

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of James Plath

Fall October, 1999

Giving the Devil His Due: Leeching and Edification of Spirit in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Witches of Eastwick*

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Giving the Devil His Due

Leeching and Edification of Spirit in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Witches of Eastwick*

JAMES PLATH

When the subconscious soul of woman recoils from its creative union with man, it becomes a destructive force. . . . She doesn't know it. She can't even help it. But she does it. The devil is in her. The very women who are most busy saving the bodies of men . . . they are all, from the inside, sending out waves of destructive malevolence which can eat out the inner life of a man, like a cancer.

D. H. Lawrence (*Studies in Classic
American Literature*, 92-93)

Reading Lawrence's remarks about Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, one can't help but think of the way in which cancer, a "sore of guilt," is used as a central motif in *The Witches of Eastwick* (280); or how the witches felt that "healing belonged to their nature," that it was "womanly to want to heal — to apply the poultice of acquiescent flesh to the wound of a man's desire, to give his closeted spirit the exaltation of seeing a witch slip out of her clothes and go skyclad in a room of taw-

dry motel furniture" (67); or how Alexandra, called "the head witch" by Updike (Plath, ed., 266), had taken to "healing" several lovers and watched as her "cuckolded husband shrank to the dimensions and dryness of a doll" (*Witches*, 7), even thinking at one point that "the devil was getting into her" (48). One also recalls Updike's own declaration that "*The Scarlet Letter* is not merely a piece of fiction, it is a myth by now, and it was an updating of the myth, the triangle redefined by D. H. Lawrence, that interested me" (Schiff, *Updike's Version*, 132).

If Updike in his *Scarlet Letter* trilogy explored the "myth" of an adulterous triangle between a man of science, a man of religion, and a woman of nature as redefined by Lawrence, then by his own careful choice of the novel's very last word (*Witches*, 307), Updike reminds readers that in *The Witches of Eastwick* he explores "legend" — and legend is secular, not mythic. The difference between the two is not insignificant and legitimates an important critical application. According to Mircea Eliade, "sacred history is recounted in the myths. . . . In so far as he imitates his gods, religious man lives in the *time of origin*, the time of the myths . . . eternity" (72). *The Scarlet Letter* takes place in mythic time and space — what Eliade calls "the sphere of the sacred" — in a New England town where "religion and law were almost identical" (Hawthorne, *Centenary Edition*, 1:50). *The Witches of Eastwick* occupies secular space and time, in which religion has shifted from the fore to the background, and each of the witches, acting "without a mythical model, belongs to the sphere of the profane" (Eliade, 96). "The myth operates whenever passion is dreamed of as an ideal instead of being feared like a malignant fever," Denis de Rougemont writes, "whenever its fatal character is welcomed, or invoked as a magnificent and desirable disaster instead of simply a disaster" (24). As Updike explained in a review of *Love Declared*, "de Rougemont is dreadfully right in asserting that love in the Western world has by some means acquired a force far out of proportion to its presumed procreative aim. Do we need a heresy, or even a myth, to explain it?" (*Assorted Prose*, 299).

Hawthorne suggests through wordplay the depth of mythic influence and heretical straying to be found in Hester's Boston, insomuch as his young Reverend Dimmesdale is himself an ironic, self-contained scriptural homily — "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil" (Psalm 23:4). His "dim" faith and fear both of Chillingworth and of having his sin discovered from the valley of his own heart cause the minister's health to deteriorate rapidly. In

naming his own Reverend Ed *Parsley*, however, Updike suggests, through the same sort of wordplay, that religion had lost even more of its efficacy and had become little more than a garnish by the time of Lyndon Johnson's presidency. In *The Scarlet Letter* an alchemist enters society and begins to work his dark magic, but in *Witches* the church has already drifted toward a broad receptivity: "In this hazy late age of declining doctrine its interior was decorated here and there with crosses anyway, and the social parlor bore on one wall a large felt banner, concocted by the Sunday school, of the Egyptian tau cross . . . surrounded by the four triangular alchemic signs for the elements" (*Witches*, 35).

In the hyper-religious society of *The Scarlet Letter* witches are treated as ghosts, kept largely offstage as voices "often heard to pass over the settlements or lonely cottages, as they rode with Satan through the air" (Hawthorne, *Centenary Edition*, 1:149), with repeated implications that any townspeople who goes into the forest, into nature, must consort with "the black man" and is therefore a witch or Mephistophelean. Aside from what readers can infer would have been deemed witchcraft had the full circumstances of Hester's sex triangle been revealed, the witches are otherwise present only through the characters of Mistress Hibbins and her friend, who were to be hanged after the main action of the novel (1:49, 1:221), and young Pearl, who is linked to evil primarily because of her mischief (1:154). Satan, meanwhile, is ambiguously embodied in Chillingworth, "a potent necromancer" (1:258) who does the "Devil's work on earth" (1:260).

