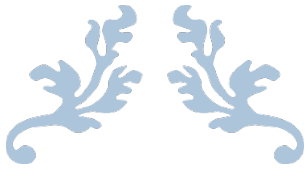

FROM A. TO S.

Modernizing America

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Introduction:

According to Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*: "American poets labor to complete their forefathers' work" and thus resort to 'Tessera' which is defined as the "antithetical attempt of an author to complete his precursor's work" (68). This could be said of the Pulitzer Prize winning writer John Updike, who, in his *Scarlet Letter Trilogy* borrows Nathaniel Hawthorne's protagonists, Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth and Hester Prynne, and sets them in a contemporary context. The novels can easily be read separately since the stories have no relation from one to the next and each explores a specific point of view through which Updike exploits the typically Hawthornian themes of religion, morality and secrecy. As a result of these rewritings Updike modernizes an American Myth. For indeed, *The Scarlet Letter* is a myth of origin for the American nation, and doubly so: firstly, as DH Lawrence (111) pointed out in his study, its plot of adulterous love resonates with the biblical original sin and secondly the story taking place at the time of the first pioneers colonizing America makes it a myth of national origin.

Therefore, to study how and for what purpose Updike modernized this American Myth the present master thesis will focus on *S.: A Novel,* written in 1987 it is the third and last installment of Updike's trilogy. On the one hand, it is the novel where Updike's intertextual references to *The Scarlet Letter* are the most explicit and which through its epistolary form reproduces the enigmatic narrative structure of Hawthorne thus permitting a thorough analysis of the process of actualization. On the other hand, it is one of Updike's first attempts at writing a female protagonist which it will be interesting to compare to Hawthorne's own representation of Hester Prynne.

To do so I will first, examine how Updike while he sets his novel at a contemporary period manages to incorporate it in the same diegesis as *The Scarlet Letter* and effects an actualization of Hawthorne's work which sketches out the evolution of the American society at different time periods. Then, I will demonstrate how the intertextual network that Updike has constructed not only serves this actualization but also creates a comic effect which satirizes the social context of Updike's time of writing, that is to say that it contributes to the conservative backlash against the liberal movements of the 1970s. Updike does so notably through the ambiguous and comic portrait of Sarah, his female protagonist, who is a modernized version of Hester Prynne that he deromanticizes. Finally, although critics and readers generally tend to interpret Updike's protagonist as self-deluded by reason of Updike's conservative agenda and

of the numerous contradictions found in Sarah's letters, I will rather argue that these contradictions and the complex narrative structure make her an unreliable narrator for sure but perhaps not a gullible character as it has been argued so far.

I- S. is for Society

First of all, for my hypothesis to be credible it is necessary to establish that although *S.*, and *The Scarlet Letter* are set in different historical periods they bear on the same diegesis. Indeed, from the start, in Hawthorne's "The Custom House" which functions as a prologue of sorts to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's *persona* is a former Salem surveyor who was laid off by reason of the 1848 election, an accurately stated historical fact which serves to authenticate his narrative. The author's *persona* relates finding a fragment of Hester Prynne's dress:

> (…) a certain affair of fine red clothe, much worn and faded. (…) little other than a rag – on careful examination assum[ing] the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 31)

He also finds:

> (…) foolscap sheets, containing many particulars respecting the life and conversation of one Hester Prynne, who appears to have a been rather a noteworthy personage in the view of our ancestors. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 32)

Both items are physical, tangible objects. The first introduces the eponymous object of the novel while pointing out the effect of time upon it. The second, which is an 'official' record, provides an explanation regarding the letter and by the same logic gives "proofs of the authenticity of [the] narrative" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 8) that Hawthorne's second narrator is about to relate within the main text of the *The Scarlet Letter*. Consequently, the very purpose of "The Custom House" is first to establish Hester's story as a genuine episode of New England's history at the time of the first settlement in Massachusetts; and second, to set it in the same diegesis as the brief episode described by Hawthorne in "The Custom House". Moreover, it is important to stress that although two hundred years have elapsed the action is set in the same geographical area and above all on the same ontological level. In other words, both "The Custom House" and *The Scarlet Letter* deal with events situated on the same plane of existence.

Updike uses a similar strategy of referring to tangible object having belonged to Hester Prynne to connect *S.* diegetically to Hawthorne's work. As a matter of fact, he makes Sarah, his protagonist, a middle-class housewife of the late 1980s, a direct descendent from the Prynnes. This is first revealed in a letter she writes to her mother which starts by discussing her potential

divorce and the family legacy she intends to keep in case of a legal dispute with her future ex-husband and later evolves into a lecture on how to take care of the said family legacy:

> The Price and the Peabody silver you still have (and that *precious* teeny-tiny salt-and-pepper set way back from the **Prynnes**) I hope you are taking out and polishing once every three months […] – that Florida salt air is *death* on silver, whereas somehow in Massachusetts the salt doesn't matter so much (…). (Updike 26-27) **(my emphasis)**

In this paragraph she alludes to three different generations. The Prices are the latest generation and the one she is associated with, Price being her maiden name. The Peabodys are the family Hawthorne married into and this allusion has the effect of establishing a direct family relation between Sarah and Hawthorne's persona and thus between *S.* and "The Custom House". Finally, in a parenthetical clause, she mentions the Prynnes who are probably the first American-born ancestors she can name as well as a direct allusion to the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne. Moreover, by implying that the "silver" is out of place in Florida and consequently belongs in Massachusetts, she emphasises the geographical connection existing between these different generations. As a result, through a seemingly random comment about family silver, Updike replicates Hawthorne's strategy to establish *S.* on the same plane of existence as both "The Custom House" and *The Scarlet Letter.* Accordingly, this diegetic and spatial continuity between the three literary pieces suggests that Updike may wish to measure an evolution and sketch out the changes that took place in American Society from the first puritan pioneer's colony to mid-nineteenth century and on to Updike's time of writing in 1986.

To some extent, Updike's *S.* has a similar purpose to the 1996 film adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* by Roland Joffe. The movie while freely adapted from the novel and an admitted failure by reason of its anachronistic reasoning, which turned Hester into a free thinker and active law breaker, still provides, according to the literary critic Sacvan Bercovitch:

> (…) a context appropriate to our time. A worthy project, admirable in its own right, and perhaps necessary to the novel's persistence from one generation to the next. Not necessary, of course, to our sense of the novel's intrinsic value, but important in suggesting the novel's relevance in our lives. In other words (…) a commentary on our culture (1).

Although *S.* is a modern rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter* and not an adaptation set in the same historical period it offers the same type of commentary by creating a stronger, more defiant

heroine. Sarah's continual mention of her puritan ancestors has a double impact. On the one hand, it reminds the reader of her connection with Hester and thus of the diegetic link between the two. On the other hand, given that the puritans have long been established as "a kind of shifting symbol of national origins" (Bercovitch 1), it provides an element of comparison between the pioneers' community and the resulting American society while at the same time suggesting that the puritan legacy is still effective.

However, for this comparison with the puritans to be possible both Hawthorne and Updike needed to create a distance between the present and the past and establish their respective periods of writing as the modern one. They did so through a specific literary device known as antiquarianism which consists in capturing the linguistic specificities of a given historical period. For instance, Hawthorne uses archaic expressions in the dialogues of *The Scarlet Letter* in an attempt to reproduce mid-seventeenth century American English. This is illustrated by the numerous occurrences of 'thou' for the personal pronoun 'you' as well as 'thy' for the possessive determiner 'your' in addition to Middle English conjugations such as "feelest" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 62) to conjugate the verb feel. This archaic use of language contrasts with the nineteenth century contemporary style that both Hawthorne's narrative voice in *The Scarlet Letter* and his *persona* in "The Custom House" adopt to express themselves.

Updike applies a similar technique to emphasize the modernity of his novel with his use of slang terms and general contemporary style. For instance, in a letter to her mother Sarah declares that she is "through with *guilt trips*" (25) *(my emphasis),* a colloquial expression she borrowed from her daughter thus denoting how recent it is. As a matter of fact, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary the first known use of 'Guilt Trip' only dates back to 1977, less than ten years before that the novel was written.[1]

Therefore, both authors' handlings of language create a reality effect which makes *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Custom House" and *S.* chronicles of America at particular times of its historical development. For this reason, a thorough comparison of the three pieces of writing may give an idea of the evolution of the American society

To measure the said evolution, I will start with an analysis of the increasing importance

[1] As found in the Merriam Webster Dictionnary: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/guilt-trip

given to money and materialism in the considered texts, and by materialism I mean the accumulation of wealth and material commodities.

For instance, in *The Scarlet Letter* financial exchanges are quasi-absent by reason of the ascetic lifestyle of the puritan society which advocates a life devoid of unnecessary luxury. However, a careful reader can notice hints at a potentially growing materialism in symbolic characters such as the Governor Bellingham. Indeed, the dwelling of this governmental representative whose function is symbolically to represent the people, is so full of luxury that its "brilliancy might have befitted Aladdin's palace, rather than the mansion of a grave old puritan ruler" (Hawthorne, The *Scarlet Letter* 92). Similarly, Pearl, who is the only character born in America and thus possibly symbolizes the first true American-born generation and those which are to follow is often attracted to golden objects. For instance, she "was as greatly pleased with the [governor's] gleaming armour as she had been with the glittering frontispiece" of the governor's house (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 94). She also "immediately twined [a seafarer's gold chain] around her neck and waist, with such happy skill, that, it became a part of her and it became difficult to imagine her without it." (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 212). Consequently, these symbolic characters' attraction to symbols of wealth, whose loss becomes inconceivable, may represent the quickly growing seed of materialism in America.

Likewise, in "The Custom House", Hawthorne's persona favours economic security over creativity for, on the one hand, he imagines his ancestors questioning his life choices with criticisms such as: "A writer of storybooks! What kind of business in life (…) may that be?" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 13). On the other hand, he pictures his characters doubting his ability to depict them correctly for they consider he has "battered [the little power he once had possessed over the tribes of unrealities] for a pittance of the public gold" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 34). This contradiction conveys that while exerting a creative activity is a viable career choice in mid-nineteenth century America it conflicts with achieving a high economical status which is the aim to strive for according to the newly developing American mentality. This new money-seeking reality is incidentally reflected through America's fast-paced industrialization which provokes "Salem's wharves to crumble to ruin" while "swelling, needlessly and imperceptibly, the mighty flood of commerce at New York or Boston" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 9). This picture, when contrasted with *The Scarlet Letter*'s representation of a Puritan community where money or even monetary exchanges are scarcely ever mentioned directly, reveals the change that the American society underwent between the 1640s and the 1840s.

Finally, Updike completes Hawthorne's project when exposing the result of this long evolution of American Society as it was at his time of writing. In *S.* the theme of money is omni-present as illustrated by the very form of Updike's epistolary novel. Interestingly, nine letters are addressed to banks, in addition to one addressed to a lawyer regarding financial matters. This makes ten letters out of sixty or, in other words, one sixth of the novel which is explicitly about money. Moreover, a study of the onomastics in the novel reveals a lot about the characters' greed. Indeed, Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth becomes Charles Worth in Updike's novel. While he is still a doctor the stress bearing on his character moves from his "chilling-ness" to his "worth-iness", in the monetary sense of the word given that he is mostly associated with the important income he earns thanks to his position as a surgeon. Furthermore, Sarah's full name is Sarah Price Worth, Price being her maiden name, as mentioned previously, and Worth her married name. Coincidentally, in their respective definitions both words have the notion of measuring (usually monetarily) the value of a person or an object. Sarah's full name might thus be interpreted as questioning the 'price' she is 'worth'.

Similarly, the letters Sarah writes rarely fail to mention financial matters be it directly or indirectly. From the very first paragraph of the first letter of the novel which is addressed to Charles, her husband, she interrupts the build up of pathos with allusions to the hired persons, as follows:

> I close my eyes and see our white house, its two screened porches and long glassy conservatory, its peek at the sea and the rocks of the cove – those gray rocks you and Pearl and I have picnicked on so many times and that when the sun beats on their veins feel warm even in February – and its undulating lap of lawn and the bulb bed so happy and thrusty with leaves, now that spring has come. Do leave a note for the *lawn boys* when they come tomorrow to set their big wide reel mower a notch higher, since last Tuesday they scalped that area over by the roses, where the ground bulges up. (Updike 3) *(my emphasis)*

In this excerpt, Sarah starts with "I close my eyes and see" which builds up the reader's expectation of pathos. She first conforms to this expectation with a description of the "white house" which fits the middle class cliché. She continues this cliché with an evocation of their shared family memories in a clause between dashes that recreates the "warm" atmosphere of the memories. In this clause she lists the members of the family one by one, separating their respective mentions by the conjunction of coordination "and" which has the effect of conjuring up individual pictures of the members of the family through a sort of slow-motion effect. Incidentally, by naming herself last she implies her self-sacrificial

nature which may possibly elicit guilt in the fictional reader and sympathy in the extra-diegetic reader. Furthermore, she sketches out a romantic description of nature where she associates an adjective usually attributed to animate subject "happy" to an inanimate object namely "bulb bed" thus personifying nature and endowing it with emotion. To this romantic description she adds the mention of "spring" which is the romantic season *par excellence*. However, she abruptly interrupts this build up of pathos with the use of the auxiliary "Do" in its imperative function and the switch to a purely practical topic, namely the mowing of the lawn, precisely to keep her "white house" picture perfect. This is where she mentions the hired persons and coincidentally where her condescension appears for she symbolically asks her husband to "leave *a note* for the lawn boys" instead of talking to them directly. This switch to practicality is emphasized by a change of register as exemplified through the use of colloquial adjectives such as "big" and "wide". Moreover, the rupture with Pathos is also enacted through the return to the present, with the use of the adverb of time "tomorrow" and the mention of "last Tuesday" which emphasizes the change of register used to describe nature. Indeed, first, she uses the violent and heavily connoted verb "scalp" to say that "the lawn boys" damaged the lawn. Then, instead of a poetic description to designate the place that has been marred she speaks of "that area over by the roses, where the ground bulges up". As a result of the succession of the prepositions of location "by" and "over" and vague descriptions she only indicates an approximate position. This denotes her lack of emotional attachment to the actual place in contrast to her romanticizing of its image. Thus, the contrast in tone between the start and the end of the paragraph creates a comic effect which discredits Sarah as a serious narrator from the very start.

She continues this first letter to Charles, with an excessively detailed list of the things she bought: "two extra boxes each of [her husband's] apple granola and unprocessed bran". As well as the state of their joint accounts: "the 5½% checking, the saving account at 6½% and the capital account in Boston at 7¼% ([she] think[s])" (Updike 3,4) of which she withdrew half. Last but not least, she informs him she sold all the stocks because while she originally "intended to sell only half" she:

> couldn't decide which ones and since everybody agree[d] the market [couldn't]keep rising like it ha[d] been [she] told the broker at Shearson Lehman to go and unload them all. (…) [She] had meant to divide the amount but Shearson Lehman sent it all in one big check though [she] had asked the young man [she] talked to *not* to – (…) – but it came into one check anyway and [she]figured that if the market [went] down as it

> [was] certain to – (…) – then [she was] saving [them] both money and maybe should award [herself] a commission. (Updike 6)

While she first attempts to remain transparent with the exact rate of their joint bank accounts her operation with the stocks is made opaque by the accumulation of details and anecdotes she relates to convey this transparency. Indeed, this passage starts with her claimed good will to "sell only half" and continues with a justification of why she ended up selling all their stocks contrary to her initial intention. Her justification is based, first on her supposed lack of knowledge on which stock to pick and then on "everybody"'s agreement that "the market can't keep rising". Therefore, after seemingly blaming herself she transfers the responsibility on an unidentified entity: "everybody". She strengthens this justification through the use of the negative form of the modal "can" implying that if the market "can't" keep rising it is logically doomed to fall. Therefore, she skilfully turns her justification into an argument that validates her decision. Moreover, she once again pretends to transparency and good-will claiming that she "*meant* to divide the amount" but there again exonerates herself from the responsibility by transferring it on "Shearson Lehman". Indeed, she claims that "they sent it all in one big check" despite her specific instruction "*not* to". Thus she firstly reiterates her original proof of good-will; secondly, tacitly taunts her husband with the quantifying and qualitative adjectives "one" and "big" implying the important amount acquired and the fact that it is not to be shared and thirdly, typographically stresses Shearson Lehman's incompetence putting the blame on them. That done, she reiterates her affirmation that she took the right decision to justify her detainment of the whole sum. She does so through multiple repetitions of the argument, the first is introduced in the hypothetical clause: "*if* the market goes down" while the second cancel the previous "if" by the validating expression: "as it's certain to" thus turning her initial hypothesis into a sure fact. She finishes her demonstration by concluding, through the use of the adverb "then", that "she saved them both money" and therefore "*should* maybe award herself a commission". She uses, the modal "should" which conveys obligation, duty or correctness in such a way as to replace an argument and cloud the lack of actual reasons for this affirmation. To sum up, by relating every single step she took since she sold the stocks, and mixing it with self-justification she confuses her reader and pretends to righteousness.

Although it is especially obvious in this first letter, the ones that follow do tend to reflect Sarah's habit to list her belongings or the state of her bank accounts, though not

always very clearly as it has just been illustrated. Finally, the plot itself, which revolves around the embezzlement of, as well as by, different characters, reveals that this obsession with money does not exclusively concern Sarah but is in fact common to most characters in the novel. As a consequence, Updike's account of the American scene in the 1970s shows how an inconspicuous feature which Hawthorne had imparted to a few symbolic characters has developed into an important characteristic involving the whole country.

Similarly, Hawthorne's and Updike's narratives offer vantage points from which to assess the increasingly individualistic nature of the American Society. Indeed, despite his ambiguous position on 'Transcendentalism' Hawthorne was still influenced by Emerson's theories, notably the ones about individualism. In the Emersonian sense of the term 'individualism' is regarded as a rather positive feature. It denotes a distance from society to better connect with the natural world and achieve self-reliance (Emerson). Hawthorne, attracted to this Emersonian creed portrayed Hester as illustrating both Emersonian qualities of independence and self-reliance given that she dwells in a cottage "out of of the sphere of social activity" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 73) and is financially independent through her professional activity as a seamstress. However, her individualism is not regarded as a complete disconnection from society for although she is spatially isolated she still meaningfully contributes to the community through her production of goods. By the same token, her inclination to give to the poor what she can afford reveals her lack of attachment to material objects. Nevertheless, this tightly bound Bostonian community is only possible through its members' concealing their respective individual desires to fit in the socially acceptable mould. Indeed, at the end of the *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne's narrator declares that:

> Women in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced or erring and sinful passion, -- or with dreary burden of heart unyielding because unvalued or unsought, -- came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched and what was the remedy! (227)

This suggests that the repressive nature of the community does take its toll on its individual members and thus foreshadows the progressive ascendancy of individual's need over the community's in later stages of American history.

Hawthorne in "The Custom House" seems to suggest that this budding individualism has come to fruition in nineteenth century America but that it resulted in an

increasingly atomized society. For, if a communal spirit is indeed present in "The Custom House" its employees are more concerned with their own personal interests than the interest of the community. They "go lazily about what they termed duty, and, at their own leisure and convenience, betake themselves to bed again" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 15). This 'laziness' and 'leisure-oriented' mentality radically contrasts with the puritanical hard-work ethic and thus demonstrates that Emersonian individualism can quickly become morally sterile. Moreover, the various employees are individualized either by names or by distinctive features contrarily to the uniform and anonymised mass which represents the people in the main text of *The Scarlet Letter.* As a result of a greater differentiation the cohesion of the community disappears and what was once a private sphere that had to be kept secret becomes a common right to privacy. For example, Hawthorne's *persona* keeps his literary ambitions to himself so that "none of [his fellow officers] had ever read a page of [his] inditing, or would have cared a fig the more for [him], if they had read them all" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 27). This denotes a growing desire for privacy and, as a consequence, for a detachment from the community.

Updike there again furthers Hawthorne's thought in *S.* where the notion of individualism has come to connote not only unproductivity but selfishness. Indeed, while Sarah claims she seeks to experiment a communal experience stating that "ego is the enemy" (Updike 12) her behaviour is in fact the epitome of isolationist individualism. On the one hand, she associates the Ego she wishes to transcend with "material things and personal 'achievements'" (Updike 12) on the other hand she reclaims half the share of Charles's belongings. This blatant contradiction points out the hypocrisy of her claim and shows that despite her affirmation that she lives a non-attached life she is unable to practice it in actual facts. In addition to her dependence on material objects she also struggles to let go of people. This is illustrated by a simple list of the recipients of her letters: her psychiatrist, dentist, hairdresser and high-school sweetheart to name just a few. She accumulates people as she does things but these relationships are devoid of any actual depth and remain at surface level thus preventing her from achieving true independence despite her eventual spatial isolation in her "lovely cottage by the sea" (Updike 264), reminiscent of Hester's own "cottage at the sea-shore" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 226), at the end of the novel.

In other words, Updike takes Hawthorne's original diegesis of the genesis of America, and by accentuating some traits merely suggested by Hawthorne, brings it up to date into a chronicle of what America came to be. That is to say a capitalist and consumer oriented society which reduced a positive Emersonian individualism to selfishness.

However, an analysis of *S.* should not overlook the inherent bias of its writer. Indeed, *S.* presents numerous elements fitting the definition of a satire. Updike, who sides with the conservative political ideology, tends to mock the idealism and/or hypocrisy of humanist movements born in the 1970s that criticized America's materialism and individualism while at the same time seeking wealth and not applying their idealist principles of generosity to real life. To some extent, Updike has a similar, though much less ambiguous, relation to these freedom movements as Hawthorne had to the Transcendentalists. It would thus be interesting to analyse Updike's parodist tone and numerous intertextual references to Hawthorne's transcendentalist works to understand his representation of his protagonist whom he turns into a deromanticised version of Hester.

II- S. is for Satire

To begin with, Satire, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, is

> The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.[2]

Gerard Genette would argue that satire is only one element of parody and that the term parody itself is too broad to really mean anything. Therefore, if one sought to be more specific *S.* fits most in the category of burlesque travesty. Indeed, according to Genette burlesque travesty:

> [It] transcribes a text from its far reaches original language to a more recent language, more familiar, in all the senses of the word (…) It *actualizes* [the parodied text].[3] (69)

In *S.*'s case, Updike uses T*he Scarlet Letter* as the hypo-text on which he bases his hypertext. In other words, *The Scarlet Letter* is the original text that Updike is first going to actualize by setting it in a contemporary period and then parody by creating a gap between the seriousness of the topics treated and the insensitive way his protagonist discusses them. This process results in a hypertext, that is to say *S.* in the present case. Updike's parodic tone is reinforced by his use of intertextual references to transcendentalism. Indeed, contrary to Hawthorne who was sceptical about but not averse to Transcendentalism, Updike leaves no room for ambiguity regarding his position on liberalism. He ridicules the liberated 'mode' and social experiments that flourished in the 1970s in creating burlesque figures who illustrate the inherent contradictions of these freedom movements.

For instance, although the references to *The Scarlet Letter* are the most obvious, Updike also draws extensively from another novel by Hawthorne, namely *The Blithedale Romance.*[4]

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[2] As given in the Oxford Dictionnary on line. Oxforddictionaries.com

[3] My translation "il s'agit de transcrire un texte de sa lointaine langue d'origine dans une langue plus proche, plus familière, dans tous les sens de ce mot. Le travestissement est le contraire de la distanciation il naturalise et assimile, au sens (métaphoriquement) juridique de ces termes, le texte parodié. Il l'*actualise*." Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes*. Paris: Seuil, 1982. p69.

[4] Written in 1852. Hawthorne Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance.* Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996.Print.

The plot is fairly simple, inspired by Hawthorne's own unsatisfactory experiment at Brook Farm, one of the numerous utopian communities sprouting in the 1840s, where it is said that:

> (…) transcendentalism stressed the correspondence between each person and nature and the presence of the divine in all men and women which was supposed to exalt individual conscience, honor the imagination openness and have faith in the truth. (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 5),

Hawthorne writes a fictionalized account of such a community. The story centres on Miles Coverdale, an idealist who joins an experimental utopian community founded on Fourieran principles, that is to say "a complex, multiple division of labor, with many tasks and occupations" (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 17). He eventually grows disheartened by the hard manual work that is harmful to his intellectual ambitions and the disappointing human experience that he finds excessively centred on the romantic life of his friend and rival Hollingworth. The story ends with Miles' leaving and his retelling of how Blithedale, like the real life model Brook Farm, finally crumbled plagued by financial troubles and by the desertion of its members returning to ordinary society. Thus, to some extent, *S.* has the same plot structure as *The Blithedale Romance*. Indeed, the story starts with Sarah, a middle-class housewife, who to transcend the ego and acquire independence joins the Ashram, a sectarian community the organization of which is reminiscent of Fourierist theories. Following Coverdale's example, she eventually leaves the community after uncovering the corruption of the Ashram's inner circle and numerous romantic and sexual dramas. Thus, through the above-mentioned actualization of the plot as well as through numerous ironic allusions to *The Blithedale Romance* Updike conveys his criticism of utopian communities and liberalism.

The most obvious reference to this other hypotext is Sarah's letters to Mrs Melissa *Blithedale* (*My emphasis*), a former member of the Ashram, who reclaims the reimbursement of the money she invested in the Ashram. On the one hand, this is reminiscent of Hawthorne's own attempt and failure at "recover[ing] his $1,000 investment [in the Book Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education]" (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 16). On the other hand, it results in a comic effect and denounces the deceiving nature of sectarian communities for Melissa Blithedale not only fails to recover her money but also lets herself be convinced to reinvest and reenrol in the Ashram.

In the same fashion, the forever unfinished "Hall of Millionfold Joys" which is "a two-acres assembly hall and an attractive vinyl-clad meditation centre of fourteen sound-proofed

rooms" (Updike 142) parodies the *Romance*'s "Phalanstère" which according to Fourier's plan is "the large building where life would be centred" (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 17). However, as Brook Farm's own Phalanstery which was destroyed by fire in 1846 "just as its construction – begun in the summer of 1844 – neared completion (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 19), the Ashram's "Hall of Millionfold Joys" is, ironically enough:

> (…) dismantled because of alleged violation of the Arizona laws pertaining to zoned ranch use, insurable electrical wiring, and *required number of emergency fire exits*. (Updike 230-231) (*my emphasis*)

Similarly, while Hawthorne's implicit criticism about the harshness of utopian communities' manual labor remained quite ambiguous, Updike clearly mocks sectarian communities' exploitation of their members. Indeed, the Ashram policy of considering work as "worship" that will help its members to achieve their enlightenment is only a way to justify their exploitation in a discourse corresponding to the Ashram's alleged spiritual goal. For example, in an official letter to a new adherent Sarah explains what the membership involves as follows:

> (…) there are fees totalling eight hundred dollars monthly to cover a modest portion of the unavoidable expenses of your food, housing, health and accident insurance, lecture and darshan fees, and supervised meditation. Sannyasins are of course expected to practice worship in the form of constructive labor for twelve hours a day (…) (Updike 57)

Here the request of the "fees" is first made more palatable by an accumulation of attenuating expressions such as: "modest portion of the unavoidable expenses" which emphasizes the supposedly minimalistic fees demanded of this new adherent. This is followed by a listing of the services these fees are supposed to cover, namely that of "food, housing, health and accident insurance, lecture and darshan fees, and supervised meditation". This listing heightened by the use of a polysyndeton, meaning in this case the repetition of the conjunction "and", creates an accumulation that has the effect of overwhelming the reader with information. Moreover, the long winded nature of the sentence which is filled with long words of Latin origin has a double impact. On the one hand it gives an impression of formality and authority. On the other hand, the accumulation of information may confuse the reader and make the actual meaning of the letter hard to grasp. Last but not least, Sarah informs the new member that he is supposed to "practice worship in the form of constructive labor for twelve hours a day". There again she lessens the exploitative nature of what is requested by presenting it as self-evident thanks to the use of the forestalling expression: "of course". Therefore, this paradoxical association of

spirituality and practical financial matters creates a comic effect which denounces the Ashram's hypocritical policy and its real financial aim.

Moreover, Updike goes a lot farther in his criticism than Hawthorne ever did when he exaggerates the sexual liberation that this communal experiment permits. While *The Blithedale Romance*'s romantic plots are only suggested, making clear that neither Blithedale nor its model followed the aspect of Fourier's theory which "proposed a more open and experimental marital and sexual life" (Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* 18), Updike mockingly describes the Ashram as a place of unrestrained sexual freedom. For instance, at her arrival at the Ashram Sarah has to undergo a "very thorough examination for venereal diseases" (Updike 40). This foreshadows from the start Sarah's future diversified love affairs. By the same token, this, as well as the fact that "the Arthat thinks birth control is the number-one global issue" (Updike 32) and that the Ashram's members have to be naked during "dynamic-meditation session" (Updike 43), imply the Ashram's open acceptance of sexual intercourses between its members. As a matter of fact, all the examination one has to undergo before being accepted in the Ashram may suggest not only the Ashram acceptance of intercourses between its members but its expectation that intercourses are going to happen. Therefore, Updike's depiction of the Ashram's libertinism conveys the conservative view that sectarian communities are only a *façade* for a decadent lifestyle.

Nonetheless, although Updike's plot is reminiscent of *The Blithedale Romance* his main hypotext and starting point remains *The Scarlet Letter.* As a matter of fact, the very title of the novel being a single letter of the alphabet echoes Hawthorne's titling and thematic choices. It is thus essential to compare the symbolism of their respective titles. The debates regarding the significance of the A on Hester's bosom are numerous. Initially supposed to stand for Adultery it acquired a range of meanings going from America to Angel or other having generally positive connotation in Hawthorne's romance. By contrast, while the debates surrounding the signification of Sarah's S are just as numerous amongst Updike's critics the meanings given to the letter S are a lot harsher. For instance, Donald Greiner (492) argues that the S represents the *si*n inducing *S*nake of the Bible, while Calinescu suggests it may stand:

> (…) ironically, obliquely, and at the same time honorifically for an absent "scarlet (letter)" and, conceivably, for "signature" as well as "sincerity" that is, for the transcendence and even the abolition of the existential, albeit fictional, type of "secrecy" that played such a cardinal role in the symbolic drama of *The Scarlet Letter*. (461)

Following the hypothesis of the present thesis Greiner's proposition of S standing for Snake would fit perfectly the theory in which Sarah is a reversed Hester, the Biblical *S*nake being as close as we can get to the opposite of the Angel. As a matter of fact, this hypothesis is also supported by the symbolic fact that her Ashram name is Kundalini which means "the energy-serpent that rises" (Updike 250). However, Calinescu's suggestion that S stands for *S*ignature would also be adequate given the epistolary format of the novel and Sarah's elusive authorship, a point that I will develop in the last part of this thesis.

Nevertheless, it may be interesting to offer other possible meanings, more suited to my contemporary reading of *S.* For instance, given Sarah's libertine nature and society's habit to label this sort of promiscuous behaviour in women with sexist slur S could conceivably stand for 'Slut'. On the other hand, if S. is interpreted as a national symbol, as A was taken to mean America, then it could very well stand for 'State' to evoke the atomization of America and its turning into the United *States* thus losing its sense of cohesion. Either way, while Updike uses a similar strategy as Hawthorne in terms of form he completely differs in terms of semantic content. In other words, although he also charges a single letter with symbolic meaning, he clearly encourages the reader to interpret S. pejoratively and as a desacralization of Hawthorne's A.

Actually, S is not the only letter in which Updike effects this desacralization. There is in fact a notable presence of the symbolic A associated with ordinary objects. Indeed, Sarah lives in an "A-frame", advises her mother to take "Vitamine A" and nicknames her female lover "Dearest A". Hawthorne's letter is everywhere in *S.* but as a mock version of the original, it lost its symbolic aspect to only keep its material one and is meant as an inside joke between the author and the reader. To some extent, it may represent how non-content to replace the noble original with a cheap copy, the consumerist society keeps using its original image for trivial objects making it lose its symbolic worth in the process.

Updike also adds to this impression through the waning of the colour scheme. Indeed, *The Scarlet Letter*'s dominant colour is eponymously Scarlet paired with other sober colours while *S.*'s colour code is composed of lighter, less symbolically charged colours. This is illustrated through the respective clothing of the protagonists. For example, except for the Scarlet Letter which is made "in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourished of gold thread" Hester's dress is "of the coarsest materials and most sombre hue" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 50; 75). On the contrary, in *S.* Sarah dresses with: "some raspberry-colored jeans (…) and [her] running shoes and an old denim jacket of Pearl's and two

sweatshirts that really were more pink than mauve" (Updike 30). This weakening of a symbolically noble colour to a whole range of lighter and more artificial tints may represent the dissipation of American ethics. Indeed, "pink" in informal speech can mean "having or showing left-wing tendencies"[5] therefore Updike in establishing such a colour code wittily criticises the growing liberalization of America.

Moreover, it is worth noting that Sarah's new clothes are borrowed from her daughter thus implying that to some extent her daughter is the one dressing her. As a consequence, the roles of the caretaker and the one being cared for are symbolically reversed. By contrast, Hester fulfilled her traditional role of motherly provider in making "the dresses which [her] child w[ears]" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 81). This other contrast adds to Updike's criticism of liberal's irresponsibility, implicitly stating that America's maturation is not only arrested but reversed.

As a matter of fact, this reversed maturation process is also symbolized by Sarah's spatial displacement. Indeed, while Hester's migration takes her from England to New England, America, where she will eventually remain despite a temporary stay in England, Sarah leaves Hester's final location of New England for what she calls her "big pilgrimage" (Updike 30) and first goes to Los Angeles. This first journey taking her on the other side of the continent is reminiscent of the 1840's Gold Rush, an historical symbol of national progression. However, this progression takes a step back for she quickly "com[es] in to land" (Updike 30) to Forrest in Arizona where the Ashram is located. Finally, she deserts the Ashram and exiles herself to Samana Cay, a desert island in the Bahamas believed to be the isle where Christopher Columbus first landed the 12th October 1492. Therefore, in going back to the very place where the colonization of the American continent started Sarah symbolically erases all the accomplished progress.

Nevertheless, Updike's satirical tone is never more obvious than in the characterization of his protagonist and the comparison he prompts the reader to make between Sarah and Hawthorne's own protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter*. Indeed, from the very start, Updike explicitly quotes *The Scarlet Letter* in the foreword. The two quotes describe Hester Prynne's physical appearance and character and emphasize her "dignity", "lady-like[ness]" and generally gentle appearance (Updike's foreword) which radically contrast with Sarah's letters which give

[5] As found in the Oxford Dictionary online. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pink

a less appealing description of her appearance and of her morals. This contrast is perfectly illustrated by a comparison of their physical descriptions. For, while Hester's complexion is "rich" and comparable to "cold marble" (Updike's foreword), Sarah's is "disgustingly dark and oily, so [she] looked dirty even after [she]'d had a bath" (Updike 96). Taken on a more symbolic level these descriptions also reflect their respective personalities. Hester is morally rich and her seemingly cold character is proof of her dignity while Sarah is slightly darker on the moral spectrum and a lot more slippery and hard to grasp as a character.

Moreover, they are also opposite with respect to their social status and personal ethics. Hester is a hard working single mother who succeeds in being self-reliant and leads an ascetic lifestyle for she "s[eeks] not to acquire anything beyond a subsistence, of the plainest and most ascetic description, for herself (…)" (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 75). Conversely, Sarah is a soon to be divorced middle class housewife who abandons her family and whose distinctive features are greed and self-justification. Donald Greiner expresses it best when he says that Sarah "takes while Hester gives" (494). Therefore, Updike establishes a parallel between Hester Prynne and Sarah only to demonstrate how his protagonist is a completely deromanticized version of Hester.

Updike's satirical disfiguration of Hawthorne's protagonist clearly appears through a close study of the characters' relation to gender and sexuality. For in addition to being protagonists, Hester and Sarah are *female* protagonists depicted by male authors who diverge in their representations of women. Indeed, Hawthorne by making Hester an example of self-reliance and strength turns her into an "ideal of womanhood" (Baym 80). Paradoxically, he also deprives Hester of her own womanhood for according to Nina Baym by being self-reliant, a supposedly exclusively masculine quality, "Hester loses her ability to attract men" (80), she is implicitly desexualized. Similarly, in the much studied scene set in the forest between Hester and Dimmesdale which is the only passage of the novel where Hester acts somewhat selfishly by admitting her personal desire, Hawthorne's narrator emits a negative personal judgement and "impute[s] 'Shame' to Hester and declare[s] that her 'strength' [is] immoral" (Carpenter 178). Thus, the fact that Hawthorne denied Hester conventional womanhood and female sexuality added to the lack of insight into the character's thoughts, feelings and ethics erased the verisimilitude of the character and encouraged numerous critics to interpret Hester as an allegorical figure "embodying the authentic American dream" (Carpenter 179) and not as an actual character with her own complexities and desires.

On the contrary, Updike far from desexualizing Sarah, almost over-sexualizes her for she admits to at least three different sexual partners and happens to be quite graphic in her depiction of some of the intercourses. Therefore, following the logic in which Sarah represents a modern Hester, Updike removes the restriction implemented by Hawthorne and suggests how promiscuous the character of Hester could have been if the story was set at a different historical period. As a result, he both emphasizes the original Hester's liberated behaviour and conveys a criticism of female liberation for Sarah's sexual freedom is portrayed as excessively naïve. For instance, Sarah assures her mother that "there are no orgies here. There is just love in its many forms" (Updike 94). This rephrasing of something considered vulgar into a politically correct language creates a comic effect which ridicules movements prescribing sexual freedom and criticises female emancipation.

Furthermore, through Sarah's incendiary letters Updike parrots feminists' discourses concerning gender roles and the limits women encounter in their social ascent because of the patriarchal nature of the society. The gap between this feminist discourse and the upper middle class character proclaiming it there again creates a comic effect that invalidates otherwise valid arguments. Indeed, Sarah is quite contradictory. On the one hand she deeply resents women's dependence on men, declaring that women have to free themselves "otherwise a million years of slavery has conditioned [them] to huddle by the hearth (…)" (Updike 15). On the other hand, after leaving her husband she still seems to remain dependent on other characters, be it the Arthat or her various lovers, they are the ones helping her upward mobility in the Ashram hierarchy.

As a result of the inconsistency of Updike's female protagonist and his known tendency to represent women merely as what he himself recognized as: "wives, sex objects and purely domestic creatures" (Rothstein) some critics have argued: "with cries of sexism and misogyny, that Updike has reduced Hester to 'a wholly hateful woman'" (Schiff 27). This accusation is significant for Hester, regardless of Hawthorne's intention, has been generally praised as one of the first feminist icons. Therefore, by writing a deromanticized version of one of the first American heroine Updike, despite his claim that his re-writing of *The Scarlet Letter* from Hester's point of view was "an attempt to make things right with his (…) feminist detractors" (Rothstein), only incensed them further. For "Updike's comic tone (…) undercuts the self-righteousness of feminists". (Greiner 492)

Indeed, notwithstanding his initial intention Updike's satire of the hypocrisy of liberal movements orients critics and readers alike to interpret Sarah not as "a woman on the move" who "achiev[es] independence" (Rothstein) but as self-deluded and in denial of her own hypocrisy. This opinion is reflected in a consequent number of scholarly articles studying *S.* For example, after illustrating the series of contradictions present in the novel where Sarah claims a thing in a letter and its opposite in the next, Parker Royal rightly points out that:

> The letters are structured in such a way that Sarah's words constantly undermine (or, as one might be tempted to say, deconstruct) themselves (82).

He then continues by stating that "The irony (…) is that [Sarah] never seems to be aware of the contradictions embedded in her own words." (83). In a similar manner Schiff suggests that:

> She has deceived herself into believing that her quest is centered upon spirituality and love, rather than revenge and hatred. Sarah is not unlike a comic Shakespearean heroine who fails to see her own hypocrisy and hidden motives. (28)

In short, Updike mixed and modernized the original plots of *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Scarlet Letter* in a satirical manner to criticize the influence of freedom movements on the contemporary American society. For his satire to be effective he mocks and discredits his female protagonist and doing so deromanticizes a key figure of American Literature.

However, it could be argued that the reason readers and critics tend to interpret Sarah as self-deluded is, on the one hand, because of Updike's own reputation regarding his representation of women as passive objects and, on the other hand, because of the context of the 1980s' conservative revival in which the novel was written. Indeed, following the freedom movements of the 1970s arose a conservative backlash which questioned the sincerity of these movements and tried to reinforce traditional norms and values, especially with respect to the place of women in society (Faludi).[6] This is an endeavor in which Updike clearly participates with his satire of the said freedom movements.

Yet, Updike's literary strategy is ambiguous because it can be understood in two different ways. Indeed, if one were to ignore the context of the time of writing and Updike's political

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[6] Susan Faludi in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* gives convincing evidence of the existence of a conservative backlash in the 1980s which aimed to restrict and reduce women's rights and freedom. She studies the influence of the backlash in the media, popular culture, fashion industry and numerous other fields. She also seeks to prove how Reaganian policies affected women's rights negatively. Although she is somewhat biased her arguments are compelling and worth listening to for it provides a relevant context to Updike's time of writing. Faludi, Susan. *Backlash*. New York: Crown, 1991. Print.

allegiance and focused only on the text Sarah's constant self-contradictions could be perceived not as denial but as sheer manipulative genius. This would make the novel fit in another literary genre, that of the Picaresque which is defined by its roguish and highly unreliable narrator. Yet, this type of anti-heroic protagonist is not only symptomatic of the Picaresque but can also be attributed to Postmodernism. Indeed, Sarah, notwithstanding her real intentions, holds a postmodern discourse, for she uses feminist arguments to subvert the patriarchal order and deconstructs her own discourse to best argue her point depending on the recipient of her letter.

This is the theory that I am going to argue and develop in this final part. Through a look at the Picaresque genre as well as a close analysis of *S.*'s narrative structure I will demonstrate that because of her unreliability Updike's protagonist is a typically Picaresque heroine, or in other words: an anti-heroine. In addition to which she uses Postmodernist discursive strategies to subvert the patriarchal opposition.

III- S. is for Schemer

To start with, I will argue that there are two possible readings of *S.*. The first and most conventional one which I discussed in the previous part is as a satire of liberalism which reinforces the conformist conservatives' position. The second, and this is what I am going to argue in this last part, is that to some extent *S.* can be read as a Picaresque novel with clear Postmodern discursive strategies. Out of a purely practical concern, I will put Postmodernism aside in this first argument and start with the novel's Picaresque quality.

Originating in Spain in the mid-sixteenth century, the Picaresque novel usually tells the story of a roguish protagonist succeeding thanks to dishonest means. Not unlike a *parvenu* they seek to climb the social ladder and acquire wealth through their wit instead of their work. This, I am going to argue, is Sarah's case.

However, before explaining in what *S.* is a Picaresque novel it is necessary to address why it has not been recognized as such. Indeed, *S.* is not only a picaresque novel but a feminine variation of a picaresque novel and the fact that Sarah is not only a female protagonist but also a female narrator injures the credibility of her discourse. Friedman expresses it best when he explains that:

> In the case of the feminine variations, the complexity of the sign and the dubious authority of the picaresque narrator turn the union of author and society against the individual into an uneven battle of the sexes. The women who would challenge the status quo are figuratively and then literally silenced. The men who write these texts underscore the doubling of which is, conversely, encoded in the text. The articulation of the anti-heroine's voice reveals a male-oriented semiotics whose subtext bespeaks suppression. The feminine picaresque is perhaps less a meta-narrative than a dialectic between free speech and its demystified underside (…). The feminine picaresque becomes the story of an absence, a gender inflicted sign of the duplicity of discourse, and a testament to the unliberated wor(l)d.
>
> The interplay between narrator and implied author, as manifested in the picaresque, allows the text to display both antisocial and conservative positions. The narrator/protagonist's "misreading" of social option is matched by discursive strategies that backfire, that incriminate rather than defend the speaker. The implied reader, as recipient of the message systems (counter strategies) of the implied author, may correct the misreading by viewing the verbal structure and its social referents ironically. The superseding voice of the implied author brings a restoration of order to the chaotic, or unconventional, measure proposed-- through word and deed-- by the déclassé character. (xiii)

Therefore, as is usual in feminine variation of Picaresque novels, by using Sarah as a satirical device Updike undermines both her agency as a character and her discursive authority as a narrator to only convey the conventional position that has been observed earlier thus explaining the critical reception that *S.* has received.

Nevertheless, conversely to the usual feminine Picaresque novel where the narration is composed of the "(…) juxtaposition of a female voice and a male voice-over" for "The authorial figure [to] keep rebellion in check" (Friedman xvi) in *S.* Updike's authorial presence is never explicit. Indeed, *S.* differs in that it belongs to the epistolary genre, that is to say that it is composed of letters written by the protagonist and therefore somewhat silences the author's voice. As a result, Sarah's point of view is the only one given to the reader. On the one hand, this minimizes the possibility of authorial intervention, which means that Updike cannot comment on his characters' actions and thus cannot guide the reading otherwise than with Sarah's discourse. On the other hand, the reader does not have any other focalizing agent that Sarah and therefore has to, either trust her discourse to be representative of her character, or to read between the lines and find that she actually changes her discourse depending on the person she writes to. This latter interpretation would make her a highly unreliable narrator as is characteristic of both Picaresque protagonist and postmodern fiction.

To begin with, it is this Picaresque quality that I will endeavour to demonstrate in the subsequent paragraphs in showing how *S.* fits numerous criteria of the Picaresque novel as defined in the *Handbook to Literature* by Thrall and Hibbard.

Firstly, one of the most important criterion of the Picaresque novel is that it is a first person narrative with autobiographic tendencies. In *S.*'s case the novel is almost entirely composed of letters written by Sarah and relates events of her own life making her the subject and only focalizing agent of the novel.

Secondly, in a picaresque novel: "the occupation of this central figure, should [they] tolerate employment at all, is menial in nature" (Thrall and Hibard 353) and indeed Sarah started off as a housewife hiring people for any kind of manual labour, be it "the lawn boys" (Updike 3) or "Mrs. Kimball" the cleaning lady (Updike 4). Moreover, although she did effectuate manual labour at her arrival at the Ashram she quickly climbed the Ashram hierarchic ladder. She was promoted, first to the "typist pool" (Updike 54), a position that does not necessitate any other talent than her wit since it consists in answering complaints and finally as the Ashram accountant which enabled her to embezzle the Ashram's "treasury of enlightenment".

This last fact clearly demonstrates her calculated dishonesty and therefore fills another criterion of the Picaresque novel. Namely, that "The hero of the picaresque novel usually stops just short of being an actual criminal" (Thrall and Hibbard 353). Here Sarah does actually commit a crime, she commits theft. This is first implied through numerous letters requesting that deposits be paid in her various bank accounts. The locations of which are known for being rather open to laundering money such as Switzerland and Samana Cay which is located in the Bahamas. Then it is revealed more or less explicitly in a letter to the Arthat in which she indirectly confesses to her crime while at the same time providing justification to defend herself. She proceeds as follows:

> (…) any apparent discrepancies [Nitaya Kalpana] notices in the books must be blamed upon the irregular methods of accounting which I, having never attended business school, had to improvise, and if that does not explain everything, blame the diabolic machinations of the perfidious Durga. (Updike 249)

Here she cleverly anticipates the accusations that could be waged against her. Indeed, she first announces that they might find "discrepancies" but associating the noun "discrepancy" with the adjective "apparent" leads them to understand that these eventual discrepancies are not necessarily there in the facts which would disculpate her of all possible accusation. Then she uses the modal "must" in an ambiguous way. Its use can either be interpreted as epistemic which would mean she is only venturing an explanation to the "apparent discrepancies" or as having an imperative function and thus be an order. In the latter case "must" would introduce the excuse she advises them to give to the authorities if the "discrepancies" were to be noticed. Namely, they should blame her faulty methods of accounting which she claims to result from her lack of experience and education. However, by putting the reason of her possible failing in a relative clause and following it with the phrasal form "had to" which conveys obligation she actually phrases the justification in a way that exonerates her of any ethical responsibility. Finally, she offers an extra plausible justification in case the first one she supplied failed to be convincing. It consists in putting the blame on Durga whom she quite literally demonizes with the exaggerated pejorative adjectives "diabolic" and "perfidious". Consequently, she confesses the embezzlement in such a way as to only seem informative and avoid any self-incrimination. As a matter of fact, the possible explanations she provides the Arthat with have for effect to disculpate her and therefore proves her criminal genius.

Moreover, the Picaresque novel is also defined by the fact that: "There is little character interest. Progress and development of character do not take place" (353). This is perfectly

illustrated in *S.* where none of the characters actually change from their initial position or status. Any change in the characters comes more from the character's true nature being uncovered than developing. For instance, Sarah remains or rather reveals the extent of her attachment to materialism for she leaves a financially comfortable position to eventually find another. This is reflected by the fact that both her first and last letter are addressed to her husband and deal with approximatively the same topics, that is to say money, the house, their shared properties and their respective infidelities.

Regarding the writing style, Thrall and Hibbard affirm that: "The method is realistic. (…) presented with a plainness of language, a freedom in vocabulary and a vividness of detail" (353). This is there again the case in *S.* through Sarah's detailed letters which read as monologues or rather one-sided dialogues. Still they are phrased in a familiar and contemporary language that leaves no room for misinterpretation.

Furthermore, the satirical aspect of the novel that has been discussed in the previous part is also an important element of the 'Picaresque novel' for in this genre the protagonist:

> (…) thrown with people from every class and often from different parts of the world, serves them intimately in one lowly capacity or another and learns all their foibles and frailties. The picaresque novel may in this way be made to satirize both social casts and national or racial peculiarities. (Thrall and Hibbard 353)

This is especially true in *S.* for it is essential to remember that most of the Ashram's members are not American and Sarah describes them using national stereotypes. For example, she describes Fritz, her German lover, as follows:

> Actually, Fritz'd kill me if he heard me calling him Fritz instead of his Ashram name. (…) I say he'd kill me and that's not true, but actually he does have a funny little temper. He's German by birth and likes things to be just *so*. *Ach ja*. (Updike 34)

This description of her lover is self-contradictory because she first implies his violent temperament then affirms that her first statement regarding Fritz being violent is untrue and eventually, through the use of the conjunction "but" she introduces a contrasting clause that undermines this affirmation. Moreover, she ends with a cliché statement implying that his German nationality explains his inflexibility and then conceivably imitates his German exclamation. Doing so, she connects his supposedly violent temperament to his nationality. Similarly, Sarah describes Durga who is Irish and the Arthat who she originally believes to be Indian but eventually discovers to be American with national and racial stereotypes.

Furthermore, she includes in the description she makes of them some anecdotes about their lives before the Ashram which proves that she detains information that she can use to her advantage. She actually does use the said personal information in an implicit threat to the Arthat as follows:

> In return for this courtesy, rest assured that our personal relations and whatever revelations they bought are sealed in my vasanas, to remain there as speechless vidya forever. If not, not – if you take my meaning. (Updike 249)

This excerpt which follows her explanation about the "apparent discrepancies" in the books of the Treasury is barely covered blackmail. The register fits her non-attached Ashram persona with a mix of politically correct and spiritual discourses but the content is scarcely disguised dishonesty. By using an affirmative sentence and starting with "in return for" she directly assumes his acceptance to conform to her request and semantically denies him the capacity to refuse. The last part of the excerpt finally addresses his possibly negative answer and states the consequences of such a refusal in a succinct manner by repeating the negation: "If not, not". Thus she implies that a refusal would put into question the preceding affirmative clause and threatens to transform it into a negative one in which the "revelations", namely his real identity as a Jewish Armenian of Watertown, Massachusetts, would *not* be "sealed in [her] vasanas.

Therefore, this long list demonstrating that *S.* fits the definition of a Picaresque novel clearly proves Sarah's deficient morals, but also, and more importantly so, her agency. Furthermore, it discredits the theories according to which she is presented as self-deluded and unaware of the incoherence of her discourse.

Indeed, the notable contradictions in her discourse actually reveal her skill as a master of rhetoric well versed in manipulating language to achieve her ends. This is illustrated by her regular shift of tone and register depending on the person she writes to. For instance, there are notable differences in the manner she announces that she has left her husband depending on whom she is announcing it to. When she announces it to her daughter she softens the news as follows:

> Perhaps by now you will have heard from your father. He was always less afraid of the transatlantic phone (…) than I was. (…) Well, darling, I am doing my wiggle now in a motel in Los Angeles, and have left your father. (...)Well, I tried an experiment. I didn't tell your father a thing about my day. And he never asked. Not once, days after days of biting my tongue – he utterly didn't

> notice. That settled it. So absent from his perceptions, I might as well be absent in fact. (Updike 14-15)

Here she first presupposes her daughter's knowledge of the news and proceeds to delay the actual announcement with digressions about common knowledge and shared memories that infantilize her daughter, saying "doing my wiggle" instead of "writing to you". When she finally announces the news it is abruptly as an end to the sentence depicting her settings and specifically not introducing a revelation. Thus, in inserting the main information amongst less relevant ones she simultaneously makes it hard to register and attenuates its importance. She then quickly proceeds to justify her decision using rational arguments. She relates the results of the "experiment" she conducted therefore implying that her decision was "settled" on the said results and thus rational in nature. Moreover, she phrases her argument in a way as to convey emotion. It is structured in a series of short sentences which associated with the emphatic repetitions of negations such as "never", "not once", "didn't" and the use of the submodifier "utterly" in the conclusion create a spasmodic rhythm and express outrage. To finish, she endeavours to evoke sympathy from her daughter by implicitly assigning the blame on her husband.

In her first letter to her mother she reproduces the same strategy but in a much less developed and lengthy way. Simply stating: "I've left him but for ten years more or less it's felt every morning and midnight as if *he's* left *me"* (Updike 22). She first confirms that "[she] left him" but then proceeds to justify herself through the use of pathos that she creates through an accumulation of binary terms, namely "more or less", "morning and midnight", "he/me" to finally effect a reversal of the situation stating that "he's left [her]. Here again she skilfully assigns the blame to Charles but contrary to the letter to her daughter she does so only through an argumentation based on emotion rather than rationality.

By contrast, in her tape recording to Midge she only mentions her separation to introduce her retelling of the past weeks, simply starting with: "Where shall I begin? I left Charles, of course." (Updike 30). This last revelation is very matter of fact, a simple sentence composed of a subject, a verb and an object to which is added the expression "of course" conveying that the news was to be expected. This radically contrasts with the two previous excerpts because in this last one she does not make use of pathos nor attempt to justify her decision nor shift the blame to Charles. In fact, it rather suggests her actual emotional detachment to the situation which seems more plausible than the excessive sentimentality evinced by the letters. Indeed, the mean of confession has its importance. A tape recording

seems to be more reliable than handwritten letters for the simple fact that a recorded discourse is more spontaneous than a written discourse.

Therefore, the notable differences in the disclosure of the same news proves that Sarah changes discursive strategies with respect to the recipient of her letters.

Similarly, her multifaceted aspect is symbolically emphasized by the fact that in addition to changing her discourse she changes signatures depending on the tone and register used. She signs successively as "S." when she writes to her husband, "Mother" or "Mommy" when she writes to her daughter and "Sare" when she writes to her mother. These different signatures may represent that despite her affirmation that she has: "forgotten [her] lines and wandered offstage" (Updike 17) she is still playing, or at least pretending to play, the respective social parts of wife, mother and daughter. Moreover, the fact that she still signs "Sarah Worth", thus using her married name, when she writes to her various doctors and former friends whom she did not inform of the real reason of her departure may be a way to conceal her actual situation and not damage her former reputation. Conversely, she signs "Sarah née Price" in a letter to Myron Stern, her college sweetheart. On the one hand, the addition of the French adjective "née" is an indirect mention of her preceding marriage for it implies that it is not her name anymore, on the other hand, using only her maiden name and not mentioning her married one while preceding her signature by "Your unextinguished old flame" (Updike 249) emphasizes the fact that the said marriage is over and is a clear attempt, as is this whole letter, at luring him back into her web.

To sum up, while signatures are ordinarily necessary to the construction of the epistolary genre they have a specific importance in *S.* for the different signatures are an integral part of Sarah's rhetorical strategy. As I mentioned earlier, quoting Calinescu who suggested that the S may stand "conceivably for 'signature', as well as 'sincerity'" (461), the signatures' part should not be underestimated. The signatures both present and conclude Sarah's relation to the recipient of the letters as well as allow the reader to gauge her level of sincerity. It is not accidental that the only letters in which she signs S., the title of the novel, should be the ones she sends to her husband. It may actually be the proof of one of the few authorial intervention in the novel for it seems to suggest that these particular letters are the ones where her "real" identity transpires.

Following this theory this interpretation would expose her as an angry and revengeful woman but contrary to what critics like Schiff have argued I do not think the character is meant to be perceived as unaware of her anger. On the contrary, by proving that *S.* presents Picaresque

aspects what I sought to demonstrate is that Sarah is fully aware of her anger and that lying, manipulating and stealing is the way she found to both achieve financial independence and avenge herself.

Although it does not necessarily make her a noble character and while she eventually seems dissatisfied with her situation, this is not relevant to the argument. The point is that she still achieves self-reliance at the end of the novel in "her lonely cottage by the sea" (Updike 264) which is reminiscent of Hester's "cottage by the sea-shore" where she remains at the end of *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 226). Therefore, despite their inherently different ethics Updike and Hawthorne's protagonists are actually in similar situations at the end of their respective novels.

What differentiates them most is that Hester is considered a heroine because of her noble character and her atonement while Sarah, by reason of her selfishness, scheming and lack of genuine remorse, fits the definition of the anti-heroine. However, it could be argued that Updike by creating an anti-heroic Hester is in fact only actualizing Hester's original heroism into a more contemporary figure. Indeed, according to Neimneh:

> A fragmented society – torn by war, conflicting values, cultural crisis, and different aspects of modernity – produces its own heroic model: sick, anti-social, and introspective and anti-heroes whose salvation is individualistic in the midst of social and cultural disarray. (78)

Therefore, Updike's protagonist's lack of ethics and striving for wealth and material goods is only a reflection of the modern society's belief that moral judgment and traditional values are decaying. To some extent, this is conveyed through Updike's rejection of what Greiner calls:

> (…) Hawthorne's distinction between the corrupt material and the pure spiritual. Updike and his characters struggle toward a unity of the extremes even at the cost of sexual transgression. No negative in the material for them. (477)

In other words, while Hawthorne kept the physical and emotional facets of his characters separated, establishing carnal desire as sinful and Christian faith as holy, Updike unites these diverging aspects of his characters. This is perfectly illustrated by the fact that Sarah uses her body, her intellect and her pretended spirituality to achieve her various schemes. On the one hand, she succeeded in climbing the Ashram's hierarchy thanks to her various sexual associations with influential members of the Ashram. On the other hand, her various schemes

steam from her rhetorical skills which themselves derive from her education. Indeed, she often stresses the importance of education for women. As a matter of fact, in a letter to her daughter she claims that:

> (…) a college degree is the invisible tiara a woman must wear now, otherwise people write her off as a bumpkin, an ignoramus, a throwback, an archaic creature. (Updike 203)

This identification of "a college degree" with "the invisible tiara a woman must wear now" conveys the actualization of the requirement women have to meet to fit in society. Indeed, the use of the copular verb "be" added to the temporal adjunct "now" at the end of the clause implies that the college degree is a modernized "tiara", the "tiara" being an infantilised and stereotypically gendered image reminiscent of the prize won in beauty pageants. Thus, to some extent the comparison implies that "a college degree" is the new indispensable accessory that women have to wear. This is emphasized by the use of the modal "must" which expresses obligation, meaning that failing to comply results in being "written off" as "a bumpkin, an ignoramus, a throwback, an archaic creature". This accumulation of pejorative nouns denoting 'stupidity' has for effect to both overwhelm the reader and convey the irritation of the writer.

Finally, to complete body and spirit, Sarah's new found Buddhist faith around which she webs her rhetoric contributes to her spiritual dimension, her "soul". As a result, Sarah is a perfect association of material and spiritual both of which are tools she uses to achieve her selfish goal.

Following these previous demonstrations, it is quite safe to assert that Sarah is both an unreliable narrator and an anti-heroic character. The only element left to argue is that in addition to being typical of Picaresque protagonists Sarah's dubiousness goes even farther and can be inscribed in a Postmodernist aesthetic known to favour unreliable anti-heroes over traditional heroic figures.

However, before I expose why *S.* is a Postmodern novel it seems essential to quickly recall some current definitions of "postmodernism". Postmodernist fiction and more generally, postmodernist discourse and thinking are often said to have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, in a rejection of the historically hegemonic colonial and patriarchal discourse. Postmodernist fiction thus often seems to be concerned with the voices that have been silenced by the hegemonic discourses. That is to say that it involves post-colonial, feminist and queer discourses giving pride as well as a prominent role to voices that have tended to be ignored until

then. Shusterman argues that stylistically, Postmodernism is defined by its:

> irony, playfulness, appropriation, mixing of styles, use of popular culture and aleatory techniques, political commentary, challenges to traditional unities, profundities, and established aesthetic purities, etc (774)

While Updike is not usually categorized as a postmodernist both Schiff and Calinsecu agree that "(…) some of Updike's major novels display at least one significant modernist/postmodernist trait." (Calinescu 446). I will argue that this is the case of *S.* in which satire is merely the most apparent Postmodernist feature but is far from being the only one. Indeed, as it has been observed earlier Updike's protagonist is a gifted master of rhetoric and incidentally her discursive strategies are Postmodernist in nature. This I will argue by giving examples of her use of feminist arguments, her application of deconstructionist theories as well as her numerous metafictional reflections.

First of all, notwithstanding her real beliefs Sarah often uses a feminist discourse to argue her right to independence from her husband. She starts by denouncing how patriarchy treats women as properties as in the following passage where she talks about her husband's signature that she had to imitate to sell their shared stocks:

> I know it so well, that signature, it's been branded into me, I wouldn't be surprised to see it burned into my flank if I looked down, char for Charles, it felt wonderful writing it – being *you* for a second, with all your dark unheeding illegible male authority. (Updike 6)

Here through the use of verbs and noun in the lexical field of agricultural breeding, such as "brand", "burn" and "flank" she likens her husband's signature to a branding iron. Thus by implicitly comparing herself to livestock she suggests her status as her husband's property and by the same token as a passive subject. Moreover, by stating that "char" stands for "Charles" she expresses the possible corruptive nature of his ownership given that something charred is forever tainted. Then she retells how it "felt" to subvert his "male authority" by usurping his signature. Indeed, the action of "signing" is historically charged with executive power and therefore with agency, the opposite of passivity. To some extent, the fact that she associates his "authority" to the adjectives "unheeding" and "illegible" expresses the illegitimacy of his authority because it simply stands unquestioned while there are no actual reasons for its existence other that the patriarchal nature of society. Therefore, by questioning and even usurping his "male authority" she subverts the patriarchal order and comes into her own authority. In other words, the sheer playfulness of Sarah's usurpation of her husband's authority

and the suggestion that the voice of power and authority can be mimicked, forged and subverted through imitation gives Updike's novel a distinctly postmodern flavour.

Although feminism in itself is not necessarily postmodern the way Sarah constructs and then deconstructs her discourse to manipulate the diegetic – and non diegetic – reader is characteristic of postmodernism. As a matter of fact, in a letter to her daughter where Sarah seems to have a hard time grasping the subject of the course her daughter is taking, there is an explicit reference to the well-known Deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida, no doubt intended by Updike as a playful metafictional reference. It is introduced as follows:

> The courses you are completing are still vague in my mind. What exactly *are* Deconstructional Dynamics, and how can they be applied to Paradise Lost and the Faerie Queene? As you remember, Granddaddy Price had *lovely* editions of both classics – much too expensive, though, to be deconstructed. (Updike 83)

The irony of this excerpt comes from Sarah's confusion in the face of Deconstruction Theory when it is the very theory she applies in most of her letters. Firstly, comedy occurs through her misspelling of the term, as she writes "Deconstructional" instead of "Deconstructionist". Then, her initial insistence on the vagueness of this theory and her later emphasis on the auxiliary "be" to require an explanation as to what exactly this theory entails may be Updike making fun of postmodernism, which has a reputation for being hard to grasp. Finally, she rebounds by switching to a material subject of which she stresses the "*lovely*" quality and reports the monetary value. This conveys that despite her application of postmodern strategies Sarah completely fails to understand their concepts and thus proves, once again, her profound attachment to the material aspect of situations. Therefore, the text lends itself to a deconstructionist analysis given that it deconstructs the binary opposition between genuine interest and hypocrisy or in other words between Sarah's sincere lyrical self and her theatrical persona. In addition to which, the logic of the text remains comedic for while Sarah's writing is an illustration of deconstruction she seems unable to understand the concepts of deconstruction.

Incidentally, this reference to the deconstruction theories of Derrida is also interesting in that it is a metafictional reference. Meta-fiction is another Postmodern device that Linda Hutcheon defines as: "fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity (…)" (1). In other words, in meta-

fiction the text is often self-reflective, it comments on its own writing process, thus in mentioning Deconstruction it hinted at its own deconstructionist tendencies. This is far from being the only instance of metafictionality in the novel for Sarah often describes her writing or what she is doing at the moment of writing. A clearer example can symbolically be found in the very first letter of the novel, which starts with:

> The distance between us grows, even as my pen hesitates. The engines drone in the spaces between words, eating up the miles, the acres of the flat farms in big brown and green squares below the wing as it inches along. (Updike 3)

Here the narrator refers to the action of writing the very text the intended reader is reading. She begins with a metaphor that establishes the action of writing as the act of creating distance. She does so through an association of the pen "inch[ing] along" with the plane "eating up the miles". The association of the two systems of measurement, in which the "inch" is established as having direct control over "the miles" serves as an image that illustrates the power of discourse. This reflexion on the action of writing and the authority it holds over action is clearly meta-fictional and applies to the rest of the novel. Indeed, through the action of writing Sarah enacts her power to incite action and creates her own authorial authority.

Therefore, Derek Parker Royal is quite right when he argues that "Sarah becomes an artist figure, working on pieces of paper to create herself" (83), be it through her change of discursive strategy depending on the person she is writing to, the various personas she creates in changing signatures or her subversion of male authority. The postmodern nature of her discourse emphasizes her elusive quality and prevents her from being classified as a mere "femme fatale", a well known character trope which is only independent from patriarchal hegemony in appearance. Thus, in using postmodern discursive strategies that endowed his female protagonist with agency, Updike, notwithstanding his authorial intention, may have given way to a possible feminist reading of the novel.

In short, by proving that *S.* can be read as a picaresque novel what I endeavoured to demonstrate is that Sarah may not be a completely self-deluded character as it has often been argued. On the contrary, the inherent contradictions found in *S.* which have too often been perceived as Updike's deliberate authorial endeavour to discredit his female protagonist are in fact evidence of her agency. This agency springs from her unreliability as a narrator whose discourse is constantly shifting accordingly to its purpose. This, in addition to her dishonest

goal, clearly makes her an anti-heroine, a figure which was created in response to the moral uncertainty and loss of traditional values of modern times. Sarah is therefore only a reflection of the contemporary society's needs and concerns and thus only another way in which Updike actualizes *The Scarlet Letter*.

However, by inscribing his novel in a Feminist Postmodern tradition that attempts to fight patriarchy through postmodernist discursive strategies, such as deconstruction and metafictional references, Updike increases the unreliability of his narrator to the point she is not simply morally ambiguous but highly elusive and therefore impossible to classify.

Conclusion:

This master thesis aimed to demonstrate how in *S.* Updike actualizes an American Myth to a contemporary context and how, doing so, he conveys a criticism of liberalism that, regardless of his intent, might have been double-edged for depending on our reading of *S.* the text may also be interpreted as a discourse of female agency.

To sum up, the most important elements to extract from this thesis are that such a study would not have been possible or relevant if the entirety of *The Scarlet Letter* and *S.* had not been established in the same diegesis. It is thanks to this diegetic continuity that a step by step comparison of these two works enabled me to expose the various ways in which American materialism and individualism, or at least their literary chronicling, evolved between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Then, through an analysis of the rich intertextuality found in Updike's chronicle I revealed the satirical dimension of Updike's work. This satire, highly influenced by right-wing conservative's ideology, is meant to criticize liberalism and passed freedom movements which, according to the conservative's discourse of the 1980s, contributed to the decay of traditional American values. Similarly, he strategically attacked female emancipation through the use of a fallen protagonist who is only a mock-version of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne and therefore intended to convert his readers to the conservative's viewpoint. However, as I demonstrated in the last part of this master thesis, the text allows another reading of the novel in which Sarah though indeed deromanticized is not any less powerful. Indeed, by making her the narrator Updike gives her a voice and conceals his own authorial control. As a consequence, she is an active female character who through her agency advances the plot instead of being a traditionally passive female subject who is only the receiver of action. The fact that she does so through what are considered dishonest means is not relevant because this lacking in morale judgement is only another in which Updike effects his actualization and inscribes the text in a Postmodern tradition.

To conclude, although Updike's impressive intertextual network efficiently conveys his satirical purpose, it is more than a simple criticism of liberalism that transpires in his actualization of *The Scarlet Letter.* He wrote what he does best, that is, a real sketching of Northern middle-class suburbanites' middle-life crisis and at the same time, the modern path to a new type of self-reliance for a new type of female character. This new independence based on selfishness and dishonesty is paradoxically both rewarded and punished for while it

symbolically achieves the same results as the old one it does so at the cost of social connection. The outcome is a morally tainted American Dream.

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