CHAPTER 5

S: "HER STORY"
S (1988), the final novel in “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy” exhibits even more conspicuous intertextual filiations with Hawthorne’s masterpiece. The Hawthornesque influence is tellingly evident in this comic novel which is an intertextual version of *The Scarlet Letter*. Updike tried to explore adultery as an American myth by retelling the story of *The Scarlet Letter* and contemporizing Hawthorne in his twentieth-century milieu.

“It’s no paradox: religion and sex are traditionally linked in the United States” ¹, said Updike in an interview with Jan Nunley (1993). As Donald J. Greiner has so pertinently pointed out that the common point where Hawthorne and Updike meet is the “inextricable unity of religion, sexual transgression and guilt” ². In *S* this preponderant curious conflation of sex and religion is embodied in the female protagonist of the novel, Sarah Worth, the Updikean equivalent of Hester Prynne. Although a critic of the stature of George Hunt has stressed the male dominance in Updike’s novels and observed that Updike’s “fiction is always a man-centered fiction in that the controlling voice retains an ultimately masculine perspective”, ³ it is in *S* (1988) that for the
first time that we find a woman’s view voiced by the female protagonist. I believe that since Hunt had not gone through S when he wrote that book in 1980, he has made such a comment, and that Hunt would surely have recanted his earlier stance, had he read S.

The creation of Sarah Worth calls for especial attention, inasmuch as Updike himself considers the novel as having autobiographical elements. As Updike so candidly puts it in an interview with Terry Gross (1988):

> Certainly, in S, only the innermost essence of my heroine could be called me. The rest is all made up[...] In writing about her, I had to sort of rethink what her past would have been. 4

I have referred to S as "Her Story" in the title of this chapter. According to David Macey, "Her Story" is a "Feminist coinage from early 1970s, formed by analogy with the pseudo-etymological transformation of 'history', and stressing that the historical experience of women is often ignored or suppressed by conventional historiography".5

Richard Gilman considers S an important book written from the feminist point of view:

> "It’s in the light of Updike’s recent strategy of trying to correct his image in feminist eyes that we have to look at S. Even more than The Witches of Eastwick, 3
S seems to celebrate the freedom of women to pursue their carnal and emotional ends, and to be relieved of guilt for doing so.[...]

This is what accounts for Updike's decision to rewrite, or to "up-date", perhaps the greatest of all American fictions in which sex and religion confront one another, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, with its archetypal female victim.⁶

As Updike has noted in the "Author's Note"⁷ to S that he had got the idea of the novel "by reports on Rajneeshpuram in newspapers, *Oregon Magazine*, and *Cities on a Hill* by Frances Fitzgerald", and that "much is owed to Mircea Eliade's *Yoga* and *A History of Religious Idea*, Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, and Ajit Mookherjee's *Kundalini".⁸ In an Interview given to Prof. Sukhbir Singh of Osmania University, Hyderabad, India, Updike himself speaks on the genesis of this novel and on the creation of her heroine, Sarah Worth:

When I was a young man, at Oxford especially,

but in my New York years also, I read a lot of religious books. Not just Christian, but also Hindu and Buddhist. I worked them into the teachings and into the novel, which made it a long glossary about yoga.

It's all very attractive[ ...][Sarah Worth] is the
essence, whatever you call it – the mystic life – and she ascends in the novel to the highest levels of what is in the Buddhist phrase, disengagement. 9

In none of the novels in the Trilogy are the pervasive intertextual echoes of The Scarlet Letter so audible as in S. That Hawthorne looms large over Updike’s consciousness and that Updike had The Scarlet Letter at the back of his mind have been clearly borne out by the two epigraphs of this novel, both taken from The Scarlet Letter:

Epigraph (1) She had dark and abundant hair, […] in which she was enveloped.

Epigraph-(2) Much of the marble coldness of Hester’s impression […] no law for her mind.

If the first epigraph from Chapter-2 (“The Market Place”) refers to the serene, soothing august and dignified aspect of Hester, the second epigraph from chapter-13 (“Another View of Hester”) hints at the rebellious nature of her, fighting against all odds and breaking all conventional codes in supreme isolation. The two epigraphs telescoping the two opposite views of Hester – the soothing and the seething, the mild and the wild – have a strong bearing on the protagonist of the novel, Sarah Worth, Updike’s twentieth-century equivalent of Hester.
Updike’s intertextual web embraces every experimentation of his version, including both conversion and inversion of Hawthorne’s text. Updike further experiments on the antithetical processes of “fusion” and “fission” \(^{10}\), as I would prefer to call it. If Sarah strikes an amazing resemblance with Hester, she also shares some akinness with Dimmesdale about which I shall refer to later.

Hester’s name echoes the Greek goddess of the hearth, Hestia, whose Roman equivalent is Vesta. In The Scarlet Letter there are ample references to Hester being attributed with divine quality. The very first view of Hester emerging from the prison “like a black shadow emerging into sunshine”(48) with a baby of three months in her arms reminds one of the Virgin Madonna. Born and brought up in a rigid puritanical society, although Hawthorne had no other choice but to punish Hester for her adulterous union with her pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, his sympathy with Hester betrays itself occasionally throughout the book.