In *Witches*, divorcees — equated throughout the novel with magic and witchcraft — are so prevalent that there are "hundreds of divorcees running around" mischievously competing for the married men in Eastwick (239); "Being a divorcee in a small town is a little like playing Monopoly; eventually you land on all the properties" (25). Instead of a single adulterous martyr "stigmatized by the scarlet letter" and isolated in a "lonesome cottage by the seashore" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:159), Updike offers a society of martyrs considerably less marginalized: "martyrs too of a sort were the men and women hastening to adulterous trysts, risking disgrace and divorce for their fix of motel love — all sacrificing the outer world to the inner, proclaiming with this priority that everything solid seeming and substantial is in fact a dream" (*Witches*, 201). Updike's language here clearly echoes Hawthorne's fascination with interiors and exteriors and with Plato's alle-

gory of the cave — as well as the debates between what is “real” and substantial versus what is ideal or illusory that dominate both the symbolism and the dialectics of *The Scarlet Letter*. Updike has also multiplied the problem Dimmesdale faced, with his three temptations, where “his inner man” and “interior kingdom” incited him “to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other, with a sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional” (*Centenary Edition*, 1:217). Instead, Updike offers an entire town full of people who have given in to their natural impulses in order to commit mischiefs small and large, including infidelity. As Elizabeth Tallent reminds us, “These ancient alternatives — fidelity and adultery — parallel the choices once offered in Eden” (Tallent, 11). If, as Donald Greiner suggests, “adultery is a bridge between the garden and the world” (*Adultery*, 23), then in *Witches* Updike depicts a society so changed from the time of Hester’s New England that the witches have moved from the periphery of social intercourse to its very center, and adultery is no longer the aberration — it is endemic. Where once, as Tallent observes, the conflict between flesh and spirit was resolved in Updike’s fiction by having his “heroes turn the women they sleep with into wives” (4), the husbands in *Witches* who are “let stray by the women who owned them” (6) indulge in no such purifying fantasies.

Considering Hawthorne’s affinities for the Gothic, Updike has concluded that “The haunted is a degenerate form of the sacred” (*Picked-Up Pieces*, 78). A succession of critics has viewed the witchcraft present in Hawthorne’s masterpiece akin to what David Van Leer has most recently termed “a disastrous conflation of the material and the spiritual . . . equating as it does verbal formulas and physical recipes with demonic influences.” Thus Chillingworth was portrayed as a man of science whose “natural learning” was a substitute for “religious zeal,” resulting in “a debased model of the soul” (Van Leer, 77). Yet, in *Witches*, witchcraft is less the debasement that it was during the time period of *The Scarlet Letter* — or the alternative pop-culture religion that it became during the love-beaded, tie-dyed era in which *Witches* was set — than it is a means of challenging authority and trying to tap into the “guiltless energy men have” (56). Or, as Updike has observed, “Witchcraft is a venture, one could generally say, of women into the realm of power” (*Hugging the Shore*, 855).

Perhaps this is why *The Witches of Eastwick*, despite being written after *A Month of Sundays* but before *Roger’s Version* and *S.*, hasn’t been

pointedly connected to Updike's rewriting of the novel he termed "our first American masterpiece" (Plath, ed., 129) and "one of the few 19th-century novels that actually deals with men and women" (207). James Schiff, the critic who has studied Updike's *Scarlet Letter* trilogy most extensively, acknowledges that

In many ways, *The Witches of Eastwick* is Updike's most Hawthornesque work, more so than even the novels of the *Scarlet Letter* trilogy. . . . *The Witches of Eastwick* feels like Hawthorne. . . . Furthermore, through its consideration of evil, witchcraft, telepathy, adultery, art and artists, male-female relations, the scientist's effort to overcome nature, and the relationship between matter and spirit, *The Witches of Eastwick* may represent the point at which Updike's sensibility moves closest to Hawthorne's. (*John Updike Revisited*, 79)

Schiff also perceptively observes that "Hawthorne depicts a world not quite real, not quite believably alive, a world that is nearly otherworldly," and he acknowledges that Updike's world — even in the trilogy — is, for the most part, "a more realistic, trivial, everyday world" (*Updike's Version*, 123). He notes that Updike "experimented with such [otherworldly] worlds in *The Witches of Eastwick*" (123), yet his own discussion stops short of directly linking the novel to *The Scarlet Letter*. "New England carries with it a whole set of associations. I mean, you're in Hawthorne's territory," Updike told one interviewer (Plath, ed., 120). And if one looks closely, *The Witches of Eastwick* is more than just "Hawthornesque." If Updike gives voice in his trilogy to a modern-day Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Hester, I would argue that in *Witches* he gives voice to characters relegated to the background in Hawthorne's novel — the witches, the townspeople, and the "black man" himself.

Updike wrote of *Witches* that, in part, he wanted "to give gossip a body and to conjure up human voices as they hungrily feed on the lives of others" (*Hugging the Shore*, 856). Such language is again reminiscent of *The Scarlet Letter*, when Hester is first brought from the prison into the "too vivid light of day" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:52). The first voices to pass judgment on her for adultery and to pronounce the magistrates' punishment "merciful overmuch" are a group of "Goodwives" who stand "in a knot together" as they bemoan the sentence: "It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church members in good repute, should have the han-

dling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne," one "hard-featured dame of fifty" remarks. "What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded?" (1:51). Forget communal standards; the "goodwives" were more likely agitated because the father of Hester's child, whose identity was yet to be revealed, could have been any one of their own husbands.

In *The Witches of Eastwick*, "It was such unverifiable impressions that spread among us in Eastwick the rumor of witchcraft," the narrator remarks (18), "and if the world not merely accused but burned them alive in the tongues of indignant opinion, that was the price" the witches knew they must pay (67). In giving gossip a body, Updike explores an alternative locus of guilt or blame to those considered by Hawthorne and Lawrence, or to those he explored in his own trilogy. Moreover, Updike not only poses a situation where, as with Hawthorne's novel, adulteresses are regarded as consorts with the devil and judged more harshly by the "good wives" than by their husbands.

He also considers the central themes of Hawthorne's novel in the context of a society in which patriarchal religiosity is no longer an oppressive factor. In *Eastwick*, where the air "empowered women" (8) and the Word of God has been replaced by the *Word of Man* — a local newspaper that prints a "scurrilous column" of gossip just to be "sexy" (294) — Updike explores adultery and male-female relations within a secular state. In *Eastwick*, divorced women experience sexual power after being freed not only from the constraints of matrimony but also from the constraints of religion that regards marriage as holy. "Female yearning was in all the papers and magazines now; the sexual equation had become reversed" (11).

In considering Hawthorne's adulterous triangle (seducer, adulterer, and cuckold) and the resultant spiritual triangle (sin, guilt, and redemption) within a society in which "Puritanism faded into Unitarianism and then into stoic agnosticism" (*Hugging the Shore*, 66), Updike forces readers to confront the enormous (and not altogether uncomfortable) gap between the spiritual and secular spheres of the two novels. "I don't feel much affinity with the New England Puritan ethos insofar as it still persists," Updike told Jeff Campbell. "I would call myself a Lutheran by upbringing, and my work contains some of the ambiguities of the Lutheran position. . . . Luther's feelings about the

devil and the world are quite interesting to me. He seems to greatly admire, to adore, the devil" (Plath, ed., 94). So, apparently, does Updike, for in *Witches*, Updike gives the devil his due: "The book is meant to be about a coven, and the hero of a coven is surely the person who puts on the devil costume" (Plath, ed., 263).

Like *The Scarlet Letter*, which depends upon the three scaffold scenes at beginning, middle, and end for its structure, *Witches* is also organized into three sections: The Coven, Malefica, and Guilt. Both novels revolve around relationship triangles as well, with Updike's triangle a bit more intricate than Hawthorne's, or even Lawrence's reading of Hawthorne's. Only Pearl, the Elf-Child, complicates Hawthorne's threesome of lover, cuckolded husband, and faithless wife, with Hester the martyr and Pearl a petri dish sort of experiment to objectify the debate over natural sin. In a morality tale worthy of Chaucer, Hawthorne invites readers, in effect, to decide which of the two men is the bigger louse — although from the earliest reviews most readers felt that it was no contest. They saw what Evert Duyckinck first observed: that Chillingworth was a "Mephistophilean" who "devotes his life to . . . a fiendish revenge," a "devilish purpose" ("Great Feeling," 323). For Lawrence, who reaches back into Christian mythos to compare Hester to Eve, Hester is the center of the maelstrom, more villain than victim:

Oh, Hester, you are a demon. A man *must* be pure, just so that you can seduce him to a fall. Because the greatest thrill in life is to bring down the Sacred Saint with a flop into the mud. . . . And then go home and dance a witch's jig of triumph. (Lawrence, 89)

While it appears that Updike found inspiration in Lawrence's comparison of sexual seduction and witchery, the implied natural bond in both Hawthorne's and Lawrence's love triangle is *two*, with the third party a disruption. In *Witches* — and this is most telling — the adulterous triangle is redefined so that *three*, not two, is the natural bond, with a fourth party causing that bond to break down. The three witches find themselves unable to "erect a cone of power" once they begin thinking about the new stranger in town, and they finally realize the reason: that "they were themselves under a spell, of a greater" (*Witches*, 33-34). Also disrupted by Van Horne are the marital triangles in which each witch was involved, and later, once their coven is rees-

established with the Satan-figure as their head, their threesome is violated again by Jenny Gabriel. In this manner, Updike has redefined the myth of the adulterous triangle not just by shifting the locus of blame or guilt, as Lawrence did, but by suggesting as well that the adulterous triangle is every bit as natural as the bond of two people entered into marriage, and infidelity as natural as fidelity: "Things fall into threes. And magic occurs all around us as nature seeks and finds the inevitable forms . . . the equilateral triangle being the mother of structure" (5).

As divorcees competing with other divorcees in a small town of married couples, Alexandra, Jane, and Sukie "depended on the infrangible triangle, the cone of power" (57) — with an emphasis on females and sisterhood reinforced by Updike's repeated references to "triangle power" and the female pudenda as a "demure triangular bush" (77). Like Hester, Alex and the other witches are women "infinitely fallen" from social graces, "from the world of decent and dreary amusements" that comprised the evenings of married couples who socialized together (48). But married life was no paradise. On the contrary, the divorced witches discover in their newfound freedom to copulate and in their sisterly cone of power a blissful state that they pronounce "paradise," with Jane urging, "We mustn't ever leave Eastwick" (191-92).

In a way, Updike had been building toward this fictional moment of sexual freedom, where adultery — an act he has said more than once that he felt was natural — could exist without guilt. Only in a secular society would that be remotely possible. Some fifteen years earlier, in *Couples*, Piet takes the burning of the church as a sign that he is removed from guilt. In *Witches*, set in Rhode Island — "Refuge of Quakers and antinomians, those final distillates of Puritanism" (9) — the reverend, not the church, is destroyed, and guilt is never much more than a few fleeting thoughts of how the witches' actions may or may not have been related to the deaths in the novel or to nature.

The eminent literary historian Alfred Kazin has noted that "Just as the structure of [*The Scarlet Letter*] climaxes in a sermon, so the Puritan tradition of reading sermons *to an audience that always knew what to expect*" is reflected in Hawthorne's novel (*God and the American Writer*, 33). But Dimmesdale's stirring sermon and confession have a doubly ironic counterpart in *Witches*. Churchgoers and readers are surprised first by the end-of-novel sermon delivered by Brenda Parsley, the minister's wife, who confesses on behalf of the wives in the congregation

that "we have been guilty . . . of overlooking evil brewing in these very homes of Eastwick, our tranquil, solid-appearing homes" (*Witches*, 270) — and then are horrified as moths and butterflies emerge from her mouth, gagging her (272). Even more ironic, the reverend who slept with his parishioners had run away with a radical flower-child and was blown up trying to make anti-establishment bombs; as a result, the very last sermon in the novel comes neither from the minister nor from his wife. The last word from the pulpit comes from Darryl Van Horne, the satanic figure, who, as a guest lecturer, delivers a radical "secular sermon" (294) on the horrors of creation and ends by asking the congregation to "vote for me next time, O.K.? Amen" (293).

In both Hawthorne's and Updike's novels, a Satanic agent ironically acts as the *deus ex machina*, with both men thinking and speaking in terms of "bonds." A physician, Chillingworth talks of being connected to "a woman, a man, a child" by "the closest ligaments" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:76), while Van Horne, an inventor, seeks the "Big Interface" between solar energy and electrical energy (*Witches*, 46) and uses the language of a chemist to discuss male-female relations throughout the novel. Chillingworth tells Hester that drawing on his "old studies in alchemy," including the alchemic search for a universal solvent and elixir, have made him "a better physician" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:71). "I shall seek [the identity of Hester's lover], as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy" (1:75), Chillingworth vows. Consistent with other reversals in *Witches*, Van Horne's theories all have something to do with selenium, and "Selenic acid can dissolve gold" (*Witches*, 172), not create it through the process of alchemy.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dinnesdale was already experiencing severe deterioration before Chillingworth came upon the scene (*Centenary Edition*, 1:120); the minister "tortured, but could not purify, himself" (1:145). Chillingworth works on him like an alchemist mining: "Let us dig a little further in the direction of this vein!" (1:130) until "at some inevitable moment will the soul of the sufferer be dissolved, and flow forth in a dark but transparent stream, bringing all its mysteries into the daylight" (1:124). In a manner befitting the title Hawthorne conferred upon him, Chillingworth tries to "leech" from him the cleansing confession that the author would have readers believe was necessary not only for the cuckold's revenge but also for the minister's salvation. Though Chillingworth experiences a Satanic ecstasy when he sees evidence of the inner disease finally leached to the surface of the minis-

Giving the Devil His Due

ter's chest (1:138), and though the minister finally perceives himself as a victim, the Leech's growing diabolization pushes the minister toward the confession that releases him from torment (1:252-53).

Leeching in *Witches* is about performance and power. Updike's witches have no real guilt, because, as Alex explains, a "natural principle" is that "we must lighten ourselves to survive" (*Witches*, 97-98), and that includes throwing off blame or guilt. But they are in danger of growing stagnant, and Van Horne serves as the witches' "redeemer from Eastwick ennui" (297). In addition to transforming their dull lives via the coven and what Harold Bloom termed "hot tub orgies" (Bloom, 4), he also tries to draw from each witch greater creative triumphs. And the witches are most receptive. Van Horne, looking at Alex's tiny folk-sculptures, tells her to "Think bigger" (*Witches*, 51), and he observes that Alex "could have mated with an elephant, thinking of becoming the next Niki de Saint-Phalle" (208). He tries to coax a novel out of a third-rate gossip columnist and more spirited performances from a second-rate cellist. "Jane came faithfully for her sessions," while Sukie "began to trip back and forth with notes for her novel" and "Alexandra timidly invited Van Horne to come view the large, weightless, enameled statues of floating women she had patted together" (207). Through flattery and discussions about gender and gender relations more frank and honest than any of the witches had ever experienced before, Van Horne makes each witch feel more comfortable about her imperfect body: "Splashing, they emerged cumbersomely: silver born in a chemical tumult from lead" (190) — another echo of Hester, whose "leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure" became "transfigured" by the golden thread used to make the A (*Centenary Edition*, 1:53-54, 57). Van Horne excites each witch by the possibility of attaining something greater, and while using them up physically and ultimately manipulating them into getting rid of Jenny, he nonetheless lifts their spirits in the process. Prior to Van Horne's arrival, the witches leached strength from the men they slept with, and later grew "strong on Jenny's death, pulling strength from it as from a man's body" (*Witches*, 265). By the same token, Alex thinks how Van Horne "was a bundle of needs; he was a chasm that sucked her heart out of her chest" (47) — perhaps the most pointed allusion to Hawthorne's leech.

As if to distinguish between Satan and satanic agent, both men are summoned to begin their leeching endeavors, rather than acting on their own. "After her return to the prison, Hester Prynne was found to

be in a state of nervous excitement that demanded constant watchfulness, lest she perpetrate violence on herself, or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe," and so the jailer thinks to summon a physician "likewise familiar with whatever the savage people could teach" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:70). But Updike's witches are in need of stirring up, not calming down, and Updike has said that Van Horne "stirs them up in ways that the other men in the book don't" (Plath, ed., 263). Sukie, the gossip columnist, makes the first visit to Van Horne, urges Jane to follow, and the two of them cast a spell (242) to bring Alex, the strongest witch, to the "dark man" (*Witches*, 34).

Like Chillingworth, Van Horne begins with a modicum of good intentions and a scientist's curiosity. In the case of the former, however, readers quickly see any medical curiosity give way to Chillingworth's personal agenda: to leech out a confession from Dimmesdale no matter what it does to the minister physically, emotionally, or spiritually. He uses Hester in order to exact his revenge, coaxing a promise from her not to reveal his identity or purpose. Likewise, Van Horne's scientific curiosity and his desire to "leech" the boredom out of the witches' lives and to leech out of them bigger and better artistic accomplishments give way, ultimately, to his own agenda. He uses them to get rid of Jenny Gabriel so that he can run away with her brother, Chris. Updike once observed that this is "one of nature's jokes" — namely, that the witches would compete with each other for the affections of a man who ultimately turns out to be gay (Plath, ed., 265). And yet Updike by no means envisioned his devil as one-sidedly satanic. "My devil, Darryl Van Horne, is a weaker figure — no monster," he told one interviewer. "I had the idea to create him as a kind of experimenter, where it would be possible for him, through some short-cut in the physical theory of thermodynamics, to forever solve the energy problems on earth" (261). In this respect, Updike shares Lawrence's belief in Chillingworth as "a magician on the verge of modern science" (Lawrence, 98).

Roy Male is one of few critics to see something positive in Chillingworth, who, despite being a "leech, draining his patient of nerve, will, and physical energy . . . is also the healer. Only by knowing him, confronting him face to face, is moral growth possible" (Male, 96). Inexplicably, Male numbers among the questions that typical readings of the text fail to answer, "Why does Chillingworth wither and die soon after Dimmesdale confesses?" (93). If one extends the leech analogy and notes that as late as 1905 the classic nursing text by I. A.

Giving the Devil His Due

Hampton included a section on using leeches to purify the blood, certainly Hawthorne was aware that leeching was not just a common but a respected medical practice of drawing out poisons, of purification. It makes more sense, then, to conclude that Chillingworth "leeches" the confession out of Dimmesdale, which, Hawthorne implies, saves the latter's soul.

While Male posits that Chillingworth "gradually shrivels as Hester and Dimmesdale come closer to full recognition of him" (96-97), it seems more consistent with Hawthorne's use of the Leech image to consider that Chillingworth, like a true leech, drops from the host once he has been sated. Hawthorne's leech, though satisfying his own thirst for blood-revenge, is still used by God, Dimmesdale knows: "By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man to keep the torture always at red-heat. . . . Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost forever! Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:239). Indeed, readers are told that this "diabolical agent had the Divine permission, for a season, to burrow into the clergyman's intimacy and plot against his soul" (1:128), and the house the two men share has a tapestry of David, Bathsheba, and the prophet Nathan (1:126), which reinforces the notion of the Leech as a positive force, and not just "a treasure seeker in a dark cavern" (1:124). Once Hawthorne's Leech is able to extract the "sickness" of spirit that lodged within Dimmesdale's frail body (1:137), once the poisonous sin and guilt had been extracted, the fact that he shrivels and dies is most likely a reflection of the common belief that enough poisons ingested could in fact kill the parasite.

Not coincidentally, Van Horne's final sermon in *Witches* concentrates on nature, but after citing the example of a "predaceous arthropod," he relies almost exclusively on examples of parasites similar to leeches in order to illustrate that "THIS IS A TERRIBLE CREATION" (*Witches*, 287-93). "I've always been fascinated by parasites," he tells the congregation, using a dictionary rather than a Bible (290). Van Horne, like Chillingworth, is associated with both wildness and civilization. The reader's first glimpse of Chillingworth sees him standing next to an Indian and clad in "a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:60), which reflects his practice of both "civilized" medicine, old school alchemy, and American Indian herbal cures. Updike's head witch, meanwhile, forms a first impres-

sion of Van Horne that also links him to American Indians: "she had brought with her from the West a regrettable trace of the regional prejudice against Indians and Chicanos, and to her eyes Darryl Van Horne didn't look *washed*" (*Witches*, 36). Sukie thinks he's a "wild man" (135), though when Jenny later says of Van Horne's tennis, "He's quite wild," Jane snaps, "Darryl Van Horne is quite the most civilized person I know" (179).

Like Chillingworth, Van Horne is also slightly deformed both by genetics and according to his indulgences. Chillingworth, who was "misshapen" from birth (*Centenary Edition*, 1:74) and spends more time stooped in study than he does in matters of the heart, has one shoulder higher than the other (1:60). Van Horne, a "dark man" (*Witches*, 34) whose hands were "eerily white-skinned beneath the hair, like tight surgical gloves" (43), strikes Alex as "a monster" at first (94). His penis resembles "one of those vanilla plastic vibrators" (107), imagery that is in keeping with Van Horne's and other males' association with artificiality and science, rather than things natural, and that also alludes to the mechanical way he made love to each witch. Both men also come replete with snake imagery. Across Chillingworth's face a "writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:61), and Van Horne's "vestigial male nipples" were "tiny warts surrounded by wet black snakes" (*Witches*, 110-11). Both men operate under aliases: "Under the appellation of Roger Chillingworth . . . was hidden another name" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:118, 127); "Lawyers now think that Darryl Van Horne was an assumed name" (*Witches*, 307). Just as Chillingworth's touch burns (*Centenary Edition*, 1:73), so does Van Horne's (*Witches*, 93-94, 96) — another *Scarlet Letter* trope.

Other textual echoes and parallels abound. Just as Hawthorne's novel is introduced by a local historian and related years later by an eyewitness, Updike's tale of witchcraft is told retrospectively by a current resident of Eastwick. In addition to a shared language of inner/outer motifs (*Centenary Edition*, 1:57-58, 61; *Witches*, 14, 164), both novels set the mood by offering a condensed local history and introducing themes of societal decay early in the narrative (*Centenary Edition*, 1:21, 50, 58; *Witches*, 9-10, 14, 23). Like Hawthorne, Updike also refers to a pronounced "stain" (*Witches*, 9, 23). Hawthorne's novel begins with Hester enduring the taunts of the townspeople, while Updike's has Alex enduring the name-calling of teenagers on the beach (13). As Hester must walk past Dimmesdale to get to Chillingworth in the

Giving the Devil His Due

novel's opening scenes, Alex must cross a Marsh Field (a playful allusion to Updike's Dimmesdale character from *A Month of Sundays*) in order to get to Van Horne the first time she visits. Both novels invoke the name of early feminist and anti-Puritan Ann(e) Hutchinson in the opening chapter and once again later in the narrative (*Centenary Edition*, 1:48, 165; *Witches*, 9, 269), and both refer to a single old woman suspected of being a witch — Mistress Hibbins (*Centenary Edition*, 1:49, 116, 149) and Abigail Lenox (*Witches*, 10). And in language that echoes Pearl's pebble-throwing incidents, where "Pearl would grow positively terrible in her puny wrath, snatching up stones to fling at [the children who tormented her], with shrill, incoherent exclamations that made her mother tremble because they had so much the sound of a witch's anathemas" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:94), Updike's old widow "went about the lanes muttering and cringing from the pebbles thrown at her by children who, called to account by the local constable, claimed they were defending themselves against her evil eye" (*Witches*, 10). Hawthorne's minister is so tormented by guilt and by his own weakness that he wields a "bloody scourge" against himself (*Centenary Edition*, 1:144, 148). An echo of that self-flagellation can be found in Updike's minister, who also dreams of a freer life, but reminds himself of his limitations: "As if to torment himself he wore a clergyman's collar" (*Witches*, 42).

Like Hester, who taught herself to become a seamstress so extraordinary that her skill transformed — transmuted, one might say — the stigma of the letter A into fine golden embroidery desired in imitation by others in society, the witches are self-taught artisans. While Hester is an adulteress who is publicly condemned and ridiculed from the start of the novel, the witches' public condemnation comes at the end of the novel during the course of Brenda Parsley's sermon. But just as Felicia Gabriel's private denouncement of the witches as "Whores and neurotics and a disgrace to the community" was muffled by feathers and straw coming out of her mouth (127-28), Parsley's condemnation is instantly choked off by moths and butterflies (272). In Hawthorne's novel, Hester endures "every variety of insult" and taunt (*Centenary Edition*, 1:57), and "Dames of elevated rank" tormented Hester "through that alchemy of quiet malice, by which women can concoct a subtle poison from ordinary trifles, and sometimes, also, by a coarser expression, that fell upon the sufferer's defenceless breast like a rough blow upon an ulcerated wound" (1:85).

Moreover, if Hester "entered a church, trusting to share the Sabbath smile of the Universal Father, it was often her mishap to find herself in the text of the discourse" (1:85). In *Witches*, the Other Women not only silence the gossips and rivals, but they are so removed from the gossip that they are not even in attendance to hear themselves slandered: "Sukie, everybody knew, would be in bed with that sly Arthur Hallybread while his wife was at church. . . . Jane Smart had gone all the way up to Warwick to play the Hammond organ for a cell of Moonies starting up. . . . Alexandra would be making her bubbies or weeding her mums" (*Witches*, 273). No public scaffold for any of them. If Hester fashioned an A that "had the effect of a spell" and "seemed to express the attitude of her spirit" — which was to face her accusers with "a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:53-54), then the witches' reaction to town gossips is equally defiant: "I just don't let gossip get to me, frankly," Sukie tells Alex. "Hold your head up and keep thinking, *Fuck you*: that's how I get down Dock Street every day" (*Witches*, 65).

For all their internal strength and spirited individualism, Hester and the witches aren't exactly mother-of-the-year candidates. When Hester "pressed her infant to her bosom with so convulsive a force that the poor babe uttered another cry of pain . . . the mother did not seem to hear it" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:60-61). Alex, afraid she might be stranded at the Lenox Mansion, is worried not about her "kids" but about her dog (*Witches*, 93); Sukie refers to hers as "brats" (78); and Jane admits she's "a dreadful mother" (237). In their preoccupation with Van Horne they begin to neglect their married men as much as their children. Such neglect, as much as anything, would have been enough to cause the wildness in Pearl that mystified Hester, Hawthorne, and readers. Therein lies more intertextuality: just as Pearl constructed "puppets . . . of witchcraft" from "the unlikeliest materials" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:95), Updike's three witches construct voodoo dolls to conjure up "husbands" and to do away with young Jenny Gabriel, who had married the man they had set their sights on.

Hawthorne's tale of adultery offers only the tantalizing promise of coupling, because Hester is able neither to run away to a new land with her lover nor to become reconciled with her legal husband — and she is most emphatically denied the chance of meeting someone else and experiencing passion again. The only "coupling" that occurs happens ironically when Chillingworth moves in with Dimmesdale. In

Giving the Devil His Due

Hawthorne's purgatorial world, where souls find themselves caught between the laws of Nature and the laws of science and religion, social laws win out in the end. In Updike's Eastwick, where religion has all but lost its efficacy, the witches, who fantasize about marrying Van Horne, are also denied the object of their passion, who, just as Chillingworth "coupled" with Dimmesdale, attaches himself to a male — Jenny's brother, Chris.

In Salem in 1692, nineteen women were hanged because of suspected witchcraft; in Hawthorne's Boston, two witches — Mistress Hibbins and her friend, Ann Turner — are hanged offstage, the latter for the murder of a man (1:221); but in Updike's Eastwick, the only hanging is the suicide of *Word* editor Clyde Gabriel, yet another reversal in Updike's secular feminist version and a herald, perhaps, of things to come in the world of male-female relations. The dramatic question raised in *The Scarlet Letter* centers on women: "is there no virtue in woman, save what springs from a wholesome fear of the gallows?" (1:52); in *Witches*, the question, like so many other elements, is reversed: "Men aren't the answer, isn't that what we've decided?" Alexandra says, while Jane responds, "They're not the answer. But maybe they're the question" (*Witches*, 32).

In considering "the whole race of womanhood," Hester reasons that "the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew" and "the very nature of the opposite sex . . . is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:165). Such thoughts bring Hester to the edge of her own "insurmountable precipice," and for a time she wonders "whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide" (1:166). In Updike's fictional world, where the witches *do* have power, they not only contemplate but actually commit murder. "I was trying to explore, on the realistic level, the whole question of power in women," Updike has said. "Would it become less murderous in female hands? And, of course, my thought was, it wouldn't" (Plath, ed., 264).

In suggesting that language "is the curse, that took us out of Eden" (*Witches*, 146), Updike goes beyond Hawthorne's exploration of the stigma of a single letter to consider the ramifications that language — especially negative language, such as gossip — may have on a society. For those to whom Hester ministered, the letter A was a beacon that seemed to signify "Able": "Elsewhere the token of sin, it was the taper

of the sick-chamber. It had even thrown its gleam, in the sufferer's hard extremity, across the verge of time. It had shown him where to set his foot, while the light of earth was fast becoming dim" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:161). Likewise, a meteor shaped like an A is taken to mean "Angel," since the phenomenon occurred on the night of the Governor's death (1:154-55, 158). And in having Pearl decorate herself with a green version of her mother's badge of shame (1:178), Hawthorne invites the reader to consider, not just the nature of sin, but the nature of signs and symbols as well.

"How short life is, how quickly its signs exhaust their meaning," Alex thinks (*Witches*, 236). In *Witches*, rather than a letter-shaped meteor, Updike provides readers with a longer airborne linguistic unit when, considering what to do about their rival, Jenny, the witches speak the vengefully magic word *hex*: "The word, like a shooting star suddenly making its scratch on the sky, commanded silence" (264). Leaving their own sisterly paradise, the witches experiment with a new "language" with Van Horne, "using the parts of his body as a vocabulary with which to speak to one another" (119). When Van Horne, in his devilish arrogance, asks to have his buttocks kissed squarely in the middle after a tennis game, "The smell seemed to be a message he must deliver, a word brought from afar" (183). "Words are just words" Jane argues at one point, Sukie disagreeing (160). But the central discussion of language occurs, fittingly, near the center of the novel within the point of view of *Word* editor Clyde Gabriel, who thinks, "Marriage is like two people locked up with one lesson to read, over and over, until the words become madness" (149). The right words can flatter and woo; the wrong words can insult, or kill, or, as happens, incite the Gabriels' murder-suicide, which ends with Clyde's skull filled with redness, "followed by blackness, giving way with the change of a single letter, to blankness" (156). A single word is capable of much. When Van Horne calls females "the superior mechanism," Alex thinks of all the routines in her life and concludes that she is "a robot cruelly conscious of every chronic motion" (68). A single, irritating word alters her mood and perspective, and "irritation, psychic as well as physical, was the source of cancer" (24) — Updike's argument for gossip being a real malignancy.

In "Emersonianism," Updike wrote that Hawthorne "remained at heart loyal to the Puritan sense of guilt and intrinsic limitation which Emerson so exultantly wished to banish" (*Odd Jobs*, 151). While

Updike all but banishes guilt in the secular state of Eastwick, in rewriting *The Scarlet Letter* from the perspective of Satan and the witches. Updike sends typically mixed signals. While he suggests that Lawrence's revisionist view of Hester as an evil force may be interesting, he also seems to believe what Hawthorne is too timid to state outright: that Nature ultimately absolves everyone of blame or guilt. If nature was for Hester a sympathetic refuge (*Centenary Edition*, 1:203), Updike paints a less symbolic and one-dimensional portrait. The witches are used by Nature for birth, when "you're just a channel for this effort that comes from beyond" (*Witches*, 108), and for death, when "at worst [they] were the conduit" used to bring about Jenny's death (267). Nature, not the Satanic figure, remains the most ominous presence in *The Witches of Eastwick*. "Nature is always waiting, watching for you to lose faith so she can insert her fatal stitch," Alex thinks (24). And when Jenny tries to defend her marriage to Van Horne, Jane remarks, "Naturally nature took its nasty natural course" (231). "What's nature for if it's not adaptable?" one of the witches asks, while another responds, "It's adaptable to a point. Then it gets hurt feelings" (52). "There must also be sacrifice," Alex thinks as she crushes crabs to death on the beach. "It was one of nature's rules" (16).

Updike even endeavors to use nature to explain Clyde and Felicia's argument, which spirals out of control. There was "no reasoning with Felicia when her indignation started to flow, it was like a chemical, a kind of chemical reaction" (127-28). Felicia speaks with "a chemical viciousness that had become independent of her body, a possession controlling her mouth" (147), and as the "chemical and mechanical action that had replaced her soul surged on" and she continued to shout at her husband, Clyde found that his "own chemicals took over; he hit her head with the poker again and again" (148). Likewise, "We're not hurting Jenny," Sukie argues. "DNA is hurting Jenny," Jane says (268). But in *Witches* nature is also forgiving, taking at least as much pity as nature does in Hawthorne's novel. "Nature absorbs all," Alex thinks, recalling a time when as a young girl she urinated on the ground and saw a "dark splotch" on the "dry earth" (8). Nature absorbs all and absolