“Whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom”: Cultural revisionism in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Exeter, 2014

A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2016

Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate how Toni Morrison and Nathaniel Hawthorne both engage in the practice of cultural revisionism in their respective novels *A Mercy* and *The Scarlet Letter.* Standing as they do as two of the most towering figures of American fiction, Morrison and Hawthorne's work in their respective novels demonstrates that national self-definition through literature was not only a concern of early American writers now read more for their historical and ideological significance than for their literary merit – it is entrenched even in the nation's most celebrated fiction. Where these two authors, so different in their work itself and in its historical and cultural context, coalesce is in their shared belief that looking back at earlier American culture through literature, in contrast with the critical model of revision proposed by Van Wyck Brooks, is key to addressing the problem of America's canon. I am interested not only in the differences between the concept of a 'usable past' for Hawthorne and Morrison, but also in where the two are similar, and what that might tell us about how to conceive of America's canonical literature.

The national and the literary are closely linked in American culture. From the earliest literature in English that can be considered 'American', as opposed to texts by European explorers of the Americas or Native American oral literature, writers have tried to define their fast-changing nation through description and narrative. In *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630-51), William Bradford of the Mayflower attempts to "write the genealogical history of a people from its first origins" (Read 296) and locate this new colony's place in global history; more than a hundred years later, St. John de Crèvecœur's letter 'What is an American?' (1782) confronts its eponymous question in a more lyrical yet equally deliberative fashion. The authors of the two central texts of this thesis, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, both engage in this practice through more oblique but no less powerful techniques. Standing as they do as two of the most towering figures of American fiction, Morrison and Hawthorne's work in their respective novels demonstrates that national self-definition was not only a concern of early American writers now read more for their historical and ideological significance than for their literary merit – it is entrenched even in the nation's most celebrated fiction.

Among nations, the United States is not alone in its concern for self-definition, but the unique circumstances of its founding and relatively short recorded history surely encourage the strength of this inclination in its culture. Yet in the early twentieth century, this penchant for national self-reflection through literature went beyond the content of literary works themselves to permeate the critical conception of that most significant coalition of a nation's texts: its literary canon. Like the country itself, America's national canon was founded deliberately and with an eye to the Old World

of Europe. In his 1918 essay 'On Creating a Usable Past', the critic Van Wyck Brooks wrote that "European writers in general, never quite separate themselves from the family tree that nourishes and sustains them and assures their growth" (337); in contrast, Brooks felt that America had "no cumulative culture", not because its literary history was without worth but because "the interpreters of that past experience [had] put a gloss upon it which render[ed] it sterile for the living mind" (337). His essay is therefore a call for America's "creative past" (340) to be reinterpreted, a key aspect of this proposed approach to literary history being to disrupt a vision of the past that sees it as both static and unimpeachable. Rather than "compar[ing] the 'poetasters of today' with certain august figures of the age of pioneering who have long since fallen into oblivion" (337-8), Brooks implores his critical contemporaries to work to reveal "that others have desired the things we desire and have encountered the same obstacles". For Brooks, the aim of this goal is to "throw an entirely new face not only over the past but over the present and the future also", in order to "bring about … that sense of brotherhood in effort and in aspiration which is the best promise of a national culture" (341). 'On Creating a Usable Past' was hugely influential in its own time, but what I am interested in in this essay is its resonances in two specific texts, one published decades before Brooks wrote his essay, and the other decades later. Nathaniel Hawthorne's seminal 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates that the problem identified by Brooks was a concern for writers even in the 19th century, whereas Toni Morrison's 2008 work *A Mercy* represent a new frontier of thinking about America's canon. Where these two authors, so different in both their work and its historical and cultural context, coalesce is in their shared belief that looking back at earlier American culture through literature, in contrast with the critical model of revision proposed by Brooks, is key to addressing the problem of

America's canon. Yet as I will go on to demonstrate, reflected in their two novels is the fact that the concept of a 'usable past' has very difference resonances for Morrison than it does for Hawthorne.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne returns to the Puritans to reclaim an English cultural heritage that he feels nineteenth-century American culture would be improved by, but in doing so comes up against the problem that the Puritans, at least in the national imagination that his novel is concerned with, deliberately detached themselves from both England and its culture, and artistic and aesthetic cultures in general. Similarly, when Morrison returns to colonial America in her 2008 novel *A Mercy*, a book whose episodic structure gives the impression that the reader is wandering through the American canon and meeting characters who might have sprung directly from some of its most significant texts, she must grapple with the inherent prejudices in early European-American culture. What must be noted when discussing Hawthorne and Morrison's respective concerns is the overt construction of an American literary canon during the century between the publications of *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Mercy*. In 1941, twenty years after Van Wyck Brooks called for a new way of reading America's literary past, F. O. Matthiessen published *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, a book widely agreed to have "ushered in … a new classical canon" (Jehlen 2). Taking a clutch of works published between 1850 and 1855 by Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman, Matthiessen's stated aims were to "assess [these texts] in relation to one another and to the drift of our literature since, and, so far as possible, to evaluate them in accordance with the enduring requirements for great art" (Matthiessen xi), and in doing so, his was "one of the first in what would be a series of attempts to characterize the 'Americanness' of American literature" (Graff 106).

Myra Jehlen traces a direct line from "the cultural history of [Van Wyck] Brooks" to Matthiessen's proposal of "a model of American literary identity" (2); thus the key difference between the idea of a 'usable past' in *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Mercy* is that while Hawthorne's work responds to the lack of any American literary tradition, Morrison's speaks to a firmly established canon that, like other Western canons, by 2008 had already had a long history of being troubled, disrupted and subverted by those whose voices it excludes – those who, as David W. Noble puts it, "had been denied a place in the imagined center of the nation … because Anglo-Protestant males defined them as peoples who were without history" (149). As my close reading of *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Mercy* and some of its multiple intertexts will demonstrate, Hawthorne and Morrison each strive to create their own forms of a "usable past" through their respective revisionist practices. Their work in these two novels demonstrates not only the concerns inherent in a national imagination that is simultaneously so proud and so ashamed of its history, both cultural and political, but also the powerful literary aesthetic brought about by the labour of cultural revisionism. Close to the novel's end, the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* proposes that "It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry, whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom", for "Each, in its utmost development, supposes a high degree of intimacy and heart-knowledge" (225). I would argue that it is this tension between hatred and love of America's cultural history that is the motivating factor for both Hawthorne and Morrison's deep and fruitful engagements with that past.

Hester Prynne's subversive aesthetic

My first concern in this project is to demonstrate a paradigmatic example of cultural revisionism through a reading of *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's celebrated novel is perhaps the best nineteenth-century example of how American novelists have tried to define their nation through addressing and revising its past; furthermore, it will become the key intertext to Morrison's *A Mercy* in the second chapter of this thesis. In focusing on Hester Prynne's artistic skill as a seamstress, I hope to illustrate not only that cultural revisionism through fiction began even before the presence of an American literary canon, but also that critical readings of *The Scarlet Letter* still have the potential to be revised, just as the novel itself is revised by Morrison in *A Mercy*. As the connections between Brooks' 'On Creating a Usable Past', Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* and the two novels that form the basis of this thesis make clear, the borders between critical and creative work are productively blurred when it comes to rereading the past.

The aesthetics of bodily adornment hold great symbolic value in *The Scarlet Letter.* From the eponymous letter A that Hester Prynne wears on her breast to the elaborate and beautiful clothes she designs and makes, Hawthorne threads rich aesthetics through this novel that is largely concerned with the consequences of the repression of any such pleasure. This binary, of aestheticism versus asceticism, can be read as a symptom of the paradoxical nature of Hawthorne's project in *The Scarlet Letter*. Frederick Newberry, in his book *Hawthorne's Divided Loyalties*, gives a useful overview of this undertaking and its various complications. He writes that Hawthorne had a "determination to recover an English aesthetic for himself and America" (167),

because he lamented the "lost cultural and aesthetic inheritance America experienced in the historical split with the mother country" (16). He "wish[ed] to emulate English authors" (Newberry 15), who were his greatest influence and whom he believed could provide America with a cultural heritage he felt it lacked. This concept of America's "impoverished culture" (Newberry 18) was brought about by Hawthorne's own feeling that he lacked "native aesthetic traditions and rich cultural continuities offering access and encouragement to a would-be artist" (16), exacerbated by his own position as a "Puritan descendent" (16).

In reclaiming this English cultural heritage, however, Hawthorne faced the problematic fact that those most associated with an early English presence in America, from whom he himself was descended, were also those who "did all they could to detach themselves from the ancient continuities [of their English heritage]" (Newberry 17). Hawthorne saw this detachment as "the historical roots of the barren aesthetic condition in which [he found] himself" (Newberry 21) in nineteenth-century America, a place whose literary tradition was determined to remain firmly split from Britain and its cultural traditions, as shown by the success of decidedly ahistorical writers like Emerson and Thoreau. Milton Stern writes that "Hawthorne's fiction emerged at a historical moment when nationalistic optimism, not dissent, ruled the literary marketplace" (26). Hawthorne cannot, therefore, claim a seventeenth-century New England cultural heritage for nineteenth-century New England's "impoverished culture" (Newberry 18), without first overcoming this problem of his own ancestors' desire to create this culture that they saw as new and superior and he saw as lacking in tradition. He defeats this obstacle by focusing *The Scarlet Letter* not on its Puritan characters who are well-established in Massachusetts, but on a trio of recent English immigrants, Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, who

present challenge to Puritan norms of behaviour. This paper will look specifically at how Hawthorne calls Hester Prynne into service in order to achieve his goal of reclaiming a New England cultural heritage that allows for aesthetics to be celebrated rather than vilified. By subverting the Puritan attitude towards art and artfulness through his portrayal of Hester, Hawthorne manages to reclaim that which the Puritans tried to supress. Hester is not an English character, but a symbol of the struggle between the Old and New Worlds that could only exist in the colonial New England context whose culture Hawthorne wants to reclaim. She is therefore a perfect emblem of this culture and the solution to Hawthorne's cultural paradox.

Newberry writes that "when [Hawthorne] creates the artistically beautiful scarlet letter … he clearly takes a positive stand at once against the dominating values of his contemporaries and his ancestors" (168). Newberry explains that "the recessive values in each century [the seventeenth century of the novel and Hawthorne's own nineteenth century] are nearly identical as expressed through Hawthorne's self-projected narrator", those "values" being the "resist[ance] or fail[ure] to consider either the value of art or alternatives to the narrow Puritan tradition" (168). The most obvious way in which this "stand" manifests itself in the text is indeed through the eponymous letter, worn on the chest of Hester Prynne. Although the letter is supposed to be a representation of shame for Hester, she sews it herself "in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread" (Hawthorne 50), thus fashioning her shame into an object of undeniable aesthetic beauty. The letter is so striking that it "[takes Hester] out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclose[es] her in a sphere by herself" (51). The letter is meant to publically mark Hester as someone who has committed the sin of adultery, and yet the language Hawthorne uses here is ambiguous. The letter has certainly made Hester

noticeable, as her punishers intended, but there is an implication she has elevated herself through her embroidery of it, or at least become separated rather than degraded. Many critics have commented on the apparent contradiction between the letter's institutionally prescribed purpose and its aesthetic power. Nina Baym, in her seminal 1976 work *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career*, argues that "[b]y making the letter beautiful, Hester is denying its literal meaning and thereby subverting the intention of the magistrates who condemn her to wear it" (138). Furthermore, she suggests that Hester is "play[ing] with that form [of the letter] in order to … make it capable of a sort of many-layered communication … [one which is] directly contrasted to the operation of the Puritan mind, forever anxiously codifying the phenomena of its world into the rigid system of its alphabet" (138). Similarly, and more recently, Sylvia Söderlind has suggested that "it is Hester's heart, her inner self, that transforms the A she is condemned by law to wear into something that is wholly her own" (66), since she is "an adulteress [who] acts like an angel of mercy", thus "[helping to] transform the collective imagination" into one that understands that people can be "other than what their labels indicate" (69). Hester's desire and ability to bring about this change is emphasised when, at the end of the book, she returns to Boston and continues to wear the letter, which has now "ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn" and is "looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (Hawthorne 227). Thus it is clear that Hester's embroidery of the A and this embroidery's effect on the letter's proliferation of meanings has been considered in depth by critics and continues to be an object of great scholarly interest.

An aspect of the text that has not been the subject of as much critical attention, however, is Hester's role as a seamstress outside the specific context of her embroidery of the letter. That the Puritans are disgusted by Hester's adultery seems

fairly self-evident, but in *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne is also addressing "Puritan America's conventional mistrust of art" (Newberry 167) through his portrayal of Hester and the Puritans' reaction to her. When Hawthorne first describes the letter on Hester's chest in the passage quoted above, he goes on to state that:

> [i]t 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 splendour in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony (50).

To suggest that the mark of Hester's supposed shame, imposed on her by those representing the institutions of her society, is a "fitting decoration" to her clothing implies that the clothes themselves have some sort of subversive power. Indeed, Hawthorne immediately confirms that Hester is dressed too luxuriously to have purchased her clothes in accordance with the laws of her society, so their "splendour" is another sign of her status as an estranged outsider within Puritan Boston. That Hawthorne refers to Massachusetts as a "colony" is significant here. Using a term such as "community" or "society" would have been equally effective in conveying the idea that Hester does not fit into Boston's homogenous population, but to invoke the fact that Massachusetts is a "colony" during this initial description of Hester complicates her estrangement and implies that she is a political outsider as well as a social one. Later in the chapter, Hawthorne does indeed reveal to the reader that Hester grew up in England, where she had a "happy infancy" (54) in a house with a "poverty-stricken aspect" that nonetheless "[retained] a half-obliterated shield of arms

over the portal, in token of antique gentility" (54). This image of the home of Hester's historically aristocratic English family is striking in the context of the "rude market-place of the Puritan settlement" (55) where she now stands. Milton Stern writes that, in the nineteenth century, "England [was] the envied object of resentment, the admired archenemy and archmodel of all American cultural pretensions" (75), and as Newberry argues, Hawthorne is addressing this concern of his contemporary culture through his portrayal of a time when Massachusetts and other colonies were not yet free from their restraints of the British Empire, and the inhabitants of those colonies even further from creating a cultural identity that did not define itself in reaction to America's relationship with Britain and its culture. In this context, the connection Hester still feels to her "monarchical, undemocratic, and aristocratically class-defined" (75) homeland explains both the clothes she is wearing in this crucial first scene and the estrangement from society that Hawthorne implies was present even before Hester was condemned to wear the A. Her status as a married woman from England who has been living alone in Massachusetts for "some two years or less … [while] no tidings have come of [her husband]" (Hawthorne 57-58) is seen as the cause of her "misguidance" (58); her unusual social position, even though she is not to blame for it, is seen by those who judge her as the inevitable prequel to her sinful behaviour because it deviates from the Puritan norm and has therefore haunted her since her arrival in Boston.

Furthermore, it is not just Hester's luxurious clothes that Hawthorne's Puritans see as subversive: her innate physical beauty also marks her as an outsider and seems to be a source of the suspicion that surrounds her. Hester is extremely beautiful: not only does she possess "regularity of feature and richness of complexion", she is "lady-like, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain

state and dignity" (50). This description is in direct contrast with the way Hawthorne describes the Puritans, who are rarely individualised but rather portrayed as a mass of indistinct figures, unlike Hester, who is set aside from them not only by her appearance but in the way she carries herself. Hawthorne begins the first sentence of the book's first chapter by describing "[a] throng of bearded men … intermixed with women" (45); similarly, the beginning of chapter two presents "a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston; all with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door" (47). Thus the inhabitants of Boston are portrayed as totally homogenous in both psychology and appearance, and Hawthorne's description of their clothing only adds to this effect, immediately setting up a group with which the individual figure of Hester will soon be contrasted.

Rather than admiring Hester's appearance, Hawthorne's Puritans regard it as an indication of her subversive qualities. When she is standing in front of the prison, the observers are "astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped" (50). Hester's beauty is such that it performs the act, shocking to the Puritan watchers, of transforming her transgressive behaviour into a "halo", thus associating adultery with the features of an angel, the emblem of goodness in Christianity. The fact that the Puritan watchers are "startled" by this perception speaks to the fear they have of any appreciation of aesthetics. Having established his depiction of the Puritans as a homogenous grey mass in the previous chapter, Hawthorne now goes so far in his portrayal of their vexed relationship with physical beauty that he compares the Puritan women with "the man-like Elizabeth" and describes their "broad shoulders and … round and ruddy cheeks" (48). The women talk about Hester and the punishment they think she should receive, and the "most pitiless of these self-constituted judges" is

also “the ugliest” (49). By contrasting Hester’s appearance specifically with that of the Puritan women, Hawthorne suggests in this early part of the novel that a Puritanical disapproval of any hint of female sexuality is at least partly to blame for the way in which other characters react to Hester’s modes of aesthetic self-expression, even when those modes are less explicitly sexual than her adulterous behaviour – and even when it comes to her essential physical appearance, which is out of her control. Thus aesthetics natural as well as man-made become a target of Puritan ire.

Whilst the “ugliest” of the Puritan women states that Hester “ought to die” for her sin because there is “law for it … both in the Scripture and the statute-book” (49), Hester has her own moral code. She refuses to name Dimmesdale as her partner in adultery, even though she is threatened with “transgress[ing] beyond the limits of Heaven’s mercy” and bribed with “tak[ing] the scarlet letter off her breast” (63). She is determined to “endure his agony, as well as [her own]”, and believes that “[her] child must seek a heavenly father” (63). Here, and throughout the rest of the novel, Hester demonstrates her ability to adhere to what she deems to be morally right. Her views do not seem immoral to a modern reader, but to the Puritans, who follow their own laws so closely and feel that their way of being Christian is the only true and morally valid way, Hester’s refusal to name her daughter’s father only strengthens their belief that she is condemned to hell.

Many other aspects of *The Scarlet Letter*, notably the A itself, complicate the relationship between symbol and meaning, but the Puritan women’s appearances are as closely aligned with their simple-mindedness as Hester’s beauty is with her “native energy of character, and rare capacity” (76). The Puritans link Hester’s beauty with her deviant behaviour because both her clothes and her natural beauty work to construct her as a heroine in the Romantic literary tradition, a genre that could not be

further from the principles of restraint and obedience valued by the Puritans in its endorsement of intense emotion and transgressive actions. However, Hawthorne cannot and does not avoid the issue of the Puritans' English heritage, which he portrays as being just as central to their character as Hester's background is to hers. He describes the Puritan women as being "of old English birth and breeding" whose aforementioned "ruddy cheeks … had ripened in the far-off island, and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England" (48). This commentary on the Puritan women's birth makes clear the problem Hawthorne faces in *The Scarlet Letter*: he cannot reclaim an English figure like Hester without to some degree reclaiming those who oppress her, whose values are so different to hers and to his, and yet who also descend from an English background.

In her introduction to the novel, Nina Baym argues that the Puritans "are not [Hawthorne's] subject … Hawthorne was neither a historical writer nor a realist" (xiv). Baym's argument that *The Scarlet Letter* is "about what goes on inside people … rather than what goes on outside and around them" (xv) is persuasive to an extent – she quotes Hawthorne's own words in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which he writes that "when a writer calls his work a Romance … he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel", and goes on to say that a romance "has fairly a right to present that truth [of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation" (qtd. in Baym xv). Baym states that the Puritans "who appear in [Hawthorne's] work are not presented as imitations of the real people who once lived" (xiv); similarly, Frederick Newberry takes care to use phrases such "Hawthorne's Puritans" or the Puritans' taste "as Hawthorne presents it" (17). However, Newberry

is not suggesting, as Baym is, that Hawthorne's Puritans are historically inaccurate, but rather that he brings out certain aspects of their culture in order to contrast them with Hester's subversive qualities. As Leland S. Person puts it, Hawthorne "conducted his research, often reading extensively in historical sources, but he frequently changed facts in order to suit his own imaginative purposes" (16). Hawthorne was not disinterested in historical accuracy, but since he was "using historical distance as a way of dealing with volatile contemporary issues" (Person 16), it was not his only concern.

However, even if Hawthorne's Puritans are not always perfect representations of historical truth, Baym's claim that the novel is purely one of individual psychology and thus disconnected from any wider political or historical background – "what goes on outside and around them" (Baym xv) – does not make sense in the context of Hawthorne's goal. I would argue that the way in which *The Scarlet Letter* delves so deeply into the psychology of its characters is a crucial aspect of Hawthorne's social, political and historical project. The difficulties of "the truth of the human heart" (Hawthorne qtd. in Baym xv) are intrinsically connected, in the novel, to their social context. As demonstrated earlier in this paper, Hester's status as a native English woman who is descended from "antique gentility" (Hawthorne 54) is almost as important as her adultery in causing her ostracisation by Puritan society. The richness of Hester's personal aesthetic is not just a feature of hers that acts upon the psychology of the Puritans, but a consequence of this Englishness. Thus Hawthorne's characters are not "removed from the real, exterior world" (Baym xvi); the historical context in which Hawthorne's characters live acts upon their individual and collective psychologies in a way that allows Hawthorne to explore issues of the national psychology, both in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

To return to the issue of Hester's aesthetic subversions, Hawthorne devotes an entire chapter, entitled 'Hester at Her Needle', to his protagonist's work as a seamstress. Hester is portrayed as a character who, although she thinks deeply, is also very much aware of the physical aspects of life. There is, of course, the fact of her adultery, which is primarily a sin of the body – merely desiring to commit adultery would fall under the sin of coveting. However, rather than ever describing Hester and Dimmesdale's sexual encounter, Hawthorne devotes many words to Hester's creative work, writing that despite the "sable simplicity that generally characterized the Puritanic modes of dress … the taste of this age did not fail to extend its influences over our stern progenitors" (74). Hester can therefore make her living producing clothes for "men assuming the reins of power" and "individuals dignified by rank or wealth", which involve "[d]eep ruffs, painfully wrought bands, and gorgeously embroidered gloves" (74). Hawthorne emphasises not only the aesthetic power of the clothes Hester makes, but also the physicality of the task: her clothes are described as having been "wrought by her sinful hands" (75), creating a link between the sin which now marks her body emblematically through the A and the clothes she makes using that same marked body. Ozzie J. Mayers describes Hester's work as a seamstress as "her capacity to interject herself into civilisation without losing that self" (674), and indeed the fact that Hester's "sinful hands" are making aesthetically beautiful clothes for the most important figures of Boston's establishment can be read as a subversion of the punishment that has been handed down to her by that establishment, since she is using a skill that, as I will now explore, possesses subversive qualities itself.

The clothes that Hester makes, and indeed the process of making them, are described in semi-sexualised language. Hawthorne writes that Hester "had in her nature 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" (75). The word "voluptuous", although not necessarily sexual in tone, nevertheless suggests an effect on the senses and thus the physical body. Hawthorne's use of "Oriental" implies that Hester's appreciation of aesthetics is such that it cannot be defined in Western terms, but instead by a culture that is utterly foreign to her Puritan surroundings, both geographically and aesthetically. Moreover, this intense relationship between Hester and the "productions of her needle" is one that has no equal anywhere else in her life. As a woman in seventeenth-century America she is, of course limited, by her gender in terms of her options for artistic expression, and Hawthorne is well aware that needlework is "the art – then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp" (74), and yet the language he uses to describes Hester's aesthetic taste suggests that he is not using the term "art" in its most traditional sense. His emphatic phrase "all the possibilities of her life", combined with the word "voluptuous", suggests that he is referring not only to artistic expression to but sexual expression as well.

Hawthorne goes on to state that "Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle" (75). Taken with the previous sentence, this statement can also be interpreted through the lens of sexuality, especially since we then learn that "like all other joys, [Hester] rejected it as sin" (76). The narrator comments on the extreme nature of Hester's reaction to the joy she takes in sewing, describing it as a "morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter [that] betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and stedfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong beneath" (76). There is a potential pun to be found in the description of needlework as an "immaterial matter", since it is undoubtedly material in nature, and indeed involves working with

materials. Whether Hawthorne intended this pun to be present or not, the connection between Hester's material needlework and the material nature of her sin is made explicit here: she has rejected all joy as sin, including this physical joy that is also her greatest skill, because her sin gave her joy. Although Hester sometimes makes elaborate clothes for important people, "[m]uch of the time, which she might readily have applied to she better efforts of her art, she employ[s] in making coarse garments for the poor" (75). That Hester feels this to be a form of self-deprivation speaks to the importance of aesthetics in her enjoyment of needlework; the physical aspect of it is not fulfilling if beauty is not created as a result. Nina Baym points out that needlework is "fundamentally non-social" (138), since it is carried out in the privacy of a woman's home, much in the same way that sex typically is. Hester's artistic skill is therefore linked by Hawthorne to her sexual expression which, although it occurs only once, and before the beginning of the narrative, confines her to using needlework as her primary form of expression, thus imbuing the needlework with sexual overtones.

If Hester's artistic expression is linked to her sexual expression, then it follows that her daughter Pearl, who is the most aesthetically subversive figure in the novel, is an artistic creation of hers just as the clothes she makes are. Pearl naturally has "no physical defect" (80), which is both suggestive of her mother's artistic powers and concerning to the Puritans, who see it as one of her "odd attributes" (88) when it is contrasted with the nature of her parentage. Her beauty is unearthly in its perfection, making her "worthy to have been brought forth in Eden" (80); it is therefore seen by the Puritans as subversive, since she was in fact brought forth out of sin, and thus one of the indictors that she might be a "demon offspring" (88). Pearl is so-called because she is "her mother's only treasure", rather than because she is "calm, white, [or of an]

unimpassioned lustre" (80), but even though she is too passionate a child to share the aesthetic features of a Pearl, she shares the aesthetic value of one. Hester might have named Pearl after something else "of great price" (80), but she chooses to make her namesake an object that is often used to adorn clothes and make jewellery. Although Hester is first depicted dressed in elaborate clothes of her own making, after she is released from prison she "[seeks] not to acquire any thing beyond a subsistence, of the plainest and most ascetic description, for herself" (75). During the scene in which Hester is brought out from the prison, the "ugliest" of the Puritan women, now referred to as "the most iron-visaged of the old dames" expresses a desire to "[strip] Madam Hester's rich gown off her dainty shoulders" objecting not only to the "red letter, which she hath stitched so curiously" (51), but also to the clothes onto which it is pinned. Hester is aware that her clothes are seen as even more inappropriate than they formerly were now that she has been convicted of adultery, so after her sentencing she wears clothes "of the coarsest materials and the most sombre hue" (75). Pearl, however, she dresses in clothes that "however simple, always impressed the beholder as if it were the very garb that became it best" (80). Furthermore, although Pearl's clothes are sometimes simple, they are never made of the rough material that Hester's are, but of "the richest tissues that could be procured", and Hester "allow[s] her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dresses which the child wore, before the public eye" (81). It is through Pearl, the product of the adultery that now mars her life and limits her self-expression, that Hester can truly become an artist and immerse herself in aesthetic beauty.

The subversive nature of this relationship between Hester's sin and her art is brought to a climax when Hester brings Pearl to Governor Bellingham's home. Hester

knows that some "leading inhabitants" of Boston think that Pearl is "of demon origin" (89) due to her wild behaviour and the circumstances of her conception. To subvert this notion, Hester performs an extreme version of her initial embellishment of the A by dressing Pearl, the result of the adultery that the A, at least in the eyes of the Puritans, represents, as the A itself, and doing so beautifully. Pearl wears "a crimson velvet tunic … abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread" (90). Hester's aim in doing this is to make incarnate the concept that Pearl, although she may be the result of sin, is "only capable of being loved" (100): Pearl is the scarlet letter, and yet she is Hester's only "happiness" (100) too. Hester's enunciation of this inspires Dimmesdale to speak on her behalf, resulting in Bellingham agreeing to let Hester keep custody of Pearl. Dimmesdale invokes Pearl's outfit, asking "Hath [Hester] not expressed this thought [that Pearl is both a blessing and a curse], in the garb of the poor child, so forcibly reminding us of that red symbol which sears her bosom?" (101). Thus Hester's aesthetic powers of representation triumph and she achieves her goal.

The end of *The Scarlet Letter* could not be conceived of as an entirely happy one, but it is here that Hawthorne finally resolves his question of how to reclaim an English cultural heritage that acknowledges the anti-artistic, anti-English nature of Puritanism whilst still claiming both art and England for America. When Dimmesdale dies, "[m]ost of the spectators testif[y] to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER – the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne – imprinted in the flesh" (223). The power of Hester's embroidery is such that the same A appears, or at least is imagined by many to appear, on the breast of the man who never publically suffers for his part in their mutual sin, thus subverting the letter's purpose of singling her out as an adulterer. After the deaths of Chillingworth,

Pearl receives "a very considerable amount of property" in his will and becomes "the richest heiress of her day, in the New World" (225). Having started her life as the product of sin and therefore feared and despised by Puritan society, Pearl is now the subject of a "very material change in the public estimation [of her]" and "might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all" (225) were it not for the fact that she and Hester leave Massachusetts soon after Chillingworth's death. Again, the power of Hester's art has altered reality, since Dimmesdale's death leaves Chillingworth's life with no purpose and his desire for revenge vanishes. Pearl's ultimate fate is never definitively revealed either to the Puritans and or to the reader, suggesting that her role in the novel is one of aesthetic symbolism; once the scarlet letter has been drained of its symbolic power through Hester's subversion of it, Pearl no longer has a part to play.

Hester, on the other hand, eventually returns to New England and "resume[s] the symbol" of the scarlet letter (227), which has "ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn" and is now viewed with "awe, yet with reverence too" (227). She counsels women on issues of "passion" (227), the letter now functioning as a symbol of her authority. Hester Prynne's decision to come back to New England, where she has a "more real life" (227) than anywhere else, is Hawthorne's reconciliation of the Old and New Worlds. Through Hester's success in "bringing the community to accept [the] letter on her terms rather than its own" (Baym 136) by way of her artistic talent, Hawthorne claims a colonial New England cultural heritage for himself that manages to acknowledge the dual forms of Englishness represented by Hester and by the Puritans, privileging the former whilst simultaneously making a space for the latter in his tradition.

Colonial visions and canonical revisions

If *The Scarlet Letter* is now deeply embedded within the American literary canon that Hawthorne longed for, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* is deeply engaged by Hawthorne's novel and other American texts that came to be seen as canonical through the twentieth-century critical work discussed in my introduction. Morrison's novel, which traces the fortunes of multiple and diverse characters in the colonial north-east of the country, is thick with allusions to other literary texts, including Hawthorne's most famous novel. In my second chapter, I will explore how Morrison utilises allusion to and ultimately revision of the American canon in order to construct a vision of early America that challenges traditional perceptions of the nation's past, thereby implicating its present and future in this new worldview. Although Geneva Cobb Moore has argued, in reference to *A Mercy*, that "Morrison is a literary parodist of American history" (16), and Valerie Babb has discussed how *A Mercy* "alludes to prenational documents [such as William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* and John Winthrop's 'A Modell of Christian Charity'] that demarcated lines of race, gender, and class in the cause of privileging an ideology of whiteness" (148), both those critics are more interested in how Morrison disrupts the cultural narratives created by traditional ways of conceiving of early American history than in the interaction between *A Mercy* and canonical works of American literature. My reading of *A Mercy* will begin by looking at how Morrison alludes and subverts the "ideology of whiteness" that is the Black Legend, for it is certainly true that *A Mercy* points to the role that this type of thinking played, and therefore still plays, in Anglo-America's

national imagination, and demonstrates the innate hypocrisy of such an ideology. I will then move to the ways in which the novel interacts with Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In turning her attention to these canonical works of fiction, Morrison performs a more complex authorial move of simultaneous homage and critique. Like Hawthorne, her concern in *A Mercy* is frequently more than one of history and historical narratives; it is deeply invested in the great joys and considerable drawbacks of America's literary canon.

It would be remiss at this point not to discuss Morrison's 1992 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, in which she reads into the work of some of America's most canonical writers "a real or fabricated Africanist presence [that is] crucial to their sense of Americanness" (Morrison 6). *Playing in the Dark* does not make direct reference to any of the texts that *A Mercy* alludes to, but the thematic connection between these two works of Morrison's cannot be denied; indeed, *A Mercy* is the novel of Morrison's that comes closest to performing, through fiction, the work of her earlier critical text. A representative example of the kind of work Morrison does in this book is her reading of Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Here, Morrison puts forward the idea of "closed white images" (33), "figures of impenetrable whiteness that surface in American literature whenever an Africanist image is engaged" (32-33). In *Pym*, this "impenetrable whiteness" takes the form of a "white curtain" and then a figure of a giant person, with skin "the colour of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (Poe qtd. in Morrison 31, 32); Morrison's argument is that this "whiteness" appears "almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control", and thus "function[s] as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness – a dark and

abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing" (33). Similarly, in *A Mercy*, Morrison brings to the fore the anxieties about blackness that permeate the canonical American texts with which her novel is intertwined – but crucially, the critical work she undertakes in *Playing in the Dark* is taken a step further in the novel. By encompassing texts such as *The Scarlet Letter* into *A Mercy's* own narrative, Morrison creates a space in those works for racial difference to be discussed openly rather than obliquely, facing head-on the uncomfortable truths about the American canon that such a discussion engenders.

The first canonical text to which *A Mercy* alludes is Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's 'Letter IX' in his 1782 collection *Letters from an American Farmer*. The hinge on which Morrison's revision of this text turns is the European and Anglo-American cultural narrative known as the Black Legend, the history and workings of which I will now briefly sketch.

Dating from approximately the mid sixteenth-century, the Black Legend has historically been one of the most powerful tools that Anglo-America has used when defining its own identity. During the early colonial period in the Americas, Spain and England came to be the two most dominant of the European forces; thus with Spain as its most significant 'Old World' rival, Anglo-America began to configure this rival into a dark alter ego that represented all the evils of empire and colonisation that the emergent nation wished to separate itself from. In their introduction to *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, the book's editors, Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo and Maureen Quilligan, establish the historical context, both political and socio-cultural, that led to the formation of the Black Legend in colonial New World discourse. The catalyst for the Legend is commonly agreed to be the writing of the Spanish priest Bartholomé de

las Casas, whose *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, published in 1552, describes a multitude of atrocities committed by Spanish colonialists in Hispaniola. As Greer, Mignolo and Quilligan point out, the fact that the basis for the Black Legend is a text written by a Spaniard is ironic, and yet this irony did not impede the *Account*'s success in instigating "a wholesale denunciation of the Spanish imperial project" by other European imperialists (Greer et al. 6), who "translated and republished [the text] over the centuries with each new conflict involving Spain and its European rivals or American colonies" (5). Thus it is clear that the Black Legend's influence was not limited to the historical moment in which it first appeared, but continued to be a crucial touchstone for other Europeans and their American descendants when they were once again faced with the Spanish 'Other'.

Greer, Mignolo and Quilligan also reference another of Las Casas' works in their introduction: the *Apologetic History of the Indies*, also published in 1552. They describe how, at the same time as he established his native Spain as a particularly brutal and merciless colonising force in his *Account*, in this text Las Casas plays a central role in the "Renaissance invention of colonial difference" (8) by delineating "four types of 'barbarians'" (6). Las Casas separates these 'barbarians' along different lines, the essential point being that no group that is not native to Europe can be considered 'civilised'. Despite his condemnation of Spanish colonialists, Las Casas – unsurprisingly, since he was Spanish himself – still viewed Spain and its people as 'civilised' by his definition of the term. However, Greer, Mignolo and Quilligan suggest that, in works such as *On the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Immanuel Kant, himself hugely influential, combined Las Casas' description of Spanish cruelty with his theories of racial 'barbarism' in order to argue that Spaniards were "leaning toward

the uncivilised" (Greer et al. 8). Thus in racialising others, Las Casas laid the groundwork for Spain to not only be demonised by Anglo-America and the Black Legend, but for that country and its colonies to be racialised and 'Othered' by those forces as well.

In her book *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire*, Maria DeGuzman approaches the Black Legend less from a historical perspective, and more from a theoretical, psychoanalytical and literary one. What makes Spain especially interesting to DeGuzman is how it functions as an alter ego for Anglo-American identity. After describing how France had to step back from the struggle for dominance over American territories to deal with crises in its other colonies, leaving Spain as Anglo-America's most significant rival, DeGuzman argues that because Spain was "geopolitically located in a more parallel [than Native Americans] … relationship with Anglo-American subjects" (xv), an essentialised image of Spain became a site for "a virtual or mirror image in front of which, in a libidinal dynamic of identification and disavowal, Anglo-American culture … ascends towards a seemingly unified and coherent imperial identity" (xvii). Anglo-America cannot help but identify itself with Spain, and yet this Lacanian move, DeGuzman suggests, results in both "identification and aggression" on the part of Anglo-America (xviii). Spain's image in the mirror thus becomes an "external threat" to Anglo-America rather than functioning as "internalized reassurance" (xviii) of its identity. Spain allows Anglo-America achieve an idealised image of itself, but in doing so becomes a rival that must be destroyed in order for Anglo-America to attain full hegemony within the USA.

Crèvecœur's use of the Black Legend in 'Letter IX" epitomises the way in which the Legend was used to define Anglo, northern America against both internal and

external 'Others'. The letter is narrated by the Pennsylvanian Farmer James, a "quasi-autobiographical figure" for Crèvecœur (Greeson 105)[1], and describes Charleston, South Carolina (which Crèvecœur refers to as Charles-town), a place that Crèvecœur himself had never seen (Greeson 109). As is characteristic of Crèvecœur's writing, he begins by giving his impressions of the city's location, its inhabitants, and their trades and modes of living. Even before Crèvecœur directly addresses the way in which slavery is practiced in this southern setting, the Black Legend's presence is evident in his words. The very first sentence of the letter analogises Charleston with Lima, in that "both are Capitals of the richest provinces of their respective hemispheres", and Crèvecœur immediately goes on to state that this similarity is expressed through "the appearances necessarily resulting from riches" that are visible in both cities. In Charleston, this takes the form of "a display of riches and luxury, inferior indeed to [Lima], but far superior to what are to be seen in our northern towns". Thus a sharp distinction is drawn between Charleston, representative of the southern United States, and the northern area of the country. Despite its British colonial history, indicated by no less than its English monarchical name, the southern city is aligned far more with the Spanish empire than with the Anglo-American territories to its north, in terms of both culture and enterprise.

That Crèvecœur disapproves of these "riches and luxury" on display in Charleston soon becomes clear. Although he does not explicitly condemn the wealth itself, he claims that Charleston's "climate renders excesses of all kinds very dangerous, particularly those of the table", and that "the rays of their sun seem to urge them irresistibly to dissipation and pleasure". This connection between Charleston's

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[1] For the purposes of clarity, I will refer to the text's author and narrator as Crèvecœur, since it can reasonably be assumed that he shares entirely in the views of his narrator.

climate and the temperament of its people is typical of Crèvecœur, whose letter 'What is an American?' famously takes as one of its central premises the claim that "Men are like plants — the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceed from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow" (4). Yet in that same letter, he professes to believe that "Here [in the United States] you will find but few crimes; these have acquired as yet no root among us" (4), and describes "those who live near the sea" as "bold and enterprising" (5). These statements belie the powerful and climate-based critique of Charleston that Crèvecœur makes later in the same collection of letters; a critique that, rather than extoling the virtues of Americans as opposed to Europeans as 'What is an American?' does, instead invokes the Black Legend in order to frame those in Charleston as louche and hedonistic. Furthermore, if one takes into account Greer, Mignolo and Quilligan's notion that, even by the Renaissance, "Spain had long served as Europe's racialised internal other" (Greet et al. 9), Crèvecœur's condemnation of Charleston's climate invites comparison between that critique and the fact that Spain's position in the south-western Mediterranean has historically led to it being classified, persistently if not constantly, as part of Africa (Dumas qtd. in Greer et al. 9). Greer, Mignolo and Quilligan do not state this directly, but one can extrapolate that Spain's climate, far warmer than Britain in particular, contributed to this classification and the association traits of barbarism and subjection to racialization. Later in the letter, Crèvecœur also assigns Charleston to this category of places with climates too warm for comfort when he describes how the slaves there are "exposed to a sun full as scorching as their native one": another way in which he subtly racializes and 'Others' the city.

As well as criticising the way in which the inhabitants of Charleston use their wealth to indulge in excess, Crèvecœur also implies that they have not earned these

riches in this first place. He describes how inhabitants of the city who are as young as thirty frequently "lose the abilities of enjoying the comforts of life, at a time when we northern men just begin to taste the fruits of our labour and prudence". In contrast to this northern "labour and prudence", with its implied integrity, Crèvecœur pays essentially no attention to how the residents of Charleston have created this great wealth. He refers to its "admirable" position, "being built at the confluence of two large rivers", which allows for docks that are "extremely convenient to facilitate this great commercial business", but there is no direct reference to work carried out by people. This, of course, lends greater emphasis to the juxtaposition that Crèvecœur will soon draw between his description of southern slavery and the luxury of wealthy white life in Charleston. However, it also perpetuates an image of southerners as undeserving of their success by subtly suggesting that they came into it through luck rather than work, much as the Black Legend constructs an image of Spain and its empire as everything that the Anglo-American empire is not, which in this case is 'industrious' and 'fair'. Later in the letter, Crèvecœur directly characterises the life of "the chosen race" in Charleston as one that is "without labour, without fatigue". The city's inhabitants are therefore represented as not only unfit to handle their wealth in a tasteful and restrained manner, but undeserving of it too, and entirely distanced from the means of its production – unlike the northerners to whom Crèvecœur is loyal.

Why, then, does Crèvecœur criticise Charleston by aligning it with the Black Legend, when in other letters he extols the virtues of the entire United States and frames it as a place where there is "room for everybody" (Letter III 10)? His 'Description of Charleston' moves quickly from a discussion of its wealthy white inhabitants to the slaves who live and work near the city, on whose backs its riches have been built. Southern slavery, rather than Charleston more generally, is now

revealed as the motivation for this letter. Crèvecœur describes the multitude of horrors committed against the slaves by their owners, going back to "devastations [that] are committed in some harmless, peaceable African neighbourhood" such as the "daughter torn from her weeping mother, the child from the wretched parents" – the irony being, of course, that northern slaves and their ancestors experienced the same removal from Africa that these southern slaves did. The description moves forward to the slaves' lives in contemporary Charleston, in which "day after day they drudge on without any prospect of ever reaping for themselves", suffering "cracks of the whip urging these miserable beings to excessive labour". In contrast, Farmer James claims to feel that he is "so raw, so unexperienced … in this mode of life, that were [he] to be possessed of a plantation, and [his] slaves treated as in general they are here, never could [he] rest in peace". On the topic of northern slavery more broadly, he "hope[s] the time draws near when they will be all emancipated", but provides a lengthy list of the ways in which northern slaves are far better treated than their southern counterparts, stating that, for example, they "enjoy as much liberty as their masters" and "are, truly speaking, a part of our families". The climax of Farmer James' encounter with southern slavery comes when, walking in the woods near a plantation, he sees a slave who has been left to die in a cage. After this scene the letter ends abruptly, with Farmer James hearing that the slave "killed the overseer of the plantation" and that his execution was therefore "necessary", followed by speech in support of "the doctrine of slavery with the arguments generally made use of to justify the practice; with the repetition of which [he] shall not trouble [his reader] at present".

Jennifer Greeson has read the 'Description of Charlestown' and this closing section in particular, not, as they have traditionally been interpreted, as a "clear parable of American virtue versus colonial barbarism" (115), but instead as a move by

Crèvecœur to simultaneously romanticise and reject the South in the service of Anglo-American identity formation. She points out the ways in which Crèvecœur's attempt to oppose the US northern and southern states breaks down, most notably his refusal to repeat the arguments made by southerners to justify their form of slavery that actually allows him to "thereby merely [avoid] repeating himself" (115). Much as DeGuzman argues that the Black Legend figured Spain as an external but intimately connected alter ego for Anglo-America, therefore, Greeson reads the South as an "internal other" for the United States (104) that "has been a figure for the residual coloniality within the nation itself" (117). Greeson's reading of the letter provides a perfect model for how to read an 'internal other' into early American literature. Her 'other' is the South, and if her interpretation is lacking in anything it is the attention it pays to Crèvecœur's construction of Charleston as the lynchpin of this 'other'. Green describes how "South Carolina becomes a *northern* point in a colonial Western hemisphere rather than a southern city in the United States" (111), but is ultimately interested in Charleston's 'Otherness' as a location in the southern United States rather than in the southern part of the colonial Western hemisphere. However, if her point about the city's position in "a colonial Western hemisphere" is expanded upon, and Crèvecœur's initial, deliberate association of Charleston with Lima looked at in detail as it is earlier in this paper, then the Black Legend's role in the 'othering' of Charleston in the service of Anglo-American identity formation rises to prominence.

Without Crèvecœur's invocation of the legend, his condemnation of the South would be far less powerful. Furthermore, to return to DeGuzman's reading of how the legend functions, it is clear in the 'Description of Charlestown' that the legend's presence from the text's very beginning plays a crucial role in enabling Crèvecœur to construct the city and its surrounding plantations as "a virtual or mirror image in front

of which, in a libidinal dynamic of identification and disavowal, Anglo-American culture … ascends towards a seemingly unified and coherent imperial identity" (xvii) and, equally, for this identity to be deeply troubled by the extent to which Charleston and Spain resemble it, and it they. As Greeson argues, by the end of the letter, "Crèvecœur's ideological opposition of nation and South [for which we may substitute nation and Spain] has become so untenable that he silences the American farmer" and "evacuates himself from the nation-building project" (116). With the parting word "Adieu", Crèvecœur returns to his roots in France, the nation whose departure from the struggle for territory in the Americas precipitated the evolution of the Black Legend and which might, therefore, be absolved from engaging with the problem Crèvecœur has arrived at. Yet this ending does not free Crèvecœur from the Black Legend, for it is discourses like the one he perpetuates in 'Letter IX' that have persisted through time in the Americas until the present moment and are thus confronted by contemporary writers such as Morrison.

Jacob Vaark's encounter with the Spaniard D'Ortega in *A Mercy* takes place in 1682, approximately halfway between the publication of Las Casas' *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* and Crèvecœur's *Letters from an American Farmer* at a time when the Black Legend's cultural power can be assumed to have been in full force. Vaark and his disgust at the aesthetic of D'Ortega's home and lifestyle, which the Anglo-Dutch man sees as indulgent, bear striking similarities to Farmer James and his impressions of Charleston. It should be noted here that although the Black Legend refers centrally to Spain, Portugal, despite becoming an independent nation in 1139, continued to retain strong ties with its larger neighbour during the period in which *A Mercy* is set. Similarities between the two countries such as their shared state religion of Roman Catholicism, which was a key tool in the Black Legend's work of

distinguishing Protestant Britain from Spain, and dual possession of vast empires, mean that Portugal can fairly be considered a part of the Black Legend alongside Spain, in general and for the purposes of this reading of *A Mercy*. Even before Vaark reaches D'Ortega's plantation, he struggles to deal with the "thick, hot", foggy atmosphere caused by the powerful sun and heat in Virginia, which he compares with the "English fogs he had known since he could walk, or those way north where he lived now [in New York]" (10). Here, Virginia is clearly aligned with the southern United States, whereas New York and England are aligned with one another. Morrison describes the fog as "blinding gold"; having made his way out of it, Vaark feels "more in control but missing [it] too" (11). The language here is not, then, entirely negative, but there is a sense that the golden fog is somehow dangerous in its beauty.

Once Vaark has left the 'Black Legend' fog, his language becomes far more practical. We learn that, Farmer James, Vaark sees himself primarily as a farmer "making place out of no place" (13), just as Crèvecœur imagines an "enlightened Englishman" feeling "a share of national pride when he views the chain of settlements which embellishes these extended shores… where a hundred years ago all was wild, woody, and uncultivated" ('What is an American?' 1). Yet when he reaches Maryland, Vaark does not admire the "place" that its European residents have made. The Black Legend's influence is clear here: Catholic churches are described as "menacing" Maryland's town squares, and Vaark is "offended by the lax, flashy cunning of the Papists" (15). Reaching D'Ortega's home, Vaark's immediate impressions are that it is "like a place where one held court", with a "prideful entrance" (Morrison 16). He tells himself that the house is "grandiose … but easy, easy to build in that climate" (17), much as Farmer James praises Charleston's

convenient location in order to identify that, rather than any work carried out by its residents, as the reason for its prosperity. Once inside the house, Vaark thinks disparagingly of how D'Ortega has "turn[ed] profit into useless baubles": like Crèvecœur, his disapproval in this situation stems from a sense that those implicated by the Black Legend are unable to handle wealth in a tasteful manner. Vaark views D'Ortega himself as "sordid and overripe" (27). As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Vaark's aesthetic objections to D'Ortega are powerfully felt by the character and therefore viscerally described by Morrison. There are moral implications here too, in that the "useless baubles" imply that D'Ortega could be spending his money in more 'useful' ways, but when it comes to the truly moral issue of slavery the differences between the two men begin to elide.

In debt to Vaark, D'Ortega has nothing left to offer him but "slaves", which the former refuses at first on the grounds that "his trade needed only himself… there was nothing to occupy them", before "winc[ing]" at the suggestion that he sell rather than keep the slaves (25). Yet wincing is a relatively mild reaction to such a suggestion, and Vaark admires D'Ortega's plantation for being "orderly and nicely kept", with "well-made" buildings, apparently unbothered by his observation that all but the "slave quarters" are in "excellent repair" (24). The Black Legend returns to protect Vaark from the implications of the way in which his thinking is beginning to turn when he and D'Ortega inspect the latter's slaves. Vaark notices the slaves' scars, vacant expressions and they way in which they seem to be "judging the men who judge them"; looking at them, he "suddenly … [feels] his stomach seize" (25). Yet this physical reaction to the sight of slaves does not inspire in Vaark great sympathy for those in front of him. Instead, he attributes the feeling either to the "tobacco odor" that he notes was "so welcoming when he arrived" (26), or to "the sugared rice, the

hog cuts fried and dripping with molasses, the cocoa Lady D'Ortega was giddy about" (26). The former explanation implicates Vaark in enjoying a smell that he is fully aware has been produced by slave labour until the point at which he is actually faced with the devastation that labour has wrought upon those who carry it out, again suggesting that the differences between him and D'Ortega are not as pronounced as Vaark imagines them to be. The latter refers directly back to the Black Legend and allows Morrison's critique of this discourse to register itself powerfully; rather than admitting that he is disturbed by the sight of slavery, a trade that he is now beginning to justify to himself, Vaark deflects his feelings back against the Portuguese.

This conflict and confluence of an Anglo-American and a Spaniard over slavery and a lost slave ship has shades of Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno' to it. In that novella, as in the first section of *A Mercy*, the narrator is an Anglo-American who appears almost parodically wholesome and good-hearted. Melville's Delano is a New Englander, described as "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature" (Melville 110). Vaark stops on his journey to D'Ortega's home "to free the bloody hindleg of a young racoon stuck in a tree break" (Morrison 12); Delano goes to help what he assumes to be "a ship in distress" (Melville 112) and is deeply concerned for Don Benito throughout their encounter. Delano's kindness towards Don Benito is less absurd than Vaark's towards a racoon (he is at least helping a man rather than an animal), but both authors are satirising the kind of red-blooded yet compassionate Anglo-American hero who looms large in American culture. Furthermore, Vaark's portion of *A Mercy* and 'Benito Cereno' both feature Spaniards who are incompetent in their slave-keeping roles and, despite Delano's kindness to Don Benito, ultimately held in contempt by their Anglo-American counterparts, who view them entirely through the Black Legend's distorting lens. On meeting Don Benito, Delano

immediately notes that he is "dressed with singular richness" (Melville 120), and his description of Don Benito moving like a "hypochondriac abbot… at times suddenly pausing, starting, or staring, biting his lip, biting his finger-nail, flushing, paling, twitching his beard" shows that he sees the same weakness of character in the Spaniard that Vaark sees in D'Ortega (123). The final and most significant similarity between Delano and Vaark is that both are hypocrites: they see themselves as just and moral, but when faced with how the realities of the slave trade might affect their own interests, each prioritises his own interests absolutely. However, the significance of Morrison's reworking of 'Benito Cereno' is more than a placement of *A Mercy* alongside another canonical American text. For despite the condemnation of slavery that is commonly read into Melville's short story, its enslaved black characters remain psychologically closed to the reader: it is, after all, a story about performance and deceit. But by shifting her focus away from D'Ortega, Vaark and the Black Legend – this is the only section of the novel in which Vaark's is the narrative voice and in which he is a major character – and instead taking up Florens' story (a character who, unlike Melville's Babo, is still alive at the end of the book), Morrison prioritises not only the role of enslaved people in her narrative, but also their interiority. *A Mercy* steps into the world of 'Benito Cereno' for a moment, acknowledges both the ideas that it shares with Melville's story and the limitations of that text, and then moves on to meet other works.

A Mercy ends with Morrison's disclosure of the novel's eponymous 'mercy' – although, as it turns out, the reader has already witnessed this 'mercy'. We discover that the mother of Florens, the slave eventually chosen by Vaark as payment from D'Ortega when her mother begs Vaark to take her daughter instead of her, views Vaark's choice to do so as "a mercy. Offered by a human" (Morrison 195). The

mother, whose name we never learn, feels that Vaark sees Florens "as a human child, not pieces of eight" (195). For a reader who has come to see Vaark as not much better, if any, than D'Ortega – at stated earlier, after visiting D'Ortega Vaark decides to invest in the sugar industry in Barbados – this ending is troubling in its apparent misinterpretation of Vaark's motives. If we return to the scene in which Florens is given to Vaark, it is clear that initially he does not see the slaves as human beings: he chooses Florens' mother because she "look[s] healthy enough" and he recognises that D'Ortega does not want to lose that particular slave; he even thinks to himself that "if [Florens] got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so [much as the loss of their daughter]" (31). When Florens' mother implores Vaark to "take her daughter" he is "struck by the terror in her eyes" (30), but this brief moment of mercy on Vaark's part is soon eclipsed by his thoughts of the wealth he might gain from investing in slavery – wealth that, in keeping with the Black Legend, he reassures himself would not result in "pagan excess" (32) as D'Ortega's has. The section ends with Vaark dreaming of "a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog" (41), a vision that is ominous in its evocation of the grand homes of plantation owners and its indication of Vaark's potential transition into a more traditional model of white, male, slave-owning American masculinity.

What, then, to make of that fact that Morrison ends *A Mercy* with such high praise of Jacob Vaark, having spent the novel's beginning using the Black Legend to establish him as a hypocritical figure? Valerie Babb suggests that "We can conceive of Morrison as a founding mother, proffering the mercy of correcting a flawed historical record, engaging the past in order to go beyond it" (159). Babb is speaking of the novel generally here, but this analysis can equally be applied, on a smaller scale, to Florens' mother. As readers, we might feel some doubt as to whether

Florens' mother is right to praise Vaark so highly, given the insight we have been given into his thoughts. However, we might instead read this final flow of thoughts as the mother, an extremely minor character who is nonetheless given the authority of ending the novel, offering a mercy to Vaark by reinterpreting his actions in the most benevolent way possible. Morrison's use of the Black Legend in *A Mercy* therefore becomes more than a mere condemnation of Anglo-America's self-aggrandisement and hypocrisy. Although Vaark may not be redeemable through his own actions, Florens' mother demonstrates that the past can be read in many different ways. Her mercy might simply be read as an act of historical kindness that redeems Vaark from his Black Legend-inspired self-deception, or it might be interpreted on a larger scale, as the creation of a personal narrative that crosses boundaries between people in order to offer hope of a more united nation in the future.

Much like her reworkings of 'Letter IX' and 'Benito Cereno', Morrison's revision of *The Scarlet Letter* falls within a particular episode of *A Mercy* and, rather than directly referencing the earlier text, instead ventriloquises its concerns through Morrison's characters. Unlike 'Letter IX', however, *The Scarlet Letter* is a work that aims to disrupt social norms: whether he is skewering the oppressive customs of the Puritans or rewriting their place in American cultural history, Hawthorne is certainly no traditionalist Crèvecœur, and *The Scarlet Letter* lends itself well to feminist readings. Yet Morrison's text still speaks back to Hawthorne, in order to sustain and reshape the task he set for himself of crafting America's future through its cultural past. For although some elements of *A Mercy*'s intersection with *The Scarlet Letter* reflect well on Hawthorne and his revisionist Puritans, race in Hawthorne's novel remains an ambivalently-constructed issue.

The episode in *A Mercy* that closely alludes to *The Scarlet Letter* concerns not Jacob Vaark, from whose perspective we see the novel's opening, but Florens, the slave he took from D'Ortega in exchange for the writing-off of D'Ortega's debts to him. Florens is now sixteen years old and has been sent north from the Vaarks' New York farm to find a free black man who is known to have some medical knowledge, in the hope that he will be able to cure Vaark's wife Rebekka of smallpox. Seeking shelter on her journey, Florens reaches a village that seems, like much of the setting of *A Mercy*, almost parodic in its representation of a stereotypical colonial American setting. Down a path through the woods in which she is walking, Florens sees "a narrow bridge past a mill wheel poised in a stream", and notes that the "creaking wheel and rushing water are what shape the quiet" (Morrison 124). This ostensibly idyllic pastoral setting is a stereotypical representation of Puritan New England – a peaceful and industrious village in which nature seems to perfectly meet the needs of humanity. In these moments, as when Jacob Vaark visits D'Ortega and cannot help but see everything through the lens of the Black Legend, Morrison is referencing a culturally-constructed narrative of the past, rather than the past itself. A relevant comparison to *The Scarlet Letter* can be made here, specifically to the pivotal scene in chapter fifteen which Hester meets Dimmesdale in the woods outside Boston in order to tell him that Chillingworth is her husband and has begun to suspect Dimmesdale of being Hester's partner in adultery. Before Hester and Dimmesdale meet, she and Pearl wait for him "on a luxuriant heap of moss… [in] a little dell... with a leaf-strewn bank rising gently on either side, and a brook flowing through the midst" (162): another setting that appears to signify total harmony between Anglo-Americans and nature.

Yet in both Hawthorne and Morrison's quaint, sylvan settings, darkness is close by. The quiet village in *A Mercy* is eerie: it appears abandoned, with cottages through

whose windows “no lamp shines” and “no cooking smoke in the air” (125), and Florens’ thought that “Hens sleep and dogs forbidden” (124) suggests an edge of repression, even of the natural world. Florens quickly deduces that almost all its residents must be “at evening prayer” (125) but this will soon reveal itself to be an equally ominous observation. In chapter fifteen of *The Scarlet Letter*, by contrast, the reader already understands a great deal about the repressive Puritan society of the novel, and Hawthorne is less restrained than Morrison in reflecting that repression through description: the stream in his woods runs “over a bed of fallen and drowned leaves”, and “giant trees and boulders of granite” appear to be impeding the stream’s path, “fearing, perhaps, that, with its never-ceasing loquacity, it should whisper tales out of the old forest whence it flowed”. I am not suggesting that Morrison is referencing *The Scarlet Letter* simply through her description of a rural New England setting whose beauty belies its repressive nature. What I am proposing, however, is that what comes later in Florens’ encounter with the Puritans, combined with Morrison’s broad commitment in *A Mercy* to rewriting earlier iterations of American cultural narratives, makes Hawthorne’s influence on this episode more explicit, to the extent that Morrison’s opening description of a Puritan village can be read as alluding to Hawthorne thematically, if not linguistically. If Hawthorne’s goal in his description of the forest is to signal his tearing-down of the tenets of Puritan society in order to rebuild it in the literary imagination as a culture both artistically enriched and explicitly linked to England, Morrison’s is to gesture towards her own reshaping of Hawthorne’s revisionism in the service of reclaiming for both early and current American culture not only England and an aesthetic sensibility, but even more displaced symbols such as the enslaved Florens.

In the aforementioned scene in the woods outside Boston, when Hester hears Dimmesdale approaching and tells Pearl to go and play while the adults talk, Pearl asks if the approaching man is "the Black Man" (Hawthorne 163) – one of a dozen points in the novel at which "the Black Man" is referred to. This figure is always conceived of by Hawthorne's characters as a presence living in the forest, but beyond that his identity is ambiguous. In some instances, the Black Man is a straightforward synonym for Satan, such as when Mistress Hibbins – "who," as the narrator tells us, "a few years later, was executed as a witch" – tells Hester that she has "wellnigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one" of her "company" in the forest that night (103). The narrator casts doubt on whether the reader should "suppose this interview betwixt Mistress Hibbins and Hester Prynne to be authentic, and not a parable", but refers to Hester as having been "saved from Satan's snare" by her refusal of Hibbins' invitation (103).

At other times, however, Hester and Pearl elide the Black Man with both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Before Dimmesdale arrives to meet Hester in the woods, Pearl requests from her mother "a story about the Black Man" (161), asking "dost thou go to meet him in the night-time?" (161). Hester rebuffs this question, but admits that "Once in [her] life [she] met the Black Man" and that the "scarlet letter is his mark" (162). This response to Pearl's question opens up the figure of the Black in the novel to a less static interpretation than that of his being a simple analogue for the devil. Hester's admission that she has met the Black Man and wears the letter as a result of that meeting, combined with Pearl's question about her mother meeting him "in the night-time", as well as her later, aforementioned conflation of the approaching Dimmesdale with the Black Man, suggests that Dimmesdale himself is one representative of the Black Man. This, of course, plays into the novel's interest in

moral relativity – to the Puritans, Dimmesdale and Hester are associated with the devil through their adultery, whereas Hawthorne suggests that Chillingworth, who has not transgressed the Puritans' moral code as flagrantly as Dimmesdale and Hester, is the novel's true villain. Indeed, the first reference to the Black Man in *The Scarlet Letter* comes when Chillingworth confronts Hester in her prison cell: when he asks her whether she is "afraid of nightmares and hideous dreams" caused by wearing the A in her sleep, Hester replies "Why dost thou smile so at me? … Are thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us? Hast though enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?" (70). Chillingworth's response – that the ruin will not be of Hester's soul – only serves to strengthen the implication that he is also a 'Black Man'.

Thus it is clear that the 'Black Man' signifies more than the devil in *The Scarlet Letter*, for he is strongly associated with all three of the novel's central players (and arguably Pearl too, given her frequent questions about him), only one of whom can truly be considered immoral within the moral code that the book, rather than Hawthorne's Puritans, espouses. Furthermore, as described in my first chapter, Hester's beautifully embroidered A, which she refers to as the mark of the Black Man, ultimately "cease[s] to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn" (227). By the end of the novel it is viewed with "awe, yet with reverence too" (227): a symbol not of adultery, but of Hester's power and authority within her community. I therefore want to suggest that the Black Man is, for Hawthorne, at least partially a figure of both good and evil. For if one lesson of *The Scarlet Letter* is that moral absolutism is wrong, then it is fitting that what seems to be a stereotypically Puritanical way of conceiving of the devil should be troubled by the novel. There are, of course, racial overtones in the name and figure of the Black Man, whose significance in both *The*

Scarlet Letter and *A Mercy* I will now discuss, and for which the ambiguous moral representation of the Black Man in the former is an essential foundation.

Morrison's Puritans in *A Mercy* also talk of the Black Man, but in the presence of Florens the term takes on a far more literal meaning than the one ostensibly intended by Hawthorne's characters. The home where Florens takes shelter is the only one whose inhabitants are not at church on the evening she arrives in the village. The reason for this is revealed the next morning, when Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane are visited by a group of people from their village. As Florens notes, "A man's voice says [the visit] is preliminary yet witnesses are several" (130): from the presence of these witnesses and the wounds Jane's mother cuts into her leg to prove that she bleeds, it is clear that the younger woman is already strongly suspected of being a demon, with her "askew" eye given as the ostensible reason for this accusation (130). Although *The Scarlet Letter* does not centre on women suspected of being demons or witches, Pearl is suspected of being a "demon offspring", in a lineage of those who "had occasionally been seen on earth, through the agency of their mothers' sin, and to promote some foul and wicked purpose" (88). The narrator then moves to provide a broader context to Pearl's situation, much as he does when he lets the reader know that Mistress Hibbins, a relatively minor character, is soon to be executed as a witch. In this case he comments, "nor was Pearl the only child to whom this inauspicious origin was assigned, among the New England Puritans" (88); the chapter ends immediately, and the reader is left to reflect on true events such as the Salem witch trials. Since those who suspect Pearl of being a demon do so as a direct result of Hester's adultery, the two forms of Puritan persecution of women become inextricably linked in *The Scarlet Letter*. In *A Mercy*, although Jane's askew eye is the apparent cause of the suspicion that surrounds her, it is notable that Widow Ealing is a

woman living alone with her daughter, as is Hester Prynne. Widow Ealing also demonstrates great kindness in taking Florens in, knowing the response she might provoke in other villagers; like Hester, she seems to adhere to a moral code that transgresses the boundaries of what her Puritan neighbours believe to be ethical.

The risk that Widow Ealing has taken in allowing Florens to spend the night in her cottage is demonstrated by the reactions of her morning visitors to the sight of a young black woman. They comment on the darkness of Florens' skin, with one proclaiming "She is Afric. Afric and much more" – the "much more" referring to the fact that these Puritans see Florens as a sign that "The Black Man is among [them]" (131): to them, black skin is a sign of the devil. A different allusion to *The Scarlet Letter* comes into play through the presence of the letter from Rebekka that Florens is carrying, whose purpose is to ensure Florens' safe passage on her journey by explaining that she is Rebekka's property. As Justine Tally points out, "Unlike Hester, who transforms the meaning of the letter, Florens, without the letter, has no meaning" (76). However, Morrison is doing much more than placing a black character into Hawthorne's world in order to demonstrate its racism. As in her reworking of the Black Legend in earlier sections of the novel, she is on one level producing a narrative that privileges those whose voices are, with a few extremely notable exceptions, mostly unheard in canonical nineteenth-century American literature. Morrison thereby gestures towards the possibility of a culturally-constructed past less racially divided than the one in the popular imagination. For, after her mother has gone to find the sheriff, Jane prepares food for the now-endangered Florens, leads her into the woods and gives her directions to the hamlet where Florens is hoping she will find the blacksmith. As Florens leaves, she asks Jane whether she is a demon. Jane's smile and answer, "Yes … Oh, yes" (Morrison 135). Through this response, Jane

aligns herself with the Black Man of both *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Mercy*, and that figure transforms into a symbol of transgression from Puritan society not into sin, but into acts of bravery and compassion. Florens ends this section of the novel acutely aware that she is being watched and reflecting on both her "outside" and "inside" dark (136). "Sudden", she thinks, "it is not like before when I am always in fright… The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home" (136): her blackness, both inside and out, becomes a source of power. Through the thoughts and actions of Florens and Jane, both abject, culturally voiceless figures to differing degrees, demons, the Black Man and black skin move away from being signifiers of evil, and the binary Puritanical worldview dissolves, momentarily, into an understanding of American society that leaves room for difference to be navigated peacefully.

Yet *A Mercy* soon turns away from this moment of mercy from a white character towards a black one, and in looking at the book's final sections I want to turn back to Hawthorne's figure of the Black Man. Despite the interpretation I laid out earlier, in which Hawthorne begins the process that Morrison continues of troubling the binary moral nature of the figure of the Black Man, and despite the solidarity Florens finds with Widow Ealing and Jane, the explicit racial overtones of a figure called the Black Man in a novel published only a decade before the American Civil War cannot be ignored. Hawthorne's ambiguous representation of this figure speaks directly to the conception of blackness in nineteenth-century American culture that Morrison expresses in *Playing in the Dark*. Speaking of romance as a genre – the subtitle of *The Scarlet Letter* is, of course, *A Romance* – Morrison suggests that, for nineteenth-century American writers, it was "a battle plain on which to fight, engage, and imagine their demons" (36). The drama and anxiety inherent in romance made it an

ideal site for the "embrace of … fears" (Morrison 36), and the "slave population" was a vehicle through which "historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and dichotomies could be articulated" (37). We see many of these fears channelled through the figure of Hawthorne's Black Man: he is often cited as the cause of Hester's wrongdoing and thereby her suffering, yet ultimately his mark becomes a symbol of pride and eventually authority for her, which disrupts the moral and social code set out by the Puritans. Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, argues that "the Civil War provides the latent context of the American Renaissance" (86), and he reads Hawthorne as proposing a "centrist strategy" in *The Scarlet Letter* – one of "gradualism" (87) rather than abolitionism as a solution to slavery. Bercovitch quotes Hawthorne's 1852 biography of his friend, the then future president Franklin Pierce, in which Hawthorne wrote that slavery was "one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but one of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream" (Hawthorne qtd. in Bercovitch 87). Bercovitch wants to "distinguish the biography from the novel"; for him, *The Life of Franklin Pierce* "takes a certain stand within an enclosed set of options", whereas *The Scarlet Letter* "explores various options [for resolving the impending national crisis over slavery] available within a set of interlinked forms of thought and expression" (88).

Yet Bercovitch does not directly address the figure of the Black Man, choosing to focus instead on the novel's general proposition of compromise and patience as a method for settling national conflict. In doing so, he sidesteps the anxiety that surrounds the Black Man in the novel – an anxiety that is arguably reflected in Hawthorne's anti-abolitionist statement in his biography of Franklin, specifically his

claim that slavery will vanish "by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation". Bercovitch might read this statement as a political move made by Hawthorne on behalf of his anti-abolitionist politician friend, but in the context of Hawthorne's usually brilliant writing and the typical clarity of his vision, it falls flat. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester's A does not "cease to be a stigma" and become "looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (227) because of a vague act of God, but by the very "human contrivances" (Hawthorne qtd. in Bercovitch 87) that Hawthorne dismisses as a solution for the problem of slavery: Dimmesdale's confession and, as discussed in my first chapter, Hester's power of artistic expression and her deliberate aesthetic choices. This is not to say that antebellum slavery and adultery in Puritan society are analogous in reality, but Hawthorne's yoking of the Black Man to Hester's 'sin' invites a comparison between his approaches to the two issues.

To return to Morrison and *Playing in the Dark*, her statement that "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities" seems key here (38). The "American Africanism" that she describes as "a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American" (38) is, I want to suggest, what motivates Hawthorne's Black Man of *The Scarlet Letter* – a figure simultaneously racialised and not (as Jay Grossman puts it, a "racialised [metaphor] that "occur[s] in essentially non-racialized contexts" (26)) – and his outright reluctance to endorse abolition despite describing slavery as an "evil" (Hawthorne qtd. in Bercovitch 87). Morrison argues that canonical American literature became so because of the complex, creative ways in which authors responded to blackness and slavery. Wishing as he did for an American canon to exist during his lifetime, Hawthorne could not, even if he had wanted to, have therefore argued for abolition on political grounds. To do so would

have been to speak out against the tension in American culture from which he and other soon-to-be canonical writers drew their inspiration, whether consciously or not. Thus when the Puritans in *A Mercy* force Florens to strip naked and examine her body, looking at it without "hate… or scare or disgust", but "across distances without recognition" (133), Morrison is pointing to Hawthorne's misrecognition of the work that the figure of the Black Man is really doing in *The Scarlet Letter*: his characters are often unafraid of the Black Man, occasionally they are even desirous of him, but neither they nor the novel recognises him for what he truly represents.

As the novel ends, Morrison makes clear the fact that revising Crèvecœur's 'Letter IX', 'Benito Cereno' and *The Scarlet Letter* cannot bring about any long-term peaceful navigation of racial difference in the early American society she portrays. After her encounter with the Puritans, which ends relatively positively because of Jane's actions, Florens' psychological scars cause her to attack a young boy who is living with the blacksmith out of jealousy, and when she returns to the Vaarks' farm she appears to the indentured servants living there to have "turned feral" (171). Rebekka's treatment of her female slaves deteriorates to the point of inhumane cruelty. *A Mercy* does not, therefore, propose anything so simplistic as a revision of the American canon that casts a more positive light on the nation's past, nor is its concern merely to bring voices such as Florens' into canonical texts in order to point out their exclusion. Rather, Morrison continues to hold American culture's past in tension with its present and future, neither 'forgiving' canonical texts for their racial politics nor dismissing them and their worth. At the end of *Playing in the Dark*, she states outright that she "take[s] no position, nor [does she] encourage one, on the quality of a work based on the attitudes of an author or whatever representations are made of some group" (90). Although Morrison acknowledges that "such concerns …

fall within [the] reach" of her book's undertaking (90), in its first chapter she states that her "project rises from delight, not disappointment", from what she knows "about the ways writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language" (4). Her critical interest in canonical American texts therefore springs directly from her enjoyment of those texts and the ways in which they function.

There is a striking similarity between Morrison's language at the very end of *Playing in the Dark* and a phrase, quoted in my introduction, that Van Wyck Brooks uses towards the beginning of 'On Creating a Usable Past'. On "the American tradition", Brooks writes that "the interpreters of that past experience have put a gloss upon it which renders it sterile for the living mind" (337); the penultimate sentence of *Playing in the Dark* states that "it would be a pity if the criticism of that literature continued to shellac those texts, immobilizing their complexities and power and luminations just below its tight, reflecting surface" (91). Although it is doubtful that Brooks' concern was one of race, both writers portray the kinds of readings they are reacting against as mirrored surfaces, into which those who look see only themselves and their present. To return once again to the very end of *A Mercy*, I want to suggest an interpretation further to the one previously laid out. Although on one level Morrison uses Florens' mother to rehabilitate Jacob Vaark through her kindness, this reading does not do away with the disquiet engendered by the novel's conclusion. Similarly, although *The Scarlet Letter*'s conclusion leaves the reader with more hope for its characters than *A Mercy*'s, it ends in a melancholy and ambiguous manner. Hester is "burdened with a life-long sorrow" (Hawthorne 228); she can never be "the destined prophetess" (227) that she once hoped to be because she is wise "through dusky grief" rather than "the ethereal medium of joy" (228). The narrator himself describes the novel's final image of a gravestone with the inscription "On a field,

sable, the latter A. Gules" as "sombre" (228), despite the A's positive connotations by the novel's end. Although Hawthorne has resolved the conflict between Puritan heritage and aesthetics within the confines of his text, it is a fictional resolution, a "national fantasy" (7), as Lauren Berlant has it, and therefore as imperfect in Hawthorne's reality as Hester's own redemption through art is in hers. By ending their novels on these unresolved notes, both Hawthorne and Morrison assert that revising America's canon can never make it a comfortable cultural space – and nor should it, for it is the on-going potential for acknowledgement and interrogation of the tension inherent in those texts – the creating, rather than creation, of a 'usable past' through revisionism both critical and creative – that sustains their status as such rich sources of literary pleasure.

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