CHAPTER 4

“ROGER’S VERSION:
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN TEXTS”
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Roger’s Version (1986), the second instalment in John Updike’s “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy” recasts Hawthorne’s masterpiece from the viewpoint of Roger Chillingworth, the old physician and the husband of Hester Prynne. The very title of this book is redolent of The Scarlet Letter, as it recalls the character of Roger Chillingworth. In none of the titles of Updike’s “Hawthorne novels” do we find an explicit intertextual echo of The Scarlet Letter than in this book. The very title amply triggers off Updike’s deliberate project of presenting and recasting his own version of Hawthorne’s erudite physician through the lens of his twentieth-century suburban American scenario.

Updike originally planned to entitle this novel as Majesty, but changed it into Roger’s Version. As Updike himself admits it in an interview with Dick Cavett:

[…] I’ll tell you a title I did change […] I wrote a book about theology, and my title for it was Majesty. That they [the head office staff] did balk at, because there were several books about the Queen of England called Majesty or Her Majesty, so I changed that to Roger’s Version.¹
Updike's manifesto of this novel may be found in his article "A special message for the first edition" of Roger's Version (The Franklin Library, 1986). He had to do assiduous study for this novel steeped in theosophical information. As Updike notes:

> For the sake of Roger Lambert, I delved into ecclesiology and the maze of early heresy, and betook myself to the library to search out Tertullian's Latin in dusty volumes. ²

Acknowledging his indebtedness to The Scarlet Letter, Updike wanted to update the gnomic, esoteric knowledge of Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth while creating his twentieth-century equivalent, Roger Lambert. Saturated with information of theology, computer and nuclear physics, the book contains an urbane, polished, scholastic setting of a city novel. As Updike justifies the informational amplitude of this book:

> The information content of this novel had to be high; the debates between Roger and Dale are meant to be real debates, on issues that are, to me, live and interesting. And the book as a whole, in its novelistic life as an assembly of images, concerns information itself: the intersection of systems of erudition, and the
strain of the demands that modern man makes upon his own brain ("Message").

Several references to both Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* are made by Updike himself. Updike, in his grand endeavour of rewriting *The Scarlet Letter* with his twentieth-century urban milieu, also paid a glorious homage to this great American novel which he adduces with "*Moby Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, to name three American classics"³, and which he describes as "the one classic from the great day of American literature that deals with society in its actual heterosexual weave" ("Message").

Although *Roger's Version* apparently reads like a parody of *The Scarlet Letter*, Updike here exploits the device of intertextual reversal to register his dig at Hawthorne's concept of Christianity, his overwhelming preoccupation with aspect of morality. "A very vivid ghost of Christianity stares out at us from his [Hawthorne's] prose"⁴ was Updike's criticism of Hawthorne's Christian alignment. In an interview with Donald J. Greiner, Updike referred to Hawthorne as a "poet of the poisoned", and reminded us that "when the images of Christianity were more palpably in the air than now – when a sin was thought to corrode the soul like rot does a zucchini, and the very word *trespass* conjured up an idea of horrendous overlap, of irreversible contamination"⁵. Things have changed now and Updike categorically stressed the stark change in people's reaction to Christianity in general:
People nowadays, at least liberal literary critics, assume that the Christian religion is primarily a system for enforcing ethics. It is not. It is an organization for disturbing the good news of Jesus Christ.

(“Updike on Hawthorne” 3).

Updike’s study of Barth and Kierkegaard, along with his deep knowledge of theosophy, provided him with a pointed penchant for religion, even in an age of science and technology. Donald J. Greiner, in his interesting study between Hawthorne and Updike in his article “Body and Soul: John Updike and The Scarlet Letter” 6 shows how the Hawthornesque disparity between body and soul is rejected by Updike in his Scarlet Letter Trilogy. Greiner further adds:

The frame of reference that connects Updike, Barth, and Hawthorne shapes the intertextual links between the contemporary trilogy and the nineteenth-century masterpiece (483).

Greiner, however, does not explore the detailed intertextual interface between The Scarlet Letter and Updike’s Trilogy on it, but exclusively dwells on Hawthorne’s separation of body and soul, and the absence of it in Updike.
Fredrick Crews\(^7\) tries to equate the characters of *Roger's Version* with *The Scarlet Letter*, but misses the line of intertextuality which operates on a grand scale and at a deeper level, trying to bring out what Julia Kristeva calls "absorption and transformation"\(^8\) of another text into the corpus of one. Crews further thinks that *Roger's Version* may be called Updike's *Heart of Darkness* in that Roger Lambert's filthy journeys through the shabby, slums to meet Verna can be equated with Marlow's journey across the Congo to get a glimpse of the darker aspects of humanity. Crews also argues that Updike's "has radically divorced his notion of Christian theology from that of Christian ethics" (7).

David Lodge's Review\(^9\) of *Roger's Version* focuses on Updike's dual preoccupations with sex and religion. Judie Newman in her book *John Updike*\(^10\) observes that Updike's *Roger's Version* can be subsumed under the "dualistic worlds of mind and flesh" (149). The computer language employed by Updike in the novel, may be, according to Newman, equated with the formal patterns comprising the structure of the book.

It was Raymond J. Wilson III who in his illuminating article "*Roger's Version: Updike's Negative – Solid Model of The Scarlet Letter*"\(^11\) pointed out the "reversal strategy" employed by Updike. But the point of intertextuality has been overlooked by Wilson who rather feels that Updike was influenced by Barthes's *S/Z*. Another critic who explores
Barthes and applies it to Updike’s Roger Version is John N. Duvall. In his excellent article “The Pleasure of Textual/Sexual Wrestling: Pornography and Heresy in Roger’s Version”12 Duvall largely draws upon Roland Barthes’s The Pleasure of the Text.

This chapter purports to bring out the intertextual echoes and the points of disparity between The Scarlet Letter and Roger’s Version and offers to point out the nature of “absorption and transformation”, as prescribed by Kristeva. (Desire 66).

Professor Roger Lambert recalls his namesake Roger Chillingworth in his erudition. A Professor at the Divinity School, Roger is well-conversant with the theosophy of Barth, Marcion, Paul Tillich, Tertullian, among others. Prof. Roger Lambert thus belongs to the same paradigm as Hawthorne’s Roger Chillingworth, Giacomo Rappaccini (in “Rappaccini’s Daughter”), Ethan Brand (in “Ethan Brand”) and Aylmer (in “The Birthmark”).

If Roger resembles Chillingworth’s range of arcane knowledge, he may also be equated with Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, for Roger had retired from the ministry. But as Verna, the daughter of Roger’s half-sister Edna, informs us that Roger is reported to have been kicked out of the ministry because of his affair with Esther, his then-mistress and present wife. It is because of this illicit relationship that Roger broke off his first marriage
to Lillian, the daughter of a minister. One may discover an autobiographical substratum in this event, for Updike’s own conjugal life of 23 years with Mary E. Pennington, the daughter of a minister, ended in a divorce in 1976.

Roger is akin to Dimmesdale not only on account of his (previous) profession as a minister, but chiefly because of his promiscuous propensity:

Lest you take me for a goody-goody, I find kindred comfort and inspiration in pornography, the much-deplored detailed depiction of impossibly long and deep, rigid and stretchable human parts interlocking, pumping, oozing (41).

Thus, Roger joins the host of Updikean characters who combine religion with sex, the clerical with the sexual, theosophy with pornography: Rev. March in The Centaur, Rev. Eccles and Rev. Kruppenbach in Rabbit, Run, the priest Hook in The Poorhouse Fair, Freddy Thorne in Couples, Rev. Thomas Marshfield in A Month of Sundays, Arthur Steinmetz and Sarah Worth in S, and so forth. Each of these characters finds his/her affinity with Dimmesdale, the adulterous minister of Hawthorne. Updike himself admits of having “done more adjusting and fine-tuning” than any other novel, and was concerned with “meshing theology with pornography” in the character of Roger (“Message” 858).
Thus, here we find a process of what may be termed ‘intertextual fusion’ in which the characteristic traits of both Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale are fused and condensed into the complex character of Prof. Roger Lambert. Like Dimmesdale, Roger is capable of giving lengthy lectures on invitations. Again, like Chillingworth, he possesses a vast ken of knowledge and scholarship. Like Chillingworth, he is possessed of a keen eyesight and an acute insight. If Dimmesdale excels in his speech and if Chillingworth excels in his sight (insight), Roger excels in both. Both these traits are harmoniously assimilated in Roger Lambert. Thus while Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality advocates “absorption and transformation” of another text into the corpus of a given text, in Roger Lambert we find a perfect “absorption and transformation” of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, as also of their insight and speech.

But the Dimmesdale-equivalent in the novel is embodied chiefly in Dale Kohler, a young computer engineer, who comes to Roger in search of a grant which would enable him to pursue his Research on proving the existence of God on the computer screen. Dale is intent on visualizing God objectively by applying the latest knowledge of modern Physics:

The physicist are getting down to the nitty-gritty, they’ve really just about pared things down to the ultimate details, and the last thing ever expected to happen is happening. God is showing through (10).
Although Roger has serious misgivings about Dale’s project, for he feels that God is too vast an aspect to be apprehended by the physical human level, Dale eggs him on having that grant desperately.

In *The Scarlet Letter* when we are presented with Roger Chillingworth for the first time (Ch-3, ‘The Recognition’), Hawthorne describes him as “at first, like a man chiefly accustomed to look inward, and to whom external matters are of little value and import unless they bear relation to something within his mind” (56). With his “keen and penetrative” look Chillingworth “found the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his own, and saw she appeared to recognize him” (56). Roger’s “prying curiosity” may be construed as what Brodhead\(^\text{13}\) calls “displacement of his suppressed erotic desire” (101). What Brodhead\(^\text{14}\) observes about Hawthorne and James, may be well applied to Updike, particularly in Roger’s Version:

> Intimate and erotic passion has the customary status, in James as in Hawthorne, of a pleasure at second hand (188).

Later when Chillingworth managed to lodge himself in the same apartment of Dimmesdale, he kept a close vigil on the minister’s (Dimmesdale’s) whereabouts by exercising his intuitive faculty:
But old Roger Chillingworth, too, had perceptions that were almost intuitive; and when the minister threw his startled eyes toward him, there the physician sat; his kind, watchful, sympathizing, but never intrusive friend (123).

Still later when Dimmesdale, hounded by remorse, ascends the scaffold (Ch-12) in “an obscure night of early May” (140) and after he had experienced the epiphanic meteor, “he was, nevertheless, perfectly aware that little Pearl was pointing her finger towards old Roger Chillingworth, who stood at no great distance from the scaffold” (149). Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* can be examined as a discourse of visualization in general and that of Chillingworth’s penetrative sight/insight in particular.

When we come to Updike’s intertext, the same act of visualisation engages his hero, Prof. Roger Lambert, the Updikean equivalent to Chillingworth. “I have taken an innocent pride in the keenness of eyesight” (17), declares Roger. A scrutinizing observer, Roger keenly notices how Dale’s “brows and lids lifted and his eyes lighted like tiny rooms where the shades have been rattlingly raised” (24) and how Dale’s “eyes wandered to my walls of books[ ...]” (26). When Dale met him for the first time, Roger’s prying eyes size him up, almost like a professional detective:
His waxy pallor was touched along the underside of his jaw with acne, like two brush burns, and his eyes in their deep bony sockets were an uncanny, sheepish, unutterably cold pale blue, pale almost to colourlessness (4).

Like Miles Coverdale in The Blithedale Romance, Roger is a voyeur who finds pleasure in keeping a clandestine observation on others. Updike utilizes the theory quantum physics to establish Roger’s penchant for observation:

[...and now quantum physics tells us it’s intrinsic to matter: a particle doesn’t become actual until it’s observed. Until the observation is made, it’s a ghost. (167-68).

Like Chillingworth, Roger delights in stealthy glimpses:

[...] I glimpsed my wife, her thin petite figure [...] Secret glimpses, even as innocuous as this, of life proceeding unaware of my watching have always excited me (33).

[Emphasis added]

During his days of his ministry Dale recalls how he would clandestinely pry into the windows of his unsuspecting parishioners (33), and how “Esther, spied upon unawares, looked like prey [...]” (34).
Similarly when he would sit in the easy chair of his church office, his “eyeballs would roll upward in the manner of Saint Teresa [...]” (45).

Roger derives a vicarious joy out of the series of views conjured up by his fertile imagination and projected on the eyes of somebody else. It is pertinent to quote the observation of Richard H. Brodhead in The School of Hawthorne. Brodhead argues that Hawthorne and James “know the need imaginative creation appeals to as the need (in Miles Coverdale’s words) ‘to live in other lives’: the need to remedy a felt life-deficiency not by living one’s own life fully but by appropriating life in simulated or surrogate forms” (183). Brodhead’s observation on Hawthorne and James, can be well extended to Updike’s Roger’s Version.

Roger frequently refers to the act of seeing with Dale’s eyes. This vigilant observation also makes Roger follow others and keep an absolute tap on their whereabouts. Intertextually, it strikes similar chords with Chillingworth’s fervent wistfulness of following Dimmesdale at close angles so as to keep a vigilant eye on him. We are reminded how Chillingworth succeeds in making an arrangement in which Dimmesdale and he were to be lodged under the same roof.

To come back to Roger’s Version, Roger relates how he “was spying on the Kriegmans, envying them their happiness”. Similarly Roger
later found himself “walking in the steps of Dale Kohler” (50) and “had the sensation of following in his steps” (29).

Each and every telling gesture of his acquaintances is pictured in his camera-like eyes, as he photographically delineates how Dale’s “smile at Esther didn’t stretch his lips, but lightly shaped and parted them, as if in poised wait for her next move. *I saw her through his eyes, my little wife, her tense and tidy figure foreshortened even more from his angle than from mine*” (96)[Emphasis added]. Similarly Roger reflects how he “saw her (Esther) close up, through Dale’s eyes, the smeared filaments of whisker on her upper lip, this pensive upper lip’s little reposeful ins and outs of muscle, [...]” (126)

The act of following others overtakes Roger almost like an obsessional pleasure of a voyeur-seeker. In fact, Roger acts like an overhead projector, projecting the entire series of episodes distilled through his subjective lens. Updike exploits the act of visualization as a trope in order to appropriate Chillingworth’s penchant for keen observation on others and to extend it to his twentieth-century America entangled under the net of pervasive promiscuousness. Roger reflects how Esther “kisses him (Dale) on the lips (wetwarm, pushsoft) and then gazes into his eyes, making him return the gaze, knowing her eyes have been flushed a richer, kinder green by her orgasm” (157).
In *The Scarlet Letter* Chillingworth’s act of visualization operates on the physical planes; the impact of this visualisation in his mindscape and the process of his mental reflections are left almost untouched by Hawthorne. Updike undertakes this task of presenting the act of visualisation operating at the psychological level also, thereby telescoping the objective and the subjective, the landscape and the mindscape. As Roger puts it so philosophically:

"The eye is the soul’s window, and we atavistically trust in its information to be complete (233)."

If in *A Month of Sundays* writing – the diary-jottings of Reverend Thomas Marshfield – becomes a useful vehicle for presenting Marshfield’s physical actions and his insightful reflection on them, in *Roger’s Version* Roger’s act of visualisation embraces an entire spectrum of his contemporary society submerged in the symphony of carnal carnival.

In *The Scarlet Letter* it is Hester Prynne who can pry into the mindscape of Dimmesdale. Like Dante who could not confront the gaze of Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, Dimmesdale experiences the lacerating lashes of a guilty heart and cannot confront Hester in the forest (Ch-17) as easily as he was wont to. Hester’s prying gaze seemed to unravel the torturous pangs of his heart:

"She read his heart more accurately (186)."
When Roger meets his niece Verna at her sordid apartment, he had a feeling that Verna "had read my thoughts" (69), thereby reminding us of the intertextual tie with The Scarlet Letter. The sin of Roger Chillingworth was the sin of intellect: his monomaniac obsession of finding out the partner of Hester's adultery in order to wreak vengeance on him. He rightly suspects Dimmesdale and applies all the devices of tormenting him in a cool, unruffled and intellectual way. His jealousy of Dimmesdale preoccupies his entire self and he derives a sadistic rapture out of the torments that he cautiously inflicts on Dimmesdale.

In Roger's Version Roger is also averse to Dale (the modern Dimmesdale equivalent) from their very first meeting. Dale's flamboyant flaunting of his knowledge repels Roger who is further disgusted when Dale in his proposed research project wants to objectify God's existence on his computer-screen. Gradually this aversion accentuates into jealousy:

    Again, I was surprised by the young man's savoir-faire, his quickness to human connections, and I felt an unaccountable pang of jealousy [... ](97)

    [Emphasis added]

If Chillingworth wanted to destroy Dimmesdale, Roger also "wanted him" (Dale) so that "he should be destroyed" (97).
D. H. Lawrence argues that it is Hester Prynne who “seduced” Dimmesdale “to a fall” (84). As Lawrence puts it in his usual bold almost abrasive style:

Good-bye Arthur. He depended on women for his spiritual Devotees, spiritual brides. So the woman (Hester) just touched him in his weak spot, his Achilles Heel of the flesh. Look out for the spiritual bride She’s after the weak spot. (Studies 85).

One may extend Lawrence’s view to Dale’s adulterous relationship with Esther, projected mainly through Roger’s voyeuristic fertile imaginings. Roger’s daydreaming about his wife’s sexual liaisons with Dale offers Roger a vicarious pleasure regarding his unfulfilled desires coupled with his ageing incapacity. Interestingly enough, these libidinal thoughts exhilarate and revitalize him, vicariously satisfying, as it were, his unhappy marriage to Esther.

One may be tempted to say, as with Lawrence, that both Roger and Esther exploit Dale in order to revitalize their marriage, that like Dimmesdale being seduced by Hester (as Lawrence contends), Dale is seduced both by Esther and Roger. Dale falls a prey to the couple’s play of seduction in which he is but a bait. For example, on one occasion Roger asks Dale whether he wants to know something “interesting” about
Esther and informs him that Esther “gets on the bathroom scales naked” so that Dale should fall a prey to their trap of erotics meant to replenish his dwindling sexuality (171). During one of Roger’s contemplated sexual games between Dale and Esther, Esther’s voice is described as “motherly husky woman-of-substance”, while Dales’s voice is equated with that “of a child being squeezed in wrestling and asking for mercy” (155).

In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne makes repeated references to Hester’s incompatible match with her old and cold husband, Roger Chillingworth. More than anyone else, they themselves are very much aware of this unevenness and incompatibility of their relationship. “We have wronged each other”, admits Chillingworth and feels that theirs was “a false and unnatural” bond (69,70). Roger’s comment smacks of his unhappy marriage when he contrasts it with the peaceful married bliss of the Kriegmans:

In contrast with the sour, quarrelsome atmosphere and deteriorating ceiling of our own kitchen, how happy the Kriegmans appeared in their dining alcove [...] I envied the Kriegmans their visible bliss [...] (46-47).

Roger experiences a chilly frozenness in his conjugal relationship and feels Esther’s “boredom pulling at me, sucking at me”. Roger’s
disquieting conjugal life is brought into sharp focus when he compares it against the blissful state of the Kriegmans:

I was spying on the Kriegmans envying them their happiness (48).

Roger also refers to his conjugal “dwindling sex life” and Esther’s “nerviness and boredom”(103).

If Hester was much younger than her husband, Esther is 14 years younger than Roger (35). Quite unlike the dark hair of Hester, Esther had “vivacious pale-red hair long and bouncing loose down her back” (39), but like Hester’s massive hair which “fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance” (195), Esther’s abundant hair “seemed to equal the mass of her entire body” (39). Like Hester’s skill in embroidery, Esther is very much dexterous in her painting (153).

In Roger’s Version, Updike employs the device of what may be termed as intertextual fission as well as intertextual fusion. In the former, characteristic trait of a character is scattered, as it were, among different characters. For example, the Hester-trait is chiefly scattered in Esther, Lillian and Vema, and loosely in Edna. Intertextual fusion refers to the opposite process in which the characteristic traits of different characters are fused into one. For example, the dual traits of Chillingworth and
Dimmesdale are embodied in Prof. Roger Lambert who like Chillingworth shares his first name and vies with his scholastic acumen and like Dimmesdale is an (ex-) minister and also shares his adulterous inclination.

In The Scarlet Letter Roger Chillingworth deliberately and coolly tortures Dimmesdale in their dark chamber. The relationship between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale is almost like a ferocious predator and its prey. With a “premeditated carefulness” he tiptoes into Dimmesdale’s chamber so as to gain possession of “his victim” (123). The slightest shudder of the sleeping Dimmesdale by the touch of Chillingworth’s stony hand rhapsodizes the latter with a remarkable sadistic rapture:

[... ] what a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror! What a ghastly rapture,[ ... ] (131).

Updike transforms the predatory metaphor into that of a wrestling one while approximating the relationship of Roger-Dale, bordering on the equation of Chillingworth-Dimmesdale. This battle is waged between the two, purely in intellectual terms. Updike exploits the idiom of battle to indicate the intellectual conflict between Roger and Dale. When Dale met Roger for the first time he was wearing an “army-surplus camouflage jacket” (4) and had “an aggression in his repeated sirring of” Roger (9). Similarly Roger reflects on the preponderant impact exercised by Dale’s words in a register suited to war:
How had I become captive, I kept asking myself, to the milky effrontery, the assaultive verbalizing earnestness, of this youth? (12)

When Dale “had his fingers to indicate the dimension of an inch”, the gap seemed to Roger “a gunsight between our pair of eyes” (13). Later Roger feels that “I could mount to shake him” (15). Thus both in The Scarlet Letter as also in Roger’s Version the relationships between Chillingworth/Roger and Dimmesdale/Dale have been conceived of in antagonistic terms. As John N. Duvall so eloquently puts it in his article “The Pleasure of Textual/Sexual Wrestling: Pornography and Heresy in Roger’s Version”:

[... ] Roger places their relation in hierarchical and adversial terms. Indeed, this relationship plays out in terms of domination and submission (83).

But whereas Chillingworth’s discovery of Dimmesdale as the partner of Hester’s adultery triggers off the jealousy of the minister, Roger’s aversion to Dale begins since their first meeting and prior to Dale’s meeting with Esther. Here then we find patterns of both intertextual resonances and dissonances telescoped together in a harmonious “absorption and transformation”, to put it in Kristeva’s phraseology.
One of the preponderant motifs of Updike’s “Hawthorne novels” is his constant effort of redefining Hawthorne’s mythical adulterous triangle. The so-called adulterous triangle comprising husband, wife and lover/beloved of either, is redefined by Updike who gives the triangle a new meaning and an extra significance more suited to his century. In Updike’s hand the triangle takes on different configurations depending on the different characters involved in it.

Further, it is in this novel that Updike exploits the properties of quantum physics to establish the nature of human relationships. Updike explores the properties of quarks which are electrically charged and can either attract or repel other particles. The term ‘quark’ was coined by the American physicist Murray Gell-Mann (b. 1929). Originally ‘quork’, the term was changed by “three quarks for Muster Mark” in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939). It refers to subatomic particles carrying a fractional electric charge.

Recalling his relationship with Esther, Roger describes how she had “triggered in me that old enchantment, that fourteen-year-old sense of the space in her vicinity being sacred, charged with electrons agitating to one’s own” (50). If quarks are capable of penetrating one another, it finds its human correspondence in Chillingworth’s intruding into and defiling of the sanctum sanctorum of Dimmesdale’s heart and Roger’s penetration of Dale and looking through his vision. Referring to quarks, Myron
Kriegman, one of the neighbours of Roger, explains that quarks “invariably occur in threes, and cannot be pried apart” (301). He further explicates that one needs “no more or less than three dimensions to make a knot, a knot that tightens on itself and won’t pull apart, and that’s what the ultimate particles are – knot in space-time” (301). Interestingly enough, human relationships tend to form adulterous knots on this triadic principle of particles. The different adulterous triangles in the novel keep on tying and untying, shaping and reshaping, permutating and combining into different and new triangular configurations, and unsettles and subverts the Hawthornesque pattern thereby. We can have the following triangular configurations of adultery.

Here Esther plays the role of the illegal beloved effecting a breach in the marital bond between Roger and his first wife Lillian.
In fact, it is this adulterous triangle which closely approximates to the adulterous equation of Chillingworth – Hester – Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter. The same Esther who had occupied the upper end of the triangle in case-1, changes her triangular position and attains the more stable position of the wife (from her hitherto status of the mistress). In this way Updike shows us (as he also did in A Month of Sundays) how characters keep on changing partners (as also their corresponding positions in the adulterous triangle) as indiscriminately as one changes chairs in a musical chair game.
Other triangles hinge on the non-marital liaisons involving one man and two women, or vice-versa. Such triadic promiscuous bonds are formed among – (a) Roger, Dale and Vema Ekelof, (b) Roger, Verna and Edna and (c) Dale, Esther and Verna.

In this book Updike exploits the dynamics and structure of quarks in order to fiddle with, as it were, the mythical triangles of adulterous and non-adulterous liaisons. Like the ten couples at Tarbox in Couples, these
triangular bonds map the realm of middle-class suburban Americanness luxuriating in an orgiastic voluptuousness.

Updike’s intertextual device telescopes adaptation and alteration. When Roger was a parish minister, Esther was, quite unlike Hester’s case, not among his parishioners. Again unlike Hester’s lady-like dignity and blushing taciturnity, Esther occasionally bursts into blustering scurrility. Her unhappy conjugal life bickers out in filthy phrases. “What a mean spirit I’m married to”, Esther blusters and describes her husband as “a cold, play-it-safe bastard” (49). Similarly we find a slight alteration in the origin of Roger and Dale. If Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale had come from England to New England, their Updikean kinsmen Roger and Dale had come from Ohio to Boston. Although Updike’s novels are suffused with theosophical and religious colours, it is in this book that he exploits the dynamics of quantum physics and computer technology against the backdrop of theology and philosophy. Thus in Roger’s Version science and religion are harmoniously enmeshed.

Like quantum physics again, the dynamics of computer technology is exploited by Updike for explicating the promiscuous inclination of human relationship. Quite interestingly, like the triadic bonding nature of quarks, Dale Kohler refers to the tripartite switches: OR, AND, NOT. As Dale explains:
And you can all see how with just these three simple switches, or gates you can set up any complexity of ins and outs to analyze your input (111).

Judie Newman\textsuperscript{16} so keenly observes that “the erotic permutation of the quartet [Esther, Roger, Vema, Dale] are anticipated in binary computer imagery” (149).

If Esther parallels Hester, Vema also loosely resembles Hester on more scores than one. That is to say, Updike here employs the device of intertextual fission in which the characteristic trait of Hester Prynne is scattered chiefly between Esther and Vema Ekelof.

In \textit{The Scarlet Letter} Hester was adept in embroidery and transforms the stigmatic scarlet letter into an object of art. Hawthorne pays his effusive tribute to this quality of Hester, so much so that he devotes an entire chapter – Chapter 5 ("Hester at Her Needle") – to it. Thus the letter "A" which stood for "Adultery" to the puritanical magistrates, was transmuted into "Art" for Hester. To Hawthorne it had a connotation of 'Angel'/ 'Apostle'. Hester’s expertise in embroidery finds intertextual kinship with Verna’s panache in painting.

The daughter of Roger’s half-sister, Edna Ekelof, Verna stays with her daughter Paula (the equivalent for Pearl) in a cheap shabby apartment. If Pearl was accidentally conceived by Hester in that she was the product
of Hester's adultery and Hester's living scarlet letter, Paula's birth was also accidental: she was the child of Verna by a black man who has deserted her. Both are products of momentary, instinctual impulse and are not conceived in a pre-planned way. Thus both Pearl and Paula have been deserted by their respective fathers. Further like her kindred Pearl, Paula develops an antagonistic feeling towards her father or father-figures whom she refers to as "Da". Like Hawthorne's Pearl, Paula has an intuitive faculty of detecting the truth. In a dignified manner Paula, suddenly blurted out, "Da bad" and smiled ingenuously (258). This reminds one of Pearl's "naughty smile of mirth and intelligence" at Mr. Dimmesdale (127). This aversion to the father-figure intertextually places Paula in the same paradigm as Pearl who relegates her father to insignificance, if not to total oblivion. When the little Pearl queries her mother how she came in this world, Hester tellingly answers, "Thy Heavenly Father sent thee"! (91) Hester thus defies and subverts the order of patriarchal hegemony. When Mr. Wilson asks Pearl about her identity, she echoes her mother's sentiment and defines her identity in terms of her mother, negating her father thereby:

"I am Mother's child," answered the scarlet vision, "and my name is Pearl!" (103).

When her uncle (Roger) wants to do something for Paula, pat comes Verna's rejoinder:
Save your charity, Nunc, she can take care of herself (70).

Intertextually, this resembles Hester’s denial of accepting any charity of the church to educate Pearl. “I can teach my little Pearl from what I have learned from this!” is the spirited rejoinder of Hester who declines to submit her daughter at the custody of the church (104).

In *The Scarlet Letter* Chillingworth “bequeathed a very considerable amount of property, both here and in England, to little Pearl, the daughter of Hester Prynne” (252). In *Roger’s Version* Roger comes to the final rescue of Paula when Vema, out of her furious anger, strikes her so hard that she breaks her leg. It is Roger who takes Paula to hospital where her broken leg is set.

Updike employs his reversal strategy to ‘transform’ the affectionate, responsible, soothing motherly figure of Hester Prynne into the waspish, irresponsible seething mother Verna, in keeping with Kristeva’s formula of “absorption and transformation”. Apart from the climactic striking of Paula (in which her leg breaks), there are several references to Verna’s cruelty and irresponsibility. When little Paula repeatedly blurts out the word “Da”, mistakenly pointing to Roger as her father, Verna “grabbed” her small arm “furiously” and rejoined:

“I told you shut up little fucker!” She shouted down into the tiny crumpling face. “That’s not Da!” And she let go of the
infant's arm with a push that dumped Paula down on her diapered bottom, hard (64-65).

Similarly on another occasion Vema physically smacks her daughter, an incident which can scarcely be applied to Hester:

Then came the sound of a slap, and of whimpers breathlessly mounting into unstanchable wounded cries (73).

Thus unlike Hester's precious Pearl, Paula has been devalued and minimized by her mother in Updike's version. Paula is, on the contrary, an exasperating, cumbersome, undesirable burden to her impoverished mother who cannot afford to ensure her a comfortable living. It was D. H. Lawrence who argued that Hawthorne's Hester both hated and loved Pearl:

Hester simply *hates* her child, from one part of herself. And from another, she cherishes her child as her precious treasure (*Studies* 104).

What Lawrence means to suggest is that Hawthorne has suppressed the darker side of Hester's relationship with Pearl, emanating from the point of her imppecunious plight. Lawrence's comment can be extended, *mutatis mutandis* to Verna's relationship with Paula. In fact, this rude behaviour in Verna appears all the more natural when we take into consideration her lack of education and her imppecuniosity. Seen from this angle, Updike appears more realistic than Hawthorne who always delights in romantic
idealism. Updike deromanticises Hawthorne, and makes us peep into the
darker side of reality.

Hester Prynne has been depicted by Hawthorne as the epitome of
lonely, free American woman:

Standing alone in the world – alone, as to any dependence
on society, and with little Pearl to be guided and protected –
alone,[ ... ](157).

[Emphasis added]

Almost a declassé, Verna suffers from an asphyxiating loneliness:

I'm lonely, I'm lonely all the time, you can't just talk
to anybody like a man can, [...] (70).

In an excellent review of Roger's Version Lorna Sage suggests that
what Lolita was to Humbert in Nabokov's Lolita, Verna is to Roger. If
Chillingworth meets Hester so as to elicit information about the unknown
man (in this case, Dimmesdale) towards whom he nurses an insidious
aversion and jealousy, Roger meets Verna to derive more information
about Dale whom he begins to detest.

In Roger's relationship with Verna, if at one level he parallels
Chillingworth, both being jealous of Dale/Dimmesdale, at another level,
Roger assumes the role of Dimmesdale in his adulterous union with
Verna. Since his very first meeting with Verna, Roger cherished a
concupiscence towards her and wanted to enjoy "the uninhibited use of her body in that deliciously shabby and warm apartment [...]" (146).

Thus in the equation of Roger-Vema-Dale, Roger combines together the dual traits of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. In other words, here we find an intertextual fusion in which the Dimmesdale and the Chillingworth traits are homogeneously fused into Prof. Roger Lambert.

Both Hester and Vema are socially outcast women. But whereas the former is ostracized by society, the latter is outcast by circumstance and choice. Unlike Hester's dignified ladylike personality, Vema is capable of using risqué, vituperative expletives about Paula: "little Shifface", "little cunt", "crummy little bitch", "little fucker" and so forth. Hester's romantic spirit is put into disarray in Updike's updated version of her as a rough and tough, uncouth, vulgar woman, embodied as Vema. Both Hester and Vema are trapped in their individual circumstances: while the former is trapped by puritificial austerity and codes of moral ethics, the latter is trapped in her "prisonlike project".

Another reversal strategy occurs in Updike's choice of his setting. The lush greenery of Hawthorne's forest has been supplanted by the urban poshness of bricks and skyscrapers of Boston. Similarly, if Hester and Dimmesdale undertake long walks through the forest, in Updike's updated version Roger and Esther resort to driving. The ethereal and pastoral setting of Hawthorne is sharply contrasted with the earthly and
polluted setting of Updike. If *The Scarlet Letter* epitomizes the triumph of passion, *Roger’s Version* is, as Ann-Janine Morey\(^{18}\) so appositely puts it, “about the disappearance of passion” (1036).

Roger’s fantasizings—like the diary-jottings of Rev. Thomas Marshfield in *A Month of Sundays*—large comprise the ‘text’ of this ‘work’ in purely erotic terms. One should note that Barthes\(^{19}\) makes an illuminating distinction between a text and a work. A work, according to Barthes, is the finished aesthetic whole physically and palpably verified, and thus while a “work is held in the hand, the text [is held] in language” (39).

As Barthes observes that the text is “the fabric of the words which make up the work […]” (32) (emphasis added). The ‘text’ thus concocted in Roger’s fantasy controls the dynamics of the narrative and reveals the inner glimpses of Roger’s psycho-somatic erotic gymnastics. It lays bare the series of orgiastic games undertaken either by Roger himself (which, otherwise, would have remained shrouded by his theological garb of an ex-minister) or by other characters. Like the Pue-manuscript in *The Scarlet Letter*, Roger’s concocted ‘text’ thus serves to unravel some hushed-up scarlet stories.

Significantly enough, the staple of Roger’s fantastic text veers around the female anatomy, fashioning the design of his sexual preoccupation. In other words, there is a perspicuous textual/sexual
equation in Roger’s narrative version. As Elaine Showalter\textsuperscript{20} has stimulatingly hinted at this equation with her characteristic feminist flavour:

Organic or biological criticism is the most extreme statement of gender difference, of a text indelibly marked by the body: anatomy is textuality\textsuperscript{(336)}. It results in what Barthes called \textit{jouissance} \textsuperscript{21}. To cite a few examples from \textit{Roger’s Version}. When Vema bends towards the crying Paula, Roger does not fail to notice how she had “loosened her bathrobe and an entire breast had swung suddenly, luminously free” (65). Roger’s prying eyes detect Vema’s “naked skin above the rather low neckline of the jersey, a bareness now sandwiched between strips of cloth like the bare pale belly […]” (131). Roger fantasizes that Esther and Dale “have already fucked once this afternoon on the filthy mattress” and that Esther “takes note of his (Dale’s) revived erection and puts aside her wine to bend her lips to its inviting hard-softness, its tacit standing homage to her”\textsuperscript{(153)}.

Updike’s unabashed display of sexuality brings out in sharp focus the absence of it in \textit{The Scarlet Letter} where Hester’s physical luxuriance is dealt in a romantic fashion and the erotic encounter between Hester and Dimmesdale has only been alluded to. Whereas the act of sexuality is eclipsed in the romantic evocative robe of textuality in Hawthorne’s \textit{The
Scarlet Letter, textuality generates and is tantamount to sexuality in Updike’s Roger’s Version.

In his article “Hawthorne’s Creed” Updike has repeatedly referred to the body-mind split in Hawthorne. As Updike observes:

He (Hawthorne) believed, with his Puritan ancestors, that man’s spirit matters; that the soul can be distorted, stained, and lost; that the impalpable exerts force against the material (“Creed” 80).

Dale, on one occasion, refers to the “body-mind problem” (163). Later Roger also mentions Tertullian and refers it to Dale:

An argument for the mind-body split you didn’t mention is the estrangement we all feel from our bodies, the disgust we have to fight in dealing with them (172).

As Greiner has tellingly argued in his article “Body and Soul: John Updike and The Scarlet Letter” the conspicuous absence of this dichotomy in Updike’s “Scarlet Letter Trilogy”:

[...] Updike can consent, and in doing so he writes a trilogy that bows to Hawthorne even as it challenges Hawthorne’s “war” between flesh and spirit (478).

In The Scarlet Letter Dimmesdale was, to put it in Hawthorne’s words, “haunted either by Satan himself, or Satan’s emissary, in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth” (121). Updike, however strips his
Chillingworth equivalent (i.e., Roger) of these daemonic associations and at once makes him the hero/narrator/creator of this narratology.

Dimmesdale had a “perception of strangeness that had haunted him throughout his walk from the forest dell into the town” (215), and had “constantly dim perception of some evil influence over him”. Similarly Dale Kohler has a feeling that “an invisible third party” is keeping a constant and careful vigil on him.

Dale Kohler eagerly looks forward to visualizing “a graphic confrontation, a face whose gaze could be frozen and printed” on his computer screen (246). Similarly as he presses his mouse, “a face seems to stare, a mournful face. A ghost of a face, a matter milliseconds” (244). While operating this computer, Dale has the vision of a mysterious ghostly hand and tries to revisualize it:

He types repeat. The screen ripples; seconds pass as the necessary crunching is performed […] The hand has been folded in, has vanished, unless its shape has been reduced and transformed into the single green scale at the lower right of the screen, in the position of an artist’s signature (250).

One may be tempted to find intertextual resonances of it with Dimmesdale’s visualizing the epiphanic meteor in *The Scarlet Letter* (ch-12). In the form of a numen or maybe a divine retribution, the meteor served as “the light that is to reveal all secrets” (147) and a cosmic
evidence of his guilt-burdened heart. If the meteoric vision had “rendered [Dimmesdale] morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain” (148), after envisioning the phantom hand in his computer-screen, “Dale feels wasted” (251). If the meteor-image proved epiphanic to Dimmesdale, bringing home the message that “another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it” (149), the hallucinatory vision of the hand also teaches Dale that “Zero is information also” (251). In The Scarlet Letter it is the little Pearl who proves a detector of truth with her keen intuitive faculty. It is she who informs us of the peculiarity of Dimmesdale:

In the dark nighttime he (Dimmesdale) calls us to him, and holds thy (Hester’s) hand, as when we stood with him on the scaffold yonder! (221).

When Hester asks Pearl why she wears the scarlet letter on her bosom, Pearl’s answer reveals a wonderful truth:

It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart! (172).

Pearl thus acts like a touchstone, bringing into sharp focus the inner truths of certain characters. Paula, the Updikean counterpart of Pearl, at times, reveals a scrutinizing faculty. As Roger reflects:

Paula’s great brimming navy-blue eyes had fastened on me, and her honey-colored plump hand, with its curling small conical fingers, reached toward me in recognition (106).
Dale reflects that “with these woods all around, to the horizon on all sides, [...] seemed all so hideously Godless [...] I mean, I could feel the Devil” (203). According to Raymond J. Wilson it is but a rehashed response of “the Hawthornean Puritan concept of wilderness as the Devil’s country” (“Negative-Solid Model” 241).

Barthes had described a text being “made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures” (148) and had defined a text as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (146). Kristeva’s concept of text as a “mosaic of quotations” (Desire 66) also approximates to Barthes’s view. These views may be substantiated in the texture of Roger’s Version.

Reflecting on his wife’s putative promise made to Dale, Roger feels that “this is a delicious promise sworn with the strength and generosity of a woman’s giving heart” (158) [emphasis added]. Intertextually, it reads like a quotation taken from The Scarlet Letter. During her judgment Hester calmly says that Pearl “must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!” (63). At this point Dimmesdale reflects:

Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart! (64)
Thus, to sum up, Roger's Version amply engages in an intertextual dialogue with The Scarlet Letter with adaptation, alterations, conversions and inversions. These changes notwithstanding, both Hawthorne and Updike were true to their respective ages.
Notes and References


4. John Updike, “Hawthorne’s Creed”. In Hugging the Shore (New York: Knopf, 1983) p. 76. Hereafter all references to “Hawthorne’s Creed” will be cited as “Creed”.

5. Donald J. Greiner, “Updike on Hawthorne”. In The Nathaniel Hawthorne Review, 13 (Spring 1987) p.2. Hereafter this article will be cited as “Updike on Hawthorne.”


21. *Jouissance* broadly means sexual pleasure. Roland Barthes’s book *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973) or *The Pleasure of the Text* the term has been translated as ‘bliss.’ *Jouissance* combines the sense of both ecstasy and sexual delight.