It is this tacit support with Hester that also constitutes the subtext of Hawthorne. Hawthorne, with the cachet of his genius, weaves an ingenious narratology which sparks off momentary flashes of his empathy in the adulteress(Hester) whom he publicly punishes. Thus Hawthorne’s narrative, in a sense, serves to deconstruct the text. We find a second Hawthorne playing hide and seek with the omniscient narrator, and this second suppressed voice betrays the
deep structure of Hawthorne, the man, camouflaged in the garb of Hawthorne, the artist.

Against the continual onslaughts of the vitriolic social condemnation Hester registers an all-tolerant sang-froid and equanimity befitting a Christ:

Hester had schooled herself long and well, she never responded to these attacks, save by a flush of crimson that rose irrepressibly over the pale cheek, and again subsided into the depths of her bosom. She was patient – a martyr, indeed – but she forebore to pray for her enemies [...] (79).

Thus, without mentioning the word Jesus Christ – that was dangerous for Hawthorne to use in this context – he equates Hester with Christ. That Hawthorne was on Hester’s side is evident when he endows the scarlet letter with hallowed connotation:

[...] the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom. It imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness [...] (156).

Hawthorne’s support for Hester was first pointed out by none other than D. H. Lawrence who, rumbles out the “marvellous
undermeaning” and “perfect duplicity” underlying the ostensible placidity of Hawthorne’s narratology. Later other critics followed suit. While David Leverenz refers to the “narrator’s symbolic advocacy” 12, and while Richard H. Brodhead argues that “Hawthorne’s technique forces us to observe the action from a double perspective” 13 and that Hawthorne’s narratology is marked by a “kind of double presentation” 14, Daniel Cottom speaks of “Hawthorne’s equivocal style” 15. Similarly, Marshall Van Deusen prefers to call it “a kind of ironic de’ doublement of perspective” 16.

What these critics and Lawrence have pinpointed is that being a direct descendent of John Hathorne, one of the notorious judges of the infamous Salem Witch Trial of 1692, and bred in a stern puritanical society, Hawthorne could not freely say what he had felt, and therefore, had to devise a narratology which implicitly hints at a double meaning, expressing his anguished concern for Hester whom he fetishizes and elevates almost to the divine status of Virgin Mary:

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant in her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, [ … ] (52)
If in *A Month of Sundays* Updike uses, as his narrative trope, the diary-jottings of Tom Marshfield, in *S* he explores the epistolary device to narrate his tale. When we turn to Updike’s twentieth-century equivalent of Hester, Sarah Worth, we find that Updike exploits the device of inversion in Sarah. Like her Biblical namesake – the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac (Genesis 17: 15-22) who was derided by people for bearing a child at her ripe age – Sarah Worth is laughed at by her acquaintances for her unnatural spiritual quest at the age of forty-two. Hester was similarly the object of derision to the puritanical society. Updike turns Sarah into a somewhat waspish woman, who, quite unlike her Hawthornesque counterpart, is given to feats of jealousy and bouts of anger. For example in a letter to her mother, Sarah accuses her for having ‘squelched’ Sarah’s previous romance and for compelling her to marry Charles, and finally, raves and rants against herself for being unable to resist her daughter’s unsuitable infatuation:

My anger is at myself, all the worse in that
my recent attempts to squelch an infatuation
of my daughter’s have proved totally ineffecctual,
thanks in part to the transatlantic meddling of your
groom-of-choice, the impeccable Charles.(212-13).
Thus, while Hester blushes, Sarah blusters. But it is rather the intertextual resonances than the dissonances that strike us. While Hester “had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam”(49), Sarah possessed “dark hair and rich complexion”(7). The intertextual tie is reinforced when we come to know that Sarah’s only daughter bears the same name as Hester’s: Pearl. If Hester was abandoned by her cold, intellectual husband, Arthur Chillingworth, Sarah has arranged a deliberate estrangement from her husband Charles in order to busy herself in her own world.

This Charles/Sarah relationship puts Updike’s Sarah in an intertextual relationship with John Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman. John Neary17 makes an interesting comparative study of the novels of Updike and Fowles. Hester’s marriage to the old and cold Chillingworth was an uneven match, and they were keenly aware of it:

“I have greatly wronged thee”, murmured Hester.

“We have wronged each other”, answered he.

“Mine was the first wrong when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay[…]”(25)
Sarah, too, had suffered from a cold unhappy marriage. In the very first letter written to Charles 'Sarah fulminates:

> Your own genteel atrocities of coldness and blindness toward me were not by themselves enough. [...] I shed you as I would shed a skin, with some awkwardness perhaps and at first a sensitivity to the touch of the new, but without pain and certainly without regret. [...] The affront to your pride and convenience, of my desertion should weigh little, in any wise court, against the nearly *twenty-two years of mental and emotional cruelty you with your antiseptic chill have inflicted on me*(12-13).

[Emphasis added]

Sarah complains her mother, that she was just “another piece of furniture” to Charles(24). In another letter to Charles (May 23) she refers to their unequal match:

> You and I, my dear, I see now, were such a pair of troublesome opposite(61).

The theme of disgruntled marriage and its resultant adultery may also be found in Updike’s *Couples* (1968) and *Marry Me* (1976).
If Roger Chillingworth’s ruling passion constitutes his obsession of finding out the partner of Hester’s adultery and if Hester is bent on not revealing the identity of her partner, Sarah is anxious about Charles’s undesirable intervention in her whereabouts, and therefore warns him:

I have left you out of love for another.

[...] I needed another. Who he is, and where we are together, I will trust you not to seek out (12).

The ‘tape’ to Midge also hints at Charles’s possibility of spying on her personal life:

I know you won’t, but you mustn’t tell Charles about Fritz – my hunch is he’s going to start suing me. Charles, I mean (47-48).

Further, like Roger Chillingworth, Charles is a physician. Hawthorne talks back, as it were, in the linguistic system (text) of S. The very names, Madame Blithedale, Bellingham, Mr. Rogers, Miss Priscilla Pilgrim, Aunt Hilda, Mrs Pyncheon, Midge Hibbens and the Prynnes make us increasingly aware of Hawthorne’s pervasive presence in Updike’s text. Hawthorne’s characters are scattered, as it were, with their new roles in Updike’s book.
Pearl was the ecstasy and the agony of Hester's heart. Mischievous and pretty, Pearl sustains the lonely Hester and animates her. When Governor Bellingham and the puritan authorities decide to transfer Pearl to other hands since she was Hester's 'badge of Shame', we can get a view of Hester as a true mother protesting against Pearl being taken away from her:

She (Pearl) is my happiness! – She is my fortune, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a millionfold the power of retribution for my sin?

[...] I will not give her up!(106)

The mother in Hester speaks out vociferously for her daughter's possession.

When we examine Updike's heroine as a mother, we find that Sarah, too, is meticulously careful as a mother and pays a punctilious attention to Pearl's upbringing, despite her busy engagements. As Sarah reminds Pearl of her maternal role in a movingly painful letter registering her suppressed bickerings for Pearl's fondness towards her father:

You write of what a tender and attentive father yours was when the sad truth is he
hardly bothered to kiss you goodnight most nights let alone read a bedtime story as you and he both seem to be fantasizing.

[...] precious Pearl, make no mistake: I nursed you, I changed your diapers. I dried your tears. I sang your songs when you were nervous at nights, on and on until my own eyes could hardly open. You sucked milk out of my breasts, took hold of life in my belly, not your father's.

In The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature 18 Adrienne Rich claims that motherhood is the feminine status. Rich makes a distinction between the fact of motherhood and that a patriarchal society makes of it. She argues that the patriarchal culture, in its endeavour to romanticize the mythic powers of motherhood, virtually oppresses and marginalizes the status of women. Updike, like Hawthorne, glorifies motherhood as an alternative structure to the hegemony of fatherhood engendered by our society. Both Hawthorne and Updike subvert the autonomy of patriarchal hegemony.

Hawthorne refers to Pearl as "the elf-child", thereby endowing her with an aura of romance. In fact, the very title of chapter eight is "The
Elf-child and the Minister". Updike strikes a close intertextual phrasal resemblance when Sarah writes to Pearl about her mental "stress" caused "from worrying about my priceless elf-child"(158).

Sir Henry Summer Maine in his book *Ancient Law* (1861) has referred to "Patriarchal Power" and has argued that "I feel sure the Power over children was the root of the old conception of Power". The distribution of power structures in family life has obsessed critics, philosophers and even authors. John Locke has inveighed against Sir Robert Filmer's work *Patriarcha* and taken strong exception to what Filmer calls "Fatherly Power". Locke's contention is that such an "Omnipotent Fatherhood" may but prove detrimental to any society and result in social disorder and disintegration.

Against this social power and authority wielded by the "Fatherhood", Hawthorne tried to create the myth of the "Motherhood" represented by Hester Prynne, the archetype of lonely suffering independent American woman. She similarly teaches Pearl to forge out her identity in terms of her mother. "I am Mother's child"(103), Pearl boldly replies to Mr. Wilson's queries and Hester Prynne tells her, "Thy Heavenly Father sent thee"(99), thereby deconstructing and subverting the traditional patriarchal structures.
If Elaine Showalter describes gynocriticism as “the feminist study of women’s writing, including readings of women’s text and analyses of the intertextual relations both between women (a female literary tradition), and between women and men”,22 such a study befits Sarah herself can be regarded as the writer of her own story penned through her series of letters. If the diary of Marshfield in *A Month of Sundays* assigns the dual roles of the author and the character to him, the epistolary trope endows Sarah with the ambivalent roles of the writer and the written. Sarah becomes the writer of her own tale.

Updike takes on the same torch of motherhood from Hawthorne and lets it shine in his twentieth-century America. In a letter written to Pearl, (August 24) Sarah reminds Pearl how she had been assiduously careful in bringing Pearl up and how, in stark contrast to it, her father had been indifferent towards her (156). Sarah accuses Charles of his undesirable intervention, particularly in Pearl’s life and warns him in one of her letters (Oct-1):

You are using your *paternal power* over her

to seduce her [...](172)

[Emphasis added]

As an endeavour to subvert patriarchal autonomy, the Arhat Ashram gives us a wonderful picture of women management:
The executive committee is mostly all women – the Arhat has his theory that women are stronger in selflessness than men, which may be a nice way of saying they are subservient(55).

"Wouldst thou avenge thyself on the innocent babe?" asked Hester when Roger Chillingworth reappears and enquires of Pearl(67). Although Updike’s counterpart of Dimmesdale, Charles, is not an irresponsible father (and not to speak of a hostile one), Sarah takes him to task for his excessive attachment to Pearl:

And do lay off little Pearl. Try to think like a father instead of a strategist in the war between the sexes(171).

The gravity of the puritans experienced and delineated by Hawthorne has been supplanted by the telling frivolity, detailed by Updike. Sarah refers to the Kali Club, the ashram mall, the ashram disco, electronics boutique and other pleasure items:

[... ]I always thought deserts were supposed to be dead but this one is just hoping with life, especially after the sun goes down – and talking into this gadget, a Seiko mini-cassette player I bought at this
electronics boutique they have over at the ashram mall. They sell a lot of gadgety stuff here, I was surprised, even mugs and T-shirts with the Arhat’s picture on them, for what I’d call wild prices,[ ...](33).

To come to an interesting device employed by Updike. Updike’s intertextual experimentation involves a process of fusion of more than one character. If Charles resembles Roger Chillingworth as being the cold, chilling husband prototype, he also displays a strange affiliation with Arthur Dimmesdale. Like Dimmesdale’s adulterous inclination, Charles has liaisons with a succession of nurses. Thus we find an intertextual fusion of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale in Charles. Similarly if Sarah is the equivalent of Hester, she is more akin to Dimmesdale than to Hester in her oratorical skill expressed in her letters. Like Dimmesdale’s felicity of the tongue, Sarah displays a suave facility of her pen, writing a series of letters which Updike has deliberately chosen as the narrative trope of this novel. Finally, Sarah loosely resembles Chillingworth in her machinations. Under the ostensible camouflage of her sham religiosity and her gnomic mystic jargons, lurks her utterly selfish motive of luxuriating in voluptuousness and indiscriminate liaisons. Astute and acquisitive, she siphons funds from the ashram coffers to her clandestine foreign bank accounts. Thus Sarah
reveals a curious intertextual fusion of Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.

If Updike succeeds in experimenting with intertextuality in terms of fusion, he is able to do it with equal éclat in terms of its opposite method, i.e. fission. For example Dimmesdale’s preoccupational adulterous trait has been diffused among all the major characters: Sarah (of course), Charles, Steinmetz (Dimmesdale- counterpart in this book) and a plenty of other ashramites. Similarly Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy has been intertextually transmitted through Sarah and the Arhat, Steinmetz. Both Sarah and Steinmetz practise profuse profligacy under the garb of religion. Updike recreates the myth of adultery in his twentieth-century society as an American malady prevailing particularly in the middle-class, suburban American society.

Like Hester who has deserted her ancestral Europe to peregrinate through the wilderness of New England, Sarah has abandoned her domestic moorings in New England to promenade in the deserts of Arizona. Hester is wont to wandering wildly among the "without rule or guidance in a moral wilderness", and “Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods”(192).

Sarah, too, rambles wildly in the desert of Arizona for spiritual fulfilment and individual freedom. The Utopain Arhat Ashram
reminds one of Hawthorne's experiences with the Utopian community of George Ripley during his seven-month sojourn at Book Farm which has been recorded in his novel, *The Blithedale Romance*.

If Hester has crossed the Atlantic like other European immigrants to settle in America, Sarah travels in flight to reside in the Arhat Ashram. In fact, the first letter she writes to Charles is from the jet in which she files. Needless to say, this journey motif is a typical American feature, and is evident in all such great works as Melville's *Moby Dick*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and so forth. In Hawthorne and Updike the journeys of the heroines assume a quest for freedom from the asphyxia of religion and society respectively. The epitome of suffering woman, Hester Prynne is, as Stuart P. Sherman so pertinently observed, "a free spirit liberated in a moral wilderness" 23. As Hawthorne himself puts it:

The world's law was no law for her mind

[... ]She assumed a freedom of speculation,

then common enough on the other side of

the Atlantic(157).
If Hester finds her emotional sustenance through her pastor, Sarah, too, finds a spiritual ‘father’ and was impressed by his “spiritual magnetism”(40). Ultimately Hester’s adulterous union with Dimmesdale is paralleled by the liaison between Sarah and Steinmetz, her so-called ‘Spiritual father’ and ‘Master’. Significantly enough, Steinmetz not only parallels Dimmesdale in his actions, but shares his first name ‘Arthur’.

Another point of intertextual kinship between Hawthorne and Updike lies in the fact that both lay bare the flagrant hypocrisy underlying religion. Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy in acting as a judge in Hester’s trial is felt all the more intensely by none other than Dimmesdale himself:

[…] I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow sufferer! Be not silent from any mistake pity and tenderness for him; for believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him – yea, compel him, as it were – to add hypocrisy to sin? (62).
The inner Dimmesdale speaks out here under the pomposity of his gifted tongue.

Sarah parallels Dimmesdale on more scores than one: in her adulterous nature, in her facility in writing (as Dimmesdale’s in speech) and finally in her hypocrisy. Although she indulges in indiscriminate licentiousness and even lesbianism, she justifies her actions in terms of gnomic religious clichés as the union of “Shakti” and “Shiva”, that of “Krishna” and “Radha”, that of “prakriti” and “purusha”, etc. As Sarah puts it:

[...] sexuality and spirituality are forms of our energy
[...](60).

Here again we find a striking intertextual echo of Hester Prynne’s interpretation of her adulterous act. In the famous forest assignation Hester considers her act not as a curse but as a “consecration”:

What we did had a consecration of its own.

We felt it so! We said to each other!(188)

The opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, “The Prison Door”, hints at the gruesomeness of a strictly rigid puritanical milieu of Boston and describes the prison where Hester was interned. Hester’s emerging out from prison bespeaks more a psychological freedom than a physical one. Sarah, too, has been immured in the invisible prison of the stifling condition of a materialistic America.
rolling in voluptuousness and yet dictated by a patriarchal social structure. As Sarah gives us a glimpse of her slavery in a letter to Charles (May 23):

Did I not labor for you for twenty-two years without wages, serving as concubine, party doll, housekeeper, cook, bedwarmer, masseuse, sympathetic adviser, and walking advertisement – in my clothes and accessories and demeanor and accent and even in my body type and muscle tone – of your status and prosperity?(62)

It is chiefly to shake off the shackles of this patriarchal imperative and the “antiseptic chill” and “bondage” provided by her husband that Sarah isolates herself from Charles and sets out for a spiritual quest in the deserts of Arizona. What strikes our amazement is that like Hawthorne who refers to “a wild rosebush”(1), Sarah refers to “that area by the roses”(1) in her very first letter (April 21) written to Charles.

Hawthorne’s pervasive impact is felt throughout the text not only through intertextual resonances of themes, motifs, events, characters and even names, but also through the direct reference made to Hawthorne’s very name. When Sarah lands in Los Angeles, she had a brief sojourn in a “motel near the airport in a dreary area called Hawthorne[ ...]”(31).
If *The Scarlet Letter* presents us with plenty of harsh, cruel, unrelenting clergymen and judges as John Wilson and Governor Bellingham, among others, who mete out their diabolic punishment to Hester Prynne, Sarah describes her age as an “age of misogynistic judges and shameless lawyers” (139).

The greatest, most prominent and typically Updikean case of ‘intertextual’ rewriting is the seemingly incongruous and yet inalienable conflation of religion and sex. Hawthorne mythicizes Dimmesdale’s syndrome; Updike domesticates it. It becomes a recurrent motif in Updike and an American malady racking and rocking the society for centuries. In an Interview with Edney Silvestre (1993) Updike states:

Surely sex and religion are such basic human concerns — the first a tribute to our bodies and animal selves, the second a tribute to our mental (and some would say) spiritual selves — that I cannot imagine myself without them, even as a small child. Both are inextricable from human vitality, and tracing their form is one of the tasks that fiction performs uniquely will. 24

In another intimate interview given to Katherine Stephen Updike clarifies why he is obsessed so much with sex:

Since prose fiction from its origin
appears to me to be about our private lives, I feel I would be a poor novelist indeed if I avoided trying to say what I can about sex.\textsuperscript{25}

A critic of American society, Updike has tried to explore sex in the context of social disorders:

\begin{quote}
In my rending of sex, I try always to present it in the full context of the social embarrassment, the awkwardness, the unease, the rumbly stomach – the general human mess that these taboos are woven into.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

George Hunt\textsuperscript{27} makes an interesting and elaborate survey of Updike’s preoccupation with “Three Great Secret things: Sex, Religion and Art”. Updike’s preoccupation with sex and religion and his re-enactment of the Adam-myth have been succinctly captured in his poem “Apple”:

\begin{quote}
Since time began, such alphabets begin With Apple, Source of knowledge and Sin.
\end{quote}

“Adultery is not a choice to be avoided; it is a circumstance to be embraced”, writes Tom Marshfield in one of his diary jottings in A Month of Sundays(44-45), and this sums up the typical syndrome of Updikean characters for whom adultery has become as much irresistible
as it is invaluable. What Hunt has observed in *Couples* can be broadly applied to any Updikean novel:

[...] sex now becomes the metaphor and symbol for the exploration of human meaning in a world that seems devoid of meaning. Sex “as the emergent religion” will parody those spiritual instincts and efforts of communal groupings that religion once energized and channeled. Sex “as the only thing left” becomes the only viable metaphor for man’s search for personal and communal meaning. Adultery in such circumstances thus becomes the only modern equivalent for romantic adventure and spiritual aspiration [...].

Sarah becomes the prototype for the Updikean characters for whom religion is paradoxically realized through unscrupulous license, permissiveness and adultery. The Updikean characters engage themselves in adulterous promiscuity in order to find a substitute for or perhaps a better religions equivalent for the spiritual bankruptcy prevailing in their society. As Prof. David Thorburn has so pithily put it:

Updike has consistently associated the marital transgression of his characters
with metaphysical or religious longings,  
as if to suggest that adulterous cravings  
in our affluent rootless era are the  
confused expression of an instinct for  
freedom itself, a rebellion against the  
confinements of age and circumstance.²⁹

Sarah relates how she had slept with Fritz in Arhat’s A-frame, how in her  
transformed person (appellated as Kundalini) she had fornicated with her  
spiritual master, Arthur Steinmetz, a Jewish Armenian from Watertown,  
Massachusetts, how she resorts to lesbianism even in the Ashram. As  
always with Updike, he describes the sexual encounters with an  
unabashed raunchiness and a flagrant explicitness.

Another telling intertextual echo lies in Sarah’s carrying a tape­  
recorder concealed in her bra in a surreptitious way. She adoptions this  
clandestine device so as to capture the exact words of the Arhat. The tape  
records the verbatim encounters between Sarah and the Arhat, and thus  
remains a rare document and a proof of the concupiscent advances and  
actions of the Arhat:

COME ON, KUNDALINS. WHAT’S YOUR OLD  
NAME? I’VE FORGOTTEN

Sarah

COME ON, SARAH, PUT AWAY THAT LONG FACE[ [...]
Don’t touch my breasts. I mean it.

*What’s this protecting your tits again?*

*suddenly? (?? - ??)*

Like Hester’s scarlet letter ‘A’ the tape hidden under Sarah’s breast remains for us a glaring evidence of some untold mystery and some hushed-up scarlet deed. If Hester’s scarlet letter epitomizes the tale of a sinful passion, the tape of Sarah – which like Hester’s scarlet letter she carries on her breasts (although furtively) – bears testimony to the tale of sinful lust.

Sarah’s daughter Pearl, like her Hawthornesque namesake, is the epitome of a free woman who defies the constrictions or any order being imposed upon her. Hawthorne was conscious enough to depict Pearl accordingly:

The child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence, a great law had been broken, and the result was a being whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder [...] (84)

Hester “could recognize her (Pearl’s) wild, desperate, defiant mood, the rashness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart”(84).
Sarah’s Pearl is also an image of desperate defiance and freedom, one who wants to “become a free intelligent woman among her boyfriends and girlfriends” (63), and behaves in a recalcitrant manner with her mother regarding her affair with a Dutch guy, Jan, whom Sarah does not approve of. What Sarah fears is that Pearl may be repeating the same folly that she had committed years before, sacrificing her ‘womanhood’ to Charles:

[...] I just get frantic fearing that Jan won’t let you grow – that you’ll allow him to put a permanent cramp in the ongoing splendid adventure of your womanhood just as your father with the connivance of my parents did to me twenty years ago (157-58).

Similarly, Pearl grows defiant of Sarah when Pearl decides not to come back to Yale and declines to finish her degree. Sarah exhorts her to get her degree, inasmuch as it “is the invisible tiara a woman must wear now, otherwise people write her off as a bumpkin, an ignoramus, a throwback, an archaic creature” (203). Pearl’s defiantly free nature culminates in her conceiving a child which makes her mother so deeply injured:

After wounding me in these various other ways you want me into a grandmother (206)
This anarchic version of Pearl also justifies Updike’s second epigraph to the novel.

And yet, these differences notwithstanding, Pearl is the spitting image of Sarah, as Hawthorne’s Pearl was to Hester. Hawthorne’s Pearl imbibed the same spirit of rebelliousness as her mother:

Hester could only account for the child’s character [... ] during that momentous period while Pearl was imbibing her soul from the spiritual world, and her bodily frame from its material of earth[ [...] Above all, the warfare of Hester’s spirit, at that epoch, was perpetuated in Pearl(84).

Sarah’s Pearl becomes her mother’s alter ego, one through whom Sarah would find her dreams realized vicariously:

You can say I was trying to live my life through you in a way I never lived in myself [...] (205).

Sarah’s dream of fearless womanhood is embodied in the blooming Pearl, as her mother would like to image it:

How thrilling it has been for me [...] to see you grow, tall and fearless and carrying your femaleness like a battle flag!(16)

Sarah considers Pearl an inalienable part of her own self:
I feel you are with me. Part of you, of course, with part of me (20).

Finally, Pearl Worth is the epitome of all “free women – women standing upright and having ideas” (205) in Sarah’s projected vision which is not unlike the Hawthornesque vision of Pearl Prynne as the very embodiment of “the steadfast principles of an unflinching courage – an uncontrollable will – a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect [...]]” (173).

Both Hester and Sarah are characterized by their loneliness. But while Hester’s loneliness is conditioned by her social persecution, Sarah chooses to remain aloof from the comfortable shores of her New England society. Hester resided in a “thatched cottage” which “stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills toward the west” (75). “Standing alone in the world”, Hester was fighting her own silent battle against a society pervaded with an avalanche of rigid laws and constrictions which she defiantly flouted:

The world’s law was no law for her mind (157).

Sarah’s self-imposed isolation in the Arhat Ashram in the Arizona not only suggests her westward an essentially American phenomenon, but is also suggestive of her lonely wrestling against the patriarchal hegemony. Sarah, further, wants to forge out her distinctive identity in
her chosen Utopia by shedding her former identities. "I shed you as I
would shed a skin", Sarah writes to Charles(12). She wants to do away
with her former self and assume a new role in which her ‘American
dream’ (freedom of a woman in her case) would be fulfilled:

[...] a parent should be transcended, I’m
trying to say, as a snake sheds its
skin(63).

In Sarah’s case her dream was awfully thwarted as she gradually
comes to realize the sham hypocrisy of the Arhat, who is actually the son
of a Jewish-Armenian. In a lengthy remorseful letter written to her
mother Sarah discloses her utter disenchantment with the Arhat:

Your daughter has been most cruelly
deceived![ ...] the Arhat’s real name
was Art Steinmetz, and that he was
from Massachusetts – Watertown, to
be exact, Watertown, Mother!(209-11)

Hester, too, has been deceived both by her cold, insensate husband and by
her hypocrite lover-cum-pastor. Her dreams are likewise shattered in her
New England society where she had immigrated from Europe, shedding
her former identity.

Both Hester and Sarah are the embodiment of the guiltless
American feminist. Despite her sinful adulterous union with Dimmesdale,
Hester is not, in the least, tormented with any kind of guilty feeling whatsoever. On the contrary, she considers her act more as a “consecration” than as a curse. In the forest assignation with Dimmesdale her passions are revived with a new gusto:

With sudden and desperate tenderness,
she threw her arms around him, and
pressed his head against her bosom;[ ... ](187).

Hester even projects her hope for a future consummation:

Shall we not meet again?[ ... ]
Shall we not spend our immortal life together?(247).

Sarah similarly does not care a tuppence about any guilty conscience:

Why do Americans always think they should feel guilty about their things?
I loved our things. Things are what we strive for, what all the waves in the air tell us to strive for – things are the stuff of our dreams and then like Eve and Adam digesting the apple we must feel so guilty. I didn’t, I don’t think(9-10).
Updike makes abundant use of the scarlet letter ‘A’ in his intertextual version of Hawthorne’s classic. Sarah repeatedly refers to ‘A’ frame in the Arhat Ashram, and relates how she had gone to Fritz’s “A-frame” and “slept with him” (46). She addresses Alinga as “Dearest, dearest A,” (99). She advises her mother to “Use lotions with PABA and take vitamin A 500 mg. twice a day” (26), and writes to Pearl about “an A-line tulle-and satin gown” (207). The sannyasins are required to wear “purple and pink” dresses (64). Any perceptive reader may notice that the colour “purple and pink” is not unlike the colour ‘scarlet’ and thus links up the intertextual connotation of shame.

In a reference to a college textbook on Zoology, Sarah sums up her paradoxical situation in a letter written to Myron:

The book talks about “the simultaneous eagerness of the female for sexual stimulation and her inherent fear of body contact with any other animal, including a male of her own species” [...] The story of my live and all other lives really [...] It goes on to talk about how lady gray squirrels [...] “feel torn between two powerful instincts: they want to escape and at the same time they want to greet the male” (248).

This situation also succinctly presents the moral dilemma in which most Americans suffer from. Sarah herself is a split, fragmented
self. Sarah is herself caught between her “two powerful instincts”. One half of Sarah is in quest for spiritual salvation; the other half luxuriates in carnal carnival, in sensual bacchanalia, in physical voluptuousness and sexual ecstasy. She can scarcely reconcile between the two, and therefore suffers from its resultant anguish and a lack of fulfilment. Sarah becomes a prototype, as it were, for her young bohemian generation in general and the Updikean in particular. In Sarah religion is paradoxically realised in and through uninhibited promiscuity. In the ultimate analysis, it may be said that Sarah herself epitomizes “the scarlet letter” of shame. In her twentieth-century America where there is an awful topsy-turviness of values and a veritable travesty of ideals, Sarah finds it rather useless to assign a complete, unified identity to herself, and hence tries to represent her fissiparous, dissociated, split identity by reducing her name to an unassuming “S”. Thus what was “A” for Hester Prynne is epitomized in “S” for Sarah Worth.

A critic like Donald J. Griener, however, treats the letter “A” linguistically and observes:

In Updike’s world, the A on Hester’s breast can be nothing more than the vowels of Sarah’s name.
If Sarah resembles Hester, she is also distinctive from her nineteenth-century counterpart. Unlike the serene, calm, goddess-like Hester who acquiesces in her suffering with an almost Christ-like tolerance and who engenders a Madonna-like sympathy, Sarah is antithetically waspish. She sasses back with an eruptive fury to Charles for his previous “antiseptic chill”(13) imposed upon her, to her mother for having forced her to marry Charles, and to her daughter Pearl for her characteristic defiance. In stark contrast to Hester’s irradiating ingenuity and innocuousness, Sarah can go to the extent of embezzling funds from the Arhat Ashram. Other instances of inversion lie in the very setting of Updike’s novel. While Hawthorne’s novel is set in a sombre and sullen puritanical seventeenth-century America steeped in gravity, Updike turns the tables to create an ambience fraught with frivolity. Similarly Sarah’s utopian Ashram resort, equipped with all kinds of materials comforts and a utopia of absolute freedom, is a flagrant inversion of the dystopian puritanical world of Hester Prynne. It is chiefly because of this opposing nature of Sarah that critics and commentators have declined to see her as a literary descendent and a remaking of Hester Prynne. Richard Gilman, for example, feels that Updike does not succeed in it:

What Hawthorne was able to do with Hester Prynne, as *Updike isn’t able to do with Sarah*, was to extend his imagination to encompass her difference from
him, and then to inculpate himself in her sorrowful fate. In wishing to make his modern Hester’s destiny a lighthearted one, Updike takes no responsibility at all.  

(Emphasis added).

Alison Lurie in another review criticizes Updike and observes that “it is difficult [...] to see any real connection between Hester and Sarah Worth.” Michiko Kakutani similarly takes Updike to task for the portrayal of his outrageously immoral women in The Witches of Eastwick and S.

What these reviewers and critics fail to realize is that this change serves but to strengthen the intertextual knot by betraying the links between the two texts. It is the difference that also draws us towards the similarity. Updike here actually resorts to the device of intertextual inversion which is more tenable and more attuned to his twentieth-century situation. Updike’s inversion becomes inevitably necessary, inasmuch as he is trying to present a faithful portrait of American middle-class in his time. Hawthorne was faithful and realistic to his nineteenth-century society; Updike remains loyal to his twentieth-century America. This inversion is therefore amply-justified not only on account of this realism, but also because it fills the long historical and socio-cultural gap of nearly three centuries.
To reviewers who decline to accept Sarah as Hester’s literary counterpart, it may safely be replied that intertextuality hinges around the principle of “difference”. That is why and where intertextuality largely differs from the concept of “mimesis”. As John Frow has put it:

The concept of intertextuality requires
that we understand the concept of text
not as a self-contained structure but
as differential and historical [...] Texts
are therefore not structures of presence
but traces and tracing of otherness. 34

The “change”, “difference”, “inversion” or “otherness” – whatever we may call it – is therefore thoroughly justified in terms of the social, cultural, historical, literary and theoretical considerations.

D. H. Lawrence had cryptically observed about The Scarlet Letter:

There was no change in belief, either
in Hester or in Dimmesdale or in Hawthorne
or in America. The same old treacherous
belief, which was really cunning disbelief,
in the Spirit, in Purity, in Selfless Love,
and in Pure Consciousness. They would go
on following this belief, for the sake of
sensationalism of it. But they would make
a fool of it all the time.\textsuperscript{35}

We may say that what Lawrence observed in \textit{The Scarlet Letter} is equally germane to Updike and S. There has indeed been little or perhaps “no change”, as we find, the same “cunning disbelief, in Spirit, In Purity, in Selfness Love” and the same celebration of carnal carnival under the sugar-coated garb of spiritualism, the same revival of the Adam myth in a new Eden. Lawrence’s keen observation that “Dimmesdale’s spiritual had gone on too long, too far” and that it virtually “had become a false thing”\textit{(Studies 87)} is even more pertinent to Sarah Worth and Arthur Steinmetz. Finally, Lawrence’s evaluation of Pearl Prynne as “perhaps the most modern child in all literature”\textit{(Studies 91)} seems to be more applicable to Pearl Worth who is the embodiment of free American woman or what her mother projects as “a free intelligent woman”\textit{(63)}.

To conclude with a discreet observation made by Donald J. Griener:

\begin{itemize}
  \item [...] Updike’s transformation of \textit{the Scarlet Letter} is both an homage to a masterpiece and a radical feat of intertextuality.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{itemize}
Notes and References


Henceforth all references to this book will be cited as Secret Things


10. I have taken the metaphor from nuclear Physics. While fission refers to the splitting of an atomic nucleus along with the discharge of energy, fusion involves the opposite process in which two or more atomic nuclei are combined to form a larger nucleus.

Hereafter all references to this book will be cited as Studies.

Hereafter all further references to this book will be cited as SL (Norton)


19. Sir Henry Summer Maine, Ancient Law (1861) Chapter 9, "The Early History of Contact".


27. George W. Hunt, S. J., In Secret Things


35. D. H. Lawrence, In Studies, 86.