement* is a degradation that changes the categorized thing for the worse, Derrida suggests that the *supplément*, in fact, opens vast possibilities of meaning because it forces us to see that every signifying system lacks the ability to categorize a thing fully, leaving an absence that the *supplement* fills.

## CHAPTER IV

### “THE PRODUCT OF THE SYSTEM?” MAY WELLAND AS THE SILENCING OF FEMALE AGENCY

In Edith Wharton’s 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence*, embroidery functions very differently than it does in *The Scarlet Letter* or “A New England Nun.” Whereas in these earlier two pieces of literature embroidery provides an avenue for expressing creative, rebellious subjectivity that reveals a voice of ideology critique, in Wharton’s novel embroidery serves instead as a symbol of hegemonic control instituted by patriarchal ideology in which the women of the novel remain imprisoned, bodily, intellectually, and emotionally. In the novel, embroidery helps to show that femininity is an unnatural product of rigid social ideology, exposing that ideology as oppressive, as a false set of material practices and rituals that allow only two possibilities for the women that exist in its structures: to enter into a marriage that will be “a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other” (*Age of Innocence* 29), or to become a shallow, socially and intellectually starved old maid like Newland Archer’s unmarried sister Janey.

Newland Archer is, arguably, the protagonist of the novel, and his bride-to be, May Welland, the most desirable marriageable girl in Newland’s New York society world, has been prepared for the former option. To fulfill this role, May has undergone a process of education—or, of subjectivation—that attempts to strip women of their agency and even their subjectivity by removing choice and eliminating possibility. May’s future was narrated for her before her birth, though her future, ironically, will be little different from Janey’s or even from Mrs. Archer’s, Newland’s widowed mother. In this time and place,



women appear one-dimensional—wife, widow, and spinster, alike in all but name and sexual activity. Embroidery, in fact, helps to make this parallel clear, for May, Janey, and Mrs. Archer all embroider during the course of the novel, and the moments when they embroider demonstrate, as Roszika Parker eloquently says, that “femininity is indeed a social and psychosocial product” (*The Subversive Stitch* 3). Embroidery discloses, in other words, that femininity is not an innate, biological imperative but rather that it is the unnatural, man-made product of ideology.

Yet, embroidery also provides us with an interpretive lens that, when applied to May Welland, suggests that her embodiment of ideal femininity at the end of the novel occurs not because she lacks agency or individual subjectivity but rather because she possesses these things and makes an active, personal choice to maintain the values of the ideological system into which she was born. In fact, embroidery in Wharton’s novel clearly demonstrates the intense conflict between the individual subject and ideology—between individualism and conformity to the social norm. May’s embroidery does not reveal an excess of creative energy or imagination, nor does it demonstrate a resistance to her social or sexual role as a wife. The scene in which she embroiders, nevertheless, shows that May makes an active choice to suppress—or to hide—creativity and imagination and to embody the Feminine Ideal as dictated by her social and sexual role. In addition to exposing the falseness of patriarchal ideology and ideal femininity, then, embroidery in *The Age of Innocence* also establishes May Welland as an individual subject who actively negotiates with ideology. If her embroidery uncovers the unnaturalness of ideology, and if the scene of embroidery makes manifest that May consciously decides to accept her role within that ideology, then it suggests that even

when embroidery serves ideal femininity it still contains the signifying power to problematize the very ideal it appears to symbolize. In fact, while the practice of embroidery is a ritual of ideology, a material practice into which patriarchal ideology is inscribed, it is also an activity that allows the subject who practices it—or, here rather the subject who encounters it in fictional representation—to discover an open space of possibility in which critical engagement with ideology can begin.

While May has inspired some scholarly attention, few recognize the critical value that she and her embroidery present. Indeed, scholarly investigations of the novel have usually focused on Newland Archer and May's cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska, who arrives in New York at the beginning of the novel, dubiously separated from her husband and surrounded by rumors that she had run away from him with another man. May, if she is discussed at all, is usually viewed as a marginal character who rigidly accepts the rituals and ideologies that bind New York high society. May is seen as a representation of nothing but the soul-killing and mind-numbing effects that these social standards have on those who embody and perpetuate them. May does indeed seem to embody fully the “good subject” who “works alright by itself” (Althusser 135). For instance, in her article “*The Age of Innocence* as Bildungsroman,” Cynthia Griffin Wolff describes May as the representative of a “primitive, natural order” (433) who “dedicates herself to the task of holding him [Newland] to the morality implicit in old New York's regulation of the process of generation” (428). If May symbolizes the “natural order” as Wolff suggests, then her only function is to ensure procreation. And while Wolff concedes that May has a “basic goodness” (431) in her character, May remains entirely flat in Wolff's eyes, significant only in that her presence allows us to understand Newland's subjective

struggles. Elizabeth Ammons, additionally, in her article “Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse,” points out that Wharton often used her novels to speak out against “the ‘parasitism’ of marriage for women” (434), arguing that for Wharton, May represents “the nation’s failure, the human victim of a deluded obsession with innocence” (437). Moreover, while mentioned only marginally, May and her innocent purity represent to Anne MacMaster in “Wharton, Race, and *The Age of Innocence*” the empty lack of vitality that threatens the survival of Old New York society. And MacMaster’s view that New York society cannot continue to survive on such emptiness agrees with Dale M. Bauer’s argument in “Whiteness and the Powers of Darkness in *The Age of Innocence*,” though Bauer focuses his investigation on Wharton’s use of May’s family to criticize “the regulatory force” (475) that imprisons every character in the novel.

Yet viewing May Welland as a force of “natural order” or as a “victim” denies her agency, individuality, and active, critical subjectivity and refuses the possibility that she, in her own way, critically negotiates with the ideological system that defines her existence and her subjectivity. Some scholars have begun to look closely at May, though, and seek alternative interpretations of her character. Margaret B. McDowell and Carol Wershoven agree that May possesses immense strength and tenacity as well as keen perception and admirable determination. Wershoven, in her book *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*, argues that May displays a great capacity for “growth and change” in the ways that she tries to handle Newland’s growing attraction to Ellen (87), while McDowell demonstrates May’s “considerable strength” and “tenacity of purpose” in maintaining her marriage, which suggest that an active agency is concealed behind the façade of ideal femininity laid over her by Newland (99).

Admittedly, a close study of May Welland holds its challenges. We never have access to her subjectivity because the narrative comes filtered through Newland Archer's consciousness. All the information we get about May emerges from his subjectivity, a fact, which in itself, provides meaningful opportunities for exploring May through Newland's perceptions and expectations of her. After all, Newland's expectations for May are really society's expectations, for he, as much as if not more than she, accepts and lives according to the dictates of "the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern" (*Age of Innocence* 28). And, as we come to realize throughout the course of the novel, May understands very well what is expected of her—almost every action she takes, nearly every word she speaks, is carefully designed to maintain the rigid social order of New York high society and her role and place in it, a role and place carved out for her long before her birth or betrothal. She is part of "the circle of ladies who were the product of the system" (6).

Is May, then, nothing but a commodity? Is she no more than a "product," non-sentient, lacking in critical capacities, a thing created for consumption by others? Ammons and Bauer see her as exemplary of a "system" that reduces individuals, especially women, to superficial, unthinking products created by and for a consumerist culture. Indeed, the way that embroidery is presented before May's marriage seems to propose just such a view of May and her family. During May's and Newland's engagement, embroidery serves as the means by which the Welland family carries out the expected pattern of courtship and marriage while they prepare themselves and their daughter May for her new life as Newland Archer's wife. Newland wants to "hasten their marriage" because the arrival of May's disgraced cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska,

who has run away from her European husband and recently arrived in New York, seeking the solace of her New York society family (43). Despite Newland's desire to advance the wedding date, however, "when he hinted at advancing the date of the wedding, [Mrs. Welland] had raised reproachful eyebrows and sighed out: 'Twelve dozen of everything—hand-embroidered'" (43). Only a few days later, moreover, when Newland finally gets May alone, hoping to convince her to agree to an earlier wedding date, Mrs. Welland has secured May's adherence to the ritual, "having that very morning won her over to the necessity of a long engagement, with time to prepare a hand-embroidered trousseau containing the proper numbers of dozens" (51). Because the ritual of marriage here demands "hand-embroidered" items for May's trousseau, Mrs. Welland uses it as the means for denying any possibility for changing the ritual. It is she, in fact, who most participates in ensuring that May becomes a fully interpellated "good subject." Not only does Mrs. Welland embroider, fully embodying all the unnatural and superficial qualities of ideal femininity, but she also pushes May to embroider, likely having taught May when she was a small girl. Mrs. Welland actively ensures that her daughter grows up to be a fully subjugated subject, for, as a mother, it is incumbent upon her to make sure that her daughter engages in all—and only—the material practices representing the ideology that creates the Feminine Ideal. Mrs. Welland's insistence upon a "hand-embroidered trousseau" for May shows that the rituals of courtship represent the mindless, uncritical adherence to ideology.

While Mrs. Welland's reference to embroidery allows us to understand the importance of rituals—of material practices—in maintaining ideological control over the individuals caught within its system, May's embroidery after she is married shows us that

individual subjects can indeed engage critically with the very ideologies that their material practices signify. The scene in which May embroiders occurs in Chapter 30. Newland has just arrived home from his visit to Ellen in Washington and notices a difference in his usually attentive, cheery wife. May, he notices, looks “tired,” “wan and almost faded” despite her best efforts to perform her “usual tenderness” for him (176). And though she is impeccably dressed, “Archer was struck by something languid and inelastic in her attitude, and wondered if the deadly monotony of their lives had laid its weight on her also” (176). As characteristic of Newland’s lack of interest in or concern for his wife’s state of mind—he does not think her mind complex or deep enough to fear it being overworked, after all—he brushes this thought off easily, focusing instead upon his own boredom and *ennui*. He wishes she would tell him about her “grievances” so that he could have “laughed them all away” and gets irritated that her training forces her to “conceal imaginary wounds under a Spartan smile” (176). Newland’s annoyance over his wife’s training seems bad enough since, at first, her ability to “ignore the ‘unpleasant’” was one of her chief attractions (17). Far worse, however, is the notion that, not only does he believe her grievances are “imaginary,” he also believes that laughing at his wife’s worries would be the best way to get rid of them. Newland completely denies that his wife might have any legitimate complaint about him and their marriage, and every time he is offered a glimpse into her individual, subjective struggles, he laughs them off and turns the focus back to himself. He is so uninterested in her subjective approach to the world that when she begins to “hazard her own” interpretations of literature, it destroys “his enjoyment of the works commented on” (177). To Newland, May represents all that

he despises and chafes against in a society dictated by extraordinarily rigid ideological patterns.

Wolff claims that Newland is emotionally alienated from New York society through most of the novel and explains, “because he so little understands it, he cannot respect or admire it” (430). Wolff provides an insight into Newland’s character that implicitly asks us to have compassion for May, though Wolff stops short of offering such a sentiment. Since Newland classifies May as a living representation of an ideological social system that denies him free choice and thus happiness, he cannot or will not see value in her individual subjectivity. He shuts her out entirely, denying her both interiority and agency, thinking of her as simply a dependent part of the family rather than as a distinct and separate individual.

Newland has stepped into the very classification, which, at the beginning of the novel, he most abhorred. He embodies the role of the hypocritical husband inherent to the social system of New York society, which men like Lawrence Lefferts symbolize. The tragic irony here, of course, is that Newland’s choice to perform the rituals of this ideological system and to take on the role allotted to him by that system also forces May to adhere to her predesigned role. And though she performs the part heroically, the moment when she embroiders reveals how completely the patriarchal ideology that dictates New York society affects her. The scene occurs after May’s and Newland’s strained dinner. Since Newland cuts off the possibility for conversation by sitting down with a history book, May

                  fetched her work-basket, drew up an armchair to the green-shaded student lamp, and uncovered a cushion she was embroidering for his sofa. She was

not a clever needlewoman; her large capable hands were made for riding, rowing and open-air activities; but since other wives embroidered cushions for their husbands she did not wish to omit this last link in her devotion.

She was so placed that Archer, by merely raising his eyes, could see her bent above her work-frame, her ruffled elbow-sleeves slipping back from her firm round arms, the betrothal sapphire shining on her left hand above her broad gold wedding-ring, and the right hand slowly and laboriously stabbing the canvas. As she sat thus, the lamplight fell on her clear brow, he said to himself with a secret dismay that he would always know the thoughts behind it, that never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion. She had spent her poetry and romance on their short courting: the function was exhausted because the need was past. Now she was simply ripening into a copy of her mother, and mysteriously, by the very process, trying to turn him into a Mr. Welland. (177)

May's embroidery here signifies, on the one hand, how entirely subjugated she is to New York society's design of ideal femininity both in her performance and in the content she creates. Whereas embroidery can represent "the beauty of the female imagination," (Beaudry<sup>3</sup>) it can also symbolize the way that the Feminine Ideal created by patriarchal ideology corrupts and denies nature by repressing female subjectivity and agency. Nature designed May for "open-air activities," which, ironically is one of her chief attractions for Newland during their engagement (29). Although she is "not a clever needlewoman," the



“old pattern” demands that she do as other wives do, meaning that she must perform the rituals intrinsic to ideal femininity, signified here by the embroidering of the cushion for Newland’s sofa.

On the other hand, however, May’s performance of embroidery suggests psychological, sexual, and physical frustration. She embroiders by “laboriously stabbing the canvas,” a description that metaphorically mimics sexual penetration. Perhaps, Newland has shut out more than May’s subjectivity. After all, if he thinks constantly of Ellen, then he might find it difficult to make love to his wife, especially considering his growing dislike of her. If she is suited for rigorous physical activity, possessing an aggressive physical energy, then some of that energy must also exist in her sexuality. Because May knows that Newland is intellectually, emotionally, and sexually attracted to and invested in Ellen, any denial of May’s need for attention, sexual or emotional, would cause the frustration manifested in her “stabbing.” Furthermore, the physical strain, indicated by her “tired” appearance and by the “labourious[ness]” of her needlework, shows that May battles against her nature in order to demonstrate her “devotion” to her husband and the ideological system he represents. Indeed, in her book *Edith Wharton’s Women: Friends and Rivals*, Susan Goodman offers one of the few scholarly interpretations of May that acknowledges how May’s embroidery “denies her the active, physical life to which she is suited” (98). Goodman also recognizes that marriage “demands that [May] surrender a part of her identity” and points to the above scene of embroidery as a signification of that surrender (97). Newland “prefers to see [May] as a type rather than as an individual,” Goodman explains, “and the picture of her at her work-frame is another in a long tradition of women immortalized doing similar

handiwork”(98). May’s embroidering, implies Goodman, assists in Newland’s disappointed characterization of his wife as a simple and vacant copy of “women immortalized” in “handiwork.” This handiwork indicates their powerlessness and lack of individual subjectivity, making them, in other words, into ideally feminine women.

Newland’s growing dissatisfaction for his wife’s apparent inability to step outside of the “long tradition” of ideal femininity and his systematic, ritualistic life with her manifests first in his “secret dismay” that May’s mind is as devoid of imagination as her heart of “poetry and romance.” Newland centers all his frustration and anger upon May, seeing her, Goodman says, “as the symbol of all that is rigid, oppressive, and stifling” (96). Newland views May as the figurehead and author of the pattern by which he will become “a Mr. Welland,” and a moment later, he fantasizes that May will “die soon—and leave him free!” (178). His morbid fantasy puts something “strange” in his eyes, leading May to question if he is ill, and again, embroidery enters the scene:

She bent over her work-frame, and as he passed he laid his hand on her hair. “Poor May!” he said.

“Poor? Why poor?” she echoed with a strained laugh.

“Because I shall never be able to open a window without worrying you,” he rejoined, laughing also.

For a moment she was silent; then she said very low, her head bowed over her work: “I shall never worry if you’re happy.” (178)

May’s subjugated posture—with her head “bent over her work-frame”—indicates to Newland that she embodies the passive, repressed Feminine Ideal. Newland’s gesture, standing over her with his “hand on her hair,” moreover, places him firmly in the role of

the superior, dominant male subject. His pity for her, additionally, reintroduces his spurious wish for May's early death, although it also may suggest that he feels a measure of sorrow for the wish and for the fact that she seems oblivious to it.

May only *seems*, however, to be oblivious. Since both Mary Beaudry and Roszika Parker point out that embroidery in nineteenth-century America almost always signified ideal femininity, then when a woman embroidered, she would immediately be associated with that ideal by whomever was around her. If the symbolic association with the Feminine Ideal and embroidery was so common, then May's embroidery must assist in solidifying Newland's belief in her simplicity, her transparency, her inability "to surprise him," and her "silent," passive acceptance of his authority as validated by the patriarchal ideology of New York society. Yet, her "strained laugh" and her "silent" momentary pause before subjecting herself vocally to Newland and patriarchy indicate that behind the "curtain" of ideal femininity that embroidery in part assists Newland in reading onto May, an active individual subjectivity seems to undergo a stressful struggle. When we combine the evidence of a struggling subjectivity in the laugh and the pause with the physical strain Newland notices in May before dinner and the more violent imagery of May's hand "stabbing the canvas" as she embroiders, we understand the magnitude of May's individual struggles. May is involved in a battle for survival and for love. In an oppressive, repressive ideological system that demands that she subjugate her natural inclinations and desires to unnatural social norms and standards of behavior, May gets caught in a tragic paradox: she must hide any sexual energy, passionate depth of feeling, or individual subjectivity behind a performance of the Feminine Ideal; but Newland does not see through the performance, leading him to "pity" his wife and even to wish for her

death instead of recognizing that she possesses the very qualities he claims that he desires and that he sees in Ellen.

Newland might pity May, but he might pity her far more if he recognized the depth of the sacrifice she makes in choosing to embody an ideal that forces her to hide the passionate nature of her love. The authenticity of May's powerful love for Newland first becomes evident in St. Augustine. When she interprets Newland's desire to hasten the marriage as love for her, her "happy tears" and rare physical demonstrativeness surely symbolize a deep relief and much desired confirmation that her love is indeed returned. Evidence of May's love also manifests later in the novel, after Newland returns from his clandestine meeting with Ellen in Washington. The hardness in May's voice when she speaks of Ellen, the perceived lack of sensitivity to Ellen's situation, and May's repeated comment that Ellen should "perhaps return to her husband" (133) all become illuminated with meaning by the revelation that May loves Newland deeply and genuinely and that she is afraid to lose him to Ellen. But even feminist investigations of the novel deny May such strength or depth of affect. Linette Davis, for instance, in her article "Vulgarity and Red Blood in *The Age of Innocence*," holds May up as an example of how shrewdly she plays her part despite the ignorance that her socialization attempts to enforce upon her. Davis, in fact, claims that "May is the only one," out of all the novel's characters, "to whom we can ascribe a knowledge at least as comprehensive as our own" (3). Rather than jumping into an exploration of May's "knowledge," however, Davis turns to Ellen instead. She discusses Ellen's deep love for Newland but does not recognize such a capacity in May, leaving an implicit understanding that, while May might be the most knowledgeable, she might also be the most devoid of love. The "happy tears" and the

warm embrace upon confirming that Newland does after all want to marry her imply that May genuinely cares for Newland as do her selfless statement to him later that she worries only for his happiness (178) and the “hardness” in her attitude towards Ellen.

May’s very legitimate concern that Newland desires to run off with Ellen, or at least to embark upon a spurious adulterous affair with her, gives Newland his final glimpse into May’s individual subjectivity, offering him a last chance to enter into a space of ideology critique with her and to discover the depth and complexity of character, thought, and love of which she is capable. Just as in St. Augustine, Newland

became aware of the same obscure effort in her, the same reaching out toward something beyond the usual range of vision.

“She hates Ellen,” he thought, “and she’s trying to overcome the feeling, and to get me to help her overcome it.”

The thought moved him, and for a moment he was on the point of breaking the silence between them, and throwing himself on her mercy.

(189)

But just as he considers reaching out to her, she turns the conversation to the family’s reaction to Ellen’s recent behavior. Newland responds “with an impatient laugh,” seeing her turn to family opinion as the ultimate proof that May has never nor will ever exist as an individual, as one in possession of a critical subjectivity, a vivid imagination, or deep feelings. He obviously believes that his wife remains incapable of moving “beyond the usual range of vision.” His reaction is to change the conversation, reverting to the typical superficialities of the “hieroglyphic world” in which they exist. Had he bothered to push past his impatience and try to interpret the significance of May’s “obscure effort,” he

might have seen that hate can only exist in combination with love. The real struggle May is attempting to “overcome” is the battle for her husband, and the “feeling” under which she labors is love for him and for herself rather than hate for Ellen.

Indeed we might see Newland’s misreading of May as a sort of psychic violence to her subjectivity and identity. Now, certainly I do not propose that Newland should bear the sole responsibility for this violence. The rigid maintenance of the “system” by a firmly entrenched patriarchal ideology provides the root cause for Newland’s and May’s mutual entrapment in a marriage built upon “ignorance” and “hypocrisy.” The fact is, though, Newland *did* marry May, and he did so firmly believing that the love was all on her side since he was already in love with Ellen. Marrying May when he could not return her love, then, can be viewed as a sort of violence since, if he had been honest with May that day in St. Augustine, she might have chosen to marry someone else who loved her first and most of all. Even if she had chosen to marry Newland despite his preference for another, at least she would have been able to make an informed decision. But by lying to her, Newland inhibits May’s agency. He keeps her ignorant so that she cannot make an informed decision for her own future, and taking away an individual’s ability to be enlightened and to make free choices does amount to a sort of violence.

This violence may not manifest in injuries to the body; rather, it manifests in injuries to the mind and heart. For May and women like her, the consequences of this invisible damage seem more disturbing because they are ignored, denied, repressed, and silenced. Newland feels conflicted about his marriage to May in part because he feels troubled by limitations placed upon women’s identities, wondering at one point “why his bride

should not have been allowed the same freedom of experience as himself” (30). His growing familiarity with Ellen further problematizes his ability to continue to accept his previously “undisturbed belief in the abysmal distinction between women one loved and respected and those one enjoyed—and pitied” (61). While Newland may believe he is ready to grant women freedom and to make exceptions for women like Ellen who, “naturally sensitive and aloof,” get “drawn into a tie inexcusable by conventional standards” (61), his interactions with his bride-to-be demonstrate that his liberality is neither wholly genuine nor equally applied.

Because Newland “easily classified” May as a “‘nice’ woman,” designed to be “loved and respected,” ironically, he eliminates the possibility that she can be anything else. It is he, in fact, who creates the conditions that force her into her predestined role by silencing her in key moments when she breaks form and attempts to embark upon a critical engagement with the ideologies that define the “old pattern” to which she is supposed to adhere. The first of these key moments occurs in Chapter Nineteen when Newland arrives at the Welland vacation home in St. Augustine. The visit shows us a troubling vision of the marriage to come—one in which woman’s individual subjectivity will be silenced. Newland asks May to tell him about how she passes her days, but as she speaks, her words lose the power of signification, for they fall upon deaf ears: “To let her talk about familiar and simple things was the easiest way of carrying on his own independent train of thought” (88-89). While May’s “talk” might not stimulate Newland’s intellect, the fact that he would rather immerse himself in “his own independent” monologue rather than attempt to have a dialogue with May becomes a form of silencing by denying her words any signifying power. Taken alone, this incident appears un-noteworthy—after all, most

of us have allowed our minds to wander while listening to the petty details of our loved ones' days. When viewed together with Newland's and May's troubling conversation with which the chapter ends, however, the impending marriage becomes far more worrisome as does Newland's disappointment with his future wife.

Consumed by his own dissatisfaction with the "artificial" creature with whom he is to be permanently united, Newland does not consider that May also might feel troubled or discouraged. Yet as he pushes her this final time to marry him sooner than planned, she steps momentarily outside the rigid patterns of convention by refusing to follow "that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant' in which they had both been brought up" (17). For at least a few minutes, May's gaze "changed and deepened inscrutably," and she asks Newland outright if his desire to hasten the marriage is because he has "someone else" (92). As she confronts Newland with this question, she "seemed to grow in womanly stature and dignity," forcing him, probably for the first and last time, to speak to her genuinely, to really and truly *hear* her and to see her as a fully developed individual subject. Catching him off guard with her pointed, unconventionally honest question, Newland falters: "She seemed to catch the uncertainty in his voice, for she went on in a deepening tone: 'Let us talk frankly, Newland. Sometimes I've felt a difference in you; especially since our engagement has been announced'" (92). By speaking "frankly," May momentarily becomes the "bad subject." If the code of conduct dictating their lives demands a resolute determination to "ignore the 'unpleasant'" and to communicate only in "hieroglyphic[s]," then by speaking "frankly" about "real" thoughts and feelings May deviates from normative material practices. And if she deviates from the material



practices of ideology, then she must indeed “have other ideas in [her] head,” suggesting that she has entered a blank space of possibility where ideology critique can occur.

Newland, of course, dodges her question and silences her first by brushing off her perception of his “difference” as “madness” and second by misleading her in regards to the identity of that “someone else.” The “someone else,” the reader recognizes, is Ellen Olenska, the real reason he has fled New York for St. Augustine. And May, though she might possess conscious knowledge of this growing attraction, reveals to Newland that she is not so ignorant or innocent as he or her parents imagine: “You mustn’t think,” she tells him, “that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices—one has one’s feelings and ideas. And of course, long before you told me that you cared for me, I’d known that there was someone else you were interested in” (93). Her reference to his already terminated affair with Mrs. Thorley Rushworth, though, rather than opening his eyes to possibilities of depth, thought, and feeling that her statement reveals she is capable of, produces in him only a sense of relief, a relief that results from his belief that her powers of perception are as limited as he wants to believe.

And yet, she continues to push past the boundaries of polite conversation into an unmapped “blank page” of possibilities in which “when two people really love each other . . . there may be situations which make it right that they should—should go against public opinion” (93). If Newland were ready to conceive that his bride-to-be manifests a “depth” of subjectivity far beyond what he and her upbringing allow, then his realization that “There was something superhuman in an attitude so recklessly unorthodox” (93) should have given him the impetus to leap into the “unorthodox” along with May. She, it is obvious, has entered into a space of possibility, and the stutter in her words as she

grapples with the possibility that sometimes going “against public opinion” is “right” shows that she is in the process of critically negotiating with ideology. If Newland’s earlier worries about May’s rigid adherence to convention and superficiality, or, rather “unreality,”<sup>1</sup> represented a concern for her life as well as his own, then he could have embarked with her onto this uncharted path, into this blank space of possibility. Here and now, had Newland opened himself to possibility with May, they could have chosen to act as “bad subjects.” For, “if other problems had not pressed on him he would have been lost in wonder at the prodigy of the Welland’s daughter urging him to marry his former mistress” (93).

Entirely immersed in these “other problems,” however, which, we suspect revolve around his nascent attraction to Ellen and the mental and emotional disruptions this causes for him, Newland decides not to “wonder.” May reaches out to him, invites him to explore the possibilities of genuine, honest, truthful conversation. She expresses thoughts and feelings that her upbringing is supposed to repress or eliminate as she attempts to explore the possibilities of the “bad subject” that might allow them both to escape the choking ideological system of their society. But, bent upon covering his tracks and achieving his goal of an earlier marriage, he closes the space of possibility by turning their conversation back to his wish to defy the “stupid conventionalities” of their society by “marrying quickly” (94). He turns the conversation in order to save himself from his own unruly passions, but in the process, he stops a conversation that could have both changed their lives and altered the “old pattern” dictated by ideology. May does not answer his renewed request with words, but rather, “[s]he flushed with joy and lifted her face to his; as he bent to it he saw that her eyes were full of happy tears” (93). He

interprets her “flush” as one of “joy” and her “tears” as a “happy” understanding that he loves only her after all and that she need not trouble herself with such deep thoughts ever again. He believes that she happily accepts the continuance of the “old pattern” and feels “disappointed at the vanishing of the new being who had cast that one deep look at him from her transparent eyes” (93). Newland thinks this “new being” has disappeared forever, repressed under the many layers of education and subjectivation that girls like May undergo, and the fact that he marries her despite this perceived loss suggests that he is worse than just selfish and blind. Newland is the worst kind of cynic, one who recognizes that ideology is false but yet still continues to follow the rituals of that ideology (Žižek 314). Because he wants to continue the ritual despite his increasing disbelief in the ideology that manifests in the ritual, then May is required to continue the ritual as well, for as a woman in the patriarchal society of Old New York, she must passively accept his decision as is required of an ideally feminine “good subject.” The space of possibility that she tries to open wide is forced closed by Newland’s belief that the “new being” is indeed gone, replaced by the “transparent,” shallow propriety of this “product of the system.”

Despite Newland’s disappointment in May’s supposed transparency, and despite his love for Ellen, which he admits to her very shortly after returning from St. Augustine, he firmly decides that he does not “mean to marry anyone else” (104). He knows that he “cares for” Ellen and admits it to her, but he is even more unwilling to break the “old pattern” than May in order to approve of and assist with Ellen’s divorce so that he might marry her himself. So, he marries May, taking his place in the carefully wrought design into which their lives must be made to fit because “she had represented peace, stability,

comradeship, and the steadying sense of unescapable duty” (126). The marriage ceremony has not even ended, however, before Newland’s thoughts “wander adrift far off in the unknown,” which, of course, means that he has been thinking of Ellen (113).

The fact that Newland’s thoughts on his wedding day revolve around a woman other than his bride, a woman with whom he is in love, foreshadows grave consequences for his marriage to May. In fact, very shortly after they return from their honeymoon, Newland realizes that something seems amiss with May. At first, he feels only mildly discouraged or disappointed with what he perceives to be an absolute inability in May to learn or to access more complex levels of thought. At the summer archery competition at Newport, he makes this observation about May:

she had the same Diana-like aloofness as when she had entered the Beaufort ballroom on the night of her engagement. In the interval not a thought seemed to have passed behind her eyes or a feeling through her head; and though her husband knew that she had the capacity for both he marveled afresh at the way in which experience dropped away from her. (128)

Newland feels disturbed by his wife’s seeming capacity to maintain a mind as fresh and simple as it was when she was a little girl, and he does not understand how she can allow “experience” to roll off of her without having any visible impact. Because May’s feelings, thoughts, and experiences make no visible or perceptible impact upon her in his view, then he believes that they make no impact at all. Because the scene in which May embroiders has already shown us that her seeming simplicity in fact veils active agency, an iron will, and a subjectivity involved in complex negotiations with ideology, we know

that she only performs rather than embodies the simple-minded, emotional “aloofness” that the ideological norms of patriarchal New York demand. Just because Newland “had never yet lifted that curtain” of May’s apparent “niceness” does not mean that only “emptiness” resides behind that curtain (129).

May is anything but “a negation” (129); though, ironically, Newland’s belief that her mind is really as seemingly “transparent” and empty as her eyes appear leads him to expose himself and his care for Ellen, providing us with the textual moments that prove May’s complexity as a subject and that it was she who was “handling the reins” the whole time (*Age of Innocence* 32). For, as Newland and May settle into married life, the text shows us that May knows that Newland cares for Ellen. For instance, May repeats several times that she thinks Ellen should probably return to her husband (17, 90, 133, 166), making sure each time that her “clear” voice reaches Newland’s ears. Newland notices “a tinge of hardness that he had never noticed before in her frank fresh voice” (133). Rather than thinking about what this new “hardness” might result from, however, Newland, much like he did in St. Augustine, does not stop to “wonder” at the change but rather promptly runs off to Boston to spend the day with Ellen. Shortly after his return, the family has gathered to discuss the growing Beaufort scandal when the conversation turns to Ellen and her disgrace: “A sudden blush rose to young Mrs. Archer’s face; it surprised her husband as much as the other guests about the table. ‘Oh *Ellen*—’ she murmured” in an “accusing and yet deprecating tone” (157-58). Now, by itself, May’s exclamation could easily be interpreted as resulting from her distaste for “unpleasant things” or for anything “vulgar” such as a woman who flouts the social conventions and ideologies that dictate May’s life. Indeed, such an interpretation would fit well in line

with the popular critical opinion of May and what she represents. But only a page prior to May's "accusing" and "deprecating" vocalization of her cousin's name, we are told that the annual Thanksgiving sermon given that very morning was "a text from Jeremiah (chap. ii., verse 25)" (155-56). It just so happens that this particular verse contains a warning to adulterers. The close spatial proximity of the text's allusion to adultery and May's surprising blush and exclamation strongly suggest that May, just as she was not as ignorant and innocent as her parents believed, neither is she as blind and insensible as her husband believes.

May has far more knowledge and experience than anyone previously has been willing to give her credit for. In fact, at the end of the chapter, Newland finally becomes aware of May's depth of understanding. He finally realizes that she and the family have suspected all along, that they have been operating and consulting about the situation behind his back, and that she knows he is running off to Washington not for business but to see Ellen (161-62). Moreover, because each revelation Newland makes about May is coupled with a comment about the clearness or transparency of her eyes or her voice, one must suspect that Newland's perception of the meaning of that clarity is incorrect. If Newland's perceptions of his wife thus far have been wrong, then we might be tempted to see his revelation about her knowledge of his real purpose for visiting Washington as a misinterpretation of her as well. But it is upon his return from seeing Ellen in Washington that the scene of embroidery occurs and where it is revealed that May has made an active, conscious choice to perform ideal femininity despite its unnaturalness and to adhere to the "laws" of ideology. In all probability, then, her "sudden blush" suggests that she has either already made or is at the point of making the decision to choose the life prepared

for her by the ideological system of New York society, a decision guaranteeing both that she will get to stay close to her love, Newland, and that she will get to survive.

Survival for women in nineteenth-century America, especially for women of the “society” class, would be ensured by a good marriage, and May sees in Ellen’s tenuous hold on financial security—and thus survival—what happens when women do not marry well and then maintain that marriage at all costs. It is Ellen’s struggle as a disgraced woman and her ultimate exile from New York, though she does finally get financial security, that most clearly demonstrates the consequences the “bad subject” faces if she does not “work alright by [her]self.” May also serves as a demonstration of the repressive power of ideology and the consequences for the “good subject” who does “work alright by [her]self.” The consequences that May symbolizes may be less visible, less vocal, and less violent than Newland’s or Ellen’s, but May stands, in a way, as a more chilling warning. At the end of the novel, her individual subjectivity gets subsumed—much like Hester’s gets subsumed in *The Scarlet Letter*—and May becomes the object of an “innocent family hypocrisy” amongst her husband and children because of “[h]er incapacity to recognize change” (208).

Lacking in perceptive powers or not, though, May’s existence represents a tragedy. Though she possesses agency and intelligence, and has the capacity to negotiate with ideology and does so at a few key points in the text, her choice to embody ideal femininity and uphold the patriarchal ideology of New York society suggests that Wharton writing in the second decade of the Twentieth Century may see this as a choice that most women are required to make. May symbolizes a step backwards in the development of the American female subject—a regressive step that embroidery assists

in demonstrating. The possibility of rebellion that May opens in her few truly genuine interactions with Newland closes because he is unwilling or unable to recognize her subjective attempts to negotiate with ideology. She is subjugated entirely to the hail of the law, fully interpellated by the end of the novel. Newland, and by default the very “system he belonged to and believed in” (28), ensures that she embodies “the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern” (28).

Newland silences her in each of the few moments that she steps outside of the “inexorable conventions” of thought and feeling imposed upon them by the ideological system, and her unwieldy but dutiful embroidering shows that she is far more imprisoned than either Newland or Ellen. May, if she could pursue her natural interests and abilities, would spend her time in “open-air” activities, very like the goddess Diana with whom she is so frequently compared. Instead, as an unnatural product of ideology, May believes that her only option is to do what “other wives” do. She must perform a role that demands that she appear as if all “the thoughts in her head” were as transparent as her eyes, turning into “a copy of her mother,” or, in other words, to subjugate her individuality and her subjectivity to what society and her husband demand (177-78). Perhaps, as many argue and as Newland believes, May has too little imagination or sensitivity to break away from the “inexorable conventions” of their society. But then perhaps, as the frequent analogy with the virgin goddess Diana as well as the subtle hints of violence that occur in the text prior to their marriage suggests, that, under different circumstances, May might have wished to remain a virgin like Diana.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to say, sadly, what May would have chosen to be and to do if the constraints of patriarchal ideology as practiced in nineteenth-century New York society did not exist, because the reality of her ability to



survive and thrive denies her any such choices. She gets silenced by Newland and by the text at the end of the novel as she recedes behind the veil of ideal femininity that activities like embroidery signify. Her individual identity is concealed permanently behind the veil, and that is precisely the point of her character as Wharton designed it.

The tragic repression of May's ability to have creative vision, imagination, or rebelliousness suggests a number of ideas about Wharton's early twentieth-century view of 1870s New York. For one, it demonstrates Wharton's highly critical attitude regarding the empty ritualistic practices necessary for maintaining the hegemonic forces of New York society ideology. May's relegation to the "old pattern" of unquestioning obedience could also symbolize a larger political context in which, as the success of women's suffrage neared, women increasingly drew the ire of branches of both the RSAs and the ISAs. Wharton, as an avid believer in women's rights, presents May as a sad example of the stultifying effects of "this elaborate system of mystification" (*Age of Innocence* 29) that designs ideal femininity at the expense of individual subjectivity. For even in the 1920s when Wharton wrote the novel, the social and intellectual possibilities for women remained nearly as rigidly bound by patriarchal ideology as they were fifty years before when the novel is set. Indeed, in her book *Feminist Readings of Edith Wharton: From Silence to Speech*, Dianne L. Chambers points out that Wharton often "uses male narrative filters" in her fiction as a strategy that shows how "female characters become imprisoned by male stories" both in fiction and in life (23). Newland's story—the interpretive lens that he applies to May—does in fact "imprison" her by denying her individual subjectivity an outlet. May is forced to choose silence along with marriage.

Hermione Lee, moreover, in her biography of Wharton, explains that Wharton lamented the limited choices for women, which included either “[m]aterial advantage” or “sentimental romance” (12). With only these two choices available, Wharton believed, women were denied the right to have or display “intellect, independence, natural passion or professional ambitions” (12-13). *May* embodies Wharton’s concerns, serving as a poignant criticism of the ideological system of nineteenth-century New York society, patriarchal at its core. Embroidery in the novel symbolizes the physical, emotional, sexual, and intellectual struggles of the female subject in 1870s America; but Wharton’s recreation of historical New York and her focus on the ways in which this repressive society denies women both agency and subjectivity suggests that such conditions continue to exist in Wharton’s time. And if the performance of embroidery demonstrates that femininity is a “psychosocial product” rather than a biological imperative, then by pointing out that *May* embroiders to adhere to a behavioral norm despite her lack of natural ability or intellectual interest, the text suggests that the price for being a “good subject” is individual subjectivity and agency.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hermione Lee in her 2007 biography of Edith Newbold Jones Wharton, “The word ‘unreality’ is insistent in Wharton . . . A sense of unreality at some point comes over all those characters, like Lily Bart, who have been educated into social ambitions that go against their more natural desires” (12). Unreality here functions similarly to ideology—it is the feeling produced within the subject when the gap between ideology and material practice becomes visible, which exposes ideology as not “natural” but rather as an imaginary set of ideas created to make sense of the natural world.

<sup>2</sup> Newland’s contact with *May* at the ball symbolizes a cloaked violence that metaphorically alludes to the violence inherent in the ritual of consummating marriage. Newland “[caught] her to him and laid a fugitive pressure on her lips” and then “broke a lily-of-the-valley from her bouquet” (17). In this moment, Newland is a “fugitive” who steals from his “pure,” “ideal” bride-to-be what she may not have given willingly had he asked, and he “broke” the very symbol of her purity—the lily-of-the-valley, which alludes to the physical breaking that *May* will experience when she is sexually initiated. *May* appears discomfited by Newland’s forceful advance and “sat silent” afterwards. Her silence may be acquiescence and acceptance, or it may be fear and shock, a discomfiting preview of what her marriage will be like. In

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combination with the inherent physical violence symbolized in Newland's breaking off of May's lily from the bouquet, when he thinks of his impending marriage, he perceives Mrs. Welland's resistance to announcing the engagement early as only "simulate[d] reluctance" in which she has "had her hand forced, quite as, in the books of Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read, the savage bride is dragged with shrieks from her parents' tent" (29). One may easily read this passage as an ironic analogy designed to reveal the ridiculousness of the superficial and meaningless rituals of the "hieroglyphic world" of New York society. Yet, as Newland continues on this train of thought, we discover that he is only "placidly in love" with May, that he feels no passion, no fire of attraction towards her. And while he feels "oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured" by the tradition of women ingrained with patriarchal ideology, he also understands that he is supposed to desire this "artificial product" because it is "what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow" (30). Notice that Newland's "lordly pleasure" is to be gained not through melting the "image made of snow" but rather in "smashing it." The brutality implied in Newland's manly rights suggest that, while May is the product of a more "advanced," less "savage" culture, while her marriage does not evince "shrieks" of terror or resistance, there remains an element of violence in the marital unions of patriarchal New York society, which, in its treatment of women, has not "advanced" far beyond its "Primitive" ancestors.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSIONS

Joyce W. Warren, in her book *The American Narcissus*, argues that the very rebellious, grandiose, individualistic persona of early Americans participated in the repression of women. Since women have always been considered the ultimate “other,” Warren explains, and because the peculiar individualism in the American character prevented the individual from recognizing the “self-hood of the ‘other’,” women were denied both individuality and person-hood (14-15). Thus, while the American subject may contain an innate or essential rebelliousness, an excess of individualism that allows him to become larger-than-life, that subject is male. In fiction, the result of viewing women as non-persons manifests in women characters who do not get fully developed—women who lack substance or depth as individual persons. Warren’s book investigates the various ways that “classic American authors” construct women in fiction, concluding, ultimately, that, while a few individual authors sprinkled throughout American literary history—Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James to be specific—maintained a “detachment from *culture*,” which enabled them to create fully developed “autonomous” women, most authors, men and women alike, relegated women in fiction to a supporting role, passive, silent, and without interiority or individual subjectivity (257). Like Armstrong’s exploration of how the British novel helped to repress excessive individualism in order to ensure the functioning of society, Warren suggests that American literature has been historically engaged in a similar project, with the notable difference that in American literature, the repression of individualism was limited to only the female gender.

Gender roles in the United States imposed increasingly limited roles upon women, so that, by the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, standards for women's behavior and character—ideal femininity, in other words—were far more restrictive and repressive than they were in colonial America. The evidence for this regressive development of American women subjects lies in the fiction. More specifically, the types of material practices in which women engaged help demonstrate the constriction of the American woman subject through increased restriction on what material practices were appropriate for women to engage in and how women performed those material practices. Because of its universal association with femininity, embroidery as represented in fiction provides a unique and fruitful way to examine the ways that material practices, the “rituals of the ISAs,” as Althusser calls them, inscribe the subject into the ideological system of which he or she is a part.

If we accept Althusser's theory of subject formation, agreeing that the subject comes into being only through his subjection to the ultimate Subject—for Althusser, the Ultimate Subject of Christian Ideology was God, although in Patriarchal Ideology, the Ultimate Subject is Man—then women come into being through their subjection to men and to the patriarchal ideology that Man, as the ruling gender, creates and perpetuates. Indeed, my preceding investigation of *The Scarlet Letter*, “A New England Nun,” and *The Age of Innocence* seems to demonstrate the validity of Althusser's theory. Each of the three women included in my study seems to command less power of imagination, less excess of individualism, less propensity for rebellion than the one before. Hester mutinies against patriarchy and the limitations of ideal femininity both bodily and intellectually. She suffers the wrath of both RSAs and ISAs because she is a “bad subject,” but rather

than be cowed and subdued, she invests all the rebelliousness of body and mind into the fanciful artistry of her embroidery. Hester's embroidery makes clear that, while her body may behave according to ideology, her thoughts engage in a critical negotiation with ideology, carving out a blank space of possibility for her individual subjectivity to operate autonomously of her community and its belief systems. Neither Hester's crime nor her punishment subjugate her, and the creative, rebellious energy that emerges from her embroidery couples with her sexual revolt to open a space of possibility in which women might explore the possibilities of being "bad subjects" by engaging in a practice that makes them appear to be "good subjects." Louisa Ellis makes full use of the space opened by Hester, and her needlework, like Hester's, signifies that behind the veil of ideal femininity overlaid by embroidery, Louisa also possesses a subjectivity that defies the norm according to patriarchal ideology. Louisa's insurrection, however, remains at the level of subjectivity and does not manifest in an overt crime that draws the "intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus" (Althusser 135). Louisa remains content to exist within the space of possibility opened by ideology critique rather than to push against the boundaries of that ideology in a violent or overtly transgressive way. Louisa's needlework, when compared with Hester's, offers a similar source of pleasure and satisfaction and signifies a parallel desire for independence and autonomy, but it also provides less evidence of an excess of imagination or robustness of character. May Welland, finally, while she is robust, seems to lack an imagination almost entirely. At the end of the novel, May becomes a strongly anti-progressive force, and her embroidery allows us to see that, while she may have agency and a sense of individualism, it gets completely subsumed under her role as an ideal wife and mother—a

role that she chooses and that she embodies entirely. While May's material practices—her embroidery, that is—reveal the falseness of femininity far more prominently than they do for Hester or Louisa, May's material practices also suggest that they no longer provide the opportunity for ideology critique and rebellion that they once did.

The trajectory of development suggested by these three texts shows an American woman subject whose choices in the actual world seem to expand at the same rate that her choices in the fictional world contract. By 1920 when Wharton published *The Age of Innocence*, women were on the verge of gaining the right to vote, and the first wave of feminism was beginning to transform gender ideology, American patriarchy, and material practices. In the actual world, women actively challenged both the ideological and legal systems that denied them person-hood and citizenship, and the “detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus” were working overtime to subdue the increasing activity of “bad subjects,” that is, of women who refused to “work by themselves” within the terms of patriarchal ideology. Embroidery, in fact, became implicated in this revolt, seen by many early twentieth-century suffragettes as symbolic of the oppressiveness of patriarchy. Roszika Parker discusses the intersection of embroidery with women's rights at length, explaining that, while for some, embroidery was considered an art in which the complexity and imaginative capabilities of women was signified, for others, embroidery represented all the bodily and psychical repression that patriarchy imposes upon women's bodies and subjectivities. Especially as a tool of instruction, embroidery's detractors pointed out, the activity of needlework symbolizes a process of education that binds women in such a way that both their bodies and their minds remain languid, ineffective, silent, and passive. Unfortunately, the latter view of embroidery was far more prominent

than the former by the early Twentieth Century, and embroidery was held by many, Parker says, to be a rigid “demarcator of women’s sphere” (215). Embroidery, in other words, became an activity whose performance signified all that was unnatural and restrictive about gender roles within patriarchy. And early feminists attacked it as a practice that erased the division between the individuality of the subject and the signifying practices that embed her within ideology

If embroidery was a material practice that seemed to create the socially constructed category of gender as natural, then it would also seem to take away the capacity for individual agency. It would appear to be one of the material practices that assists in constituting the subjugated Althusserian subject by inscribing the subject into ideology. Agency does not really exist for the subject subjugated by the Ideological State Apparatuses of the ruling class in Althusser’s theory. But Althusser’s theory of subject formation and the role of ideology within that formation are based, of course, in a man’s perception of what defines subjectivity. And the paradoxical nature of the female subject that embroidery reveals in these three texts suggests that his theory contains irreconcilable flaws. Indeed, as Theresa de Lauretis and Sylvia Pritsch have established, gender is an Ideological State Apparatus, something that Althusser did not consider. If gender is an ISA, then gender norms as established by that ideology assist in removing the subject’s capacity for agency. Indeed, the increasing constriction of gender roles as revealed by the practice of embroidery in *The Scarlet Letter*, “A New England Nun,” and *The Age of Innocence* seems to show that gender, as an ISA, was becoming more carefully and more restrictively defined throughout the Nineteenth Century as the ideology attempted to remove women’s capacity for agency altogether.



But if the role of ISAs is to restrict and redirect a subject's agency into appropriate material practices, then it would seem that the material practice of embroidery as a ritual that inscribed the embroiderer into ideology would have closed the space of possibility for action or identity rather than opening it. In *Gender Trouble*, however, Judith Butler proposes an alternative to Althusser's subjugating model of subject formation. Whereas Althusser believes that the subject comes into existence only when he is hailed by the law and interpellated, or subjugated, into culturally defined identity categories (130), Butler proposes instead that "the 'subject' is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates" (182). For Butler, then, the subject does in fact have "some stable existence" prior to the "hail of the law," meaning that, perhaps, the subject can have an existence, an individual being, a subjectivity that is not fully subjugated.

In her book *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler builds upon her theory of subjectivity and agency from *Gender Trouble*. She proposes that the subject—or, rather, the "bad subject"—can refuse "the hail of the law," which seems to rupture ideology rather than maintaining its functionality. She asks:

Is there a possibility of being elsewhere and otherwise, without denying our complicity in the law that we oppose? Such possibility would require a different kind of turn, one that, enabled by the law, turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity, and agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence. Such a turn demands a willingness to be—a critical desubjectivation—in order to expose that law as less powerful than it seems. (130)

What Butler calls “critical desubjectivation” here alludes to the “reflexive meditation” of the “culturally constructed” subject that she defines in *Gender Trouble* (182). Once the subject is “enabled by the law,” in other words, once the subject has been “constructed” into ideological identity categories and vested with agency and being, Butler proposes the possibility that the constructed subject might be able to un-embed itself and to move into a space of possibility where being remains undefined, uncategorized, and therefore unsubjected to the hail of the law of ideology. This space of “critical desubjectivation” exposes the “law” of the need for the subject to subjugate himself as problematic and possibly even as false.

Perhaps, women’s material culture, then, provides women with the means to undergo a process of “critical desubjectivation,” if not for the women in fiction, then surely for the women who read that fiction. While Hester Prynne, Louisa Ellis, and May Welland all experience moments of “critical desubjectivation” in which they visibly negotiate with the constraints of ideal femininity and the gender ideology that produces it, none of them entirely successfully resists “the lure of identity” offered by the hail of the law. Hester’s subjectivity gets re-subjectivated because it is subsumed by Hawthorne’s narrative voice at the end, making it clear that she has ended her rebellion and fully embodied ideal femininity. Louisa resists the “lure of identity” that would make her a wife but ultimately ends up safely subjectivated as an “uncloistered nun.” May Welland becomes so embedded in ideology that she has no “capacity for reflexive mediation” by the end of the novel. Yet, these fictional representations of women and women’s material culture allow the reader to gain a capacity for mediation with culture and open the possibility that women “can be elsewhere and otherwise” than enmeshed within the ideologically created

identity categories for subject-hood, categories like “Feminine Ideal.” Because these women enter into critical negotiations with patriarchal ideology and the identity category of the Feminine Ideal, and because their embroidery helps us to see that gender is a “culturally constructed” Ideological State Apparatus, then Actual women who encounter these fictions can recognize their own abilities to act and to be beyond or outside of what “the law” proposes. While the space of possibility for “critical desubjectivation” closes for these three fictional women, their critical negotiations with gender ideology and approved identity categories as represented by needlework opens a space for readers to see that resisting “the hail of the law” is possible and that it is indeed possible to “exist elsewhere and otherwise” than within the repressive identity category of ideal femininity.

Embroidery as represented in these three works, then, helps us see that gender is only a performance rather than some essential part of the identity of the subject. As Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, gender is a performative, and “there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction” (176). Embroidery is what reveals to us that gender is indeed a “performative,” a fiction created by the ruling class—or gender rather—to ensure the subjection of the feminine to the masculine. Embroidery is the *supplement* that allows we the readers to look inside the category of Woman as constructed by ideology from outside that ideology so that we can embark upon “critical desubjectivation.” Though the fictional women who embroider become increasingly repressed, and while embroidery becomes a symbol of that repression by Wharton’s time, the moments when these women embroider reveal that it is not women who are *supplements* but femininity

itself. Embroidery helps us to recognize the misrecognition inherent within gender norms as constructed by patriarchal ideology. So, while the American woman subject as created in fiction develops regressively, the conditions of her repression and constriction get forced to the surface of the text because of embroidery, opening a space for actual women to rebel and to validate themselves as subjects.

The critique of patriarchal ideology as it has emerged and developed in the culture of the United States has come from an ideological space that values women, women's activities, and women's fiction—it has come from feminists, even before the term “feminist” existed. This critique has been an act of survival for women whose bodies and subjectivities have been so deeply embedded in the culture of patriarchy that their subjectivity has been almost denied existence. It was this silencing, this repression of women that led feminists like Adrienne Rich to argue for the practice of feminist theory and criticism. In “When We Dead Re-Awaken,” Rich writes:

Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is a part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (191)

For Rich and other feminists, the need to “Re-vision” past works of literature “is an act of survival” because the “assumptions” in which women have been “drenched” have all been men's assumptions about women. Women have been denied “self-knowledge,” they

have been denied the possibility for “reflexive mediation” of culture because society—and literature and literary theory and criticism—has been “male-dominated.”

By re-visioning a text from “a new critical direction,” one informed by woman’s experiences and subjectivities, we can look at how an activity like embroidery becomes both a source of pleasurable artistic creation and an inculcator of patriarchal ideology. In *The Scarlet Letter*, “A New England Nun,” and *The Age of Innocence*, embroidery in part comes to symbolize the increasing restrictions upon female subjectivity and agency that patriarchal ideology imposed in nineteenth-century American culture, but only for the fictional characters. Actual women can “re-vision” these texts, opening a space to negotiate with ideology because it is revealed as flawed, false, and unnatural. What the embroidery in these texts does is show us, as Ozzie J. Mayers points out, that “the act of sewing embodies a potential for self-reflection, linking a female tradition to the American experience” (667). If sewing “embodies a potential for self-reflection,” then it seems to create the possibility for “critical desubjectivation.”

In this investigation, I have examined the representations of needleworking women in Hawthorne, Freeman, and Wharton in order to show that needlework creates the conditions for subjects to negotiate with the ideologies that dictate their lives. In the process, I have discovered that the American woman subject does contain rebelliousness within her core. By engaging in the material practice of embroidery, Hester Prynne, Louisa Ellis, and May Welland become signifiers of the Feminine Ideal while simultaneously revealing that Ideal as the unnatural product of an ideological system that makes women passive, ignorant, naïve, and dependent in order to justify keeping them subjugated to the ruling masculine gender. Each of them rebels as a subject by entering

into a critical negotiation with her roles within patriarchal ideology, and while these fictional women are reintegrated into ideological categories of identity, their struggles and their stitching open a space for women readers to resist the “lure of identity” offered by the “hail of the law,” to be critical of ideology, and to enter into a space of possibility where “critical desubjectivation” might occur. *The Scarlet Letter*, “A New England Nun,” and *The Age of Innocence* provide us with three distinct re-visions of embroidery and of female subjectivity in American culture, but there remains an entire body of fiction, in the United States and around the world, in which women who sew also grapple with ideology. From Odysseus’s wife Penelope to Philomela, from Susan Glaspell’s unnamed quilter in *Trifles* to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, from Richardson’s Pamela to Isak Dinesen’s nuns in “The Blank Page,” needlework has always been associated with women and femininity. Even outside of the Western literary tradition, needlework appears in the hands of fictional women. If sewing—and embroidery in particular—is an activity “universally associated with women,” then a fuller investigation of how needlework gets represented in fiction would surely yield useful and interesting ideas and conclusions about how material practices, ideology, and women’s subjectivity intersect.

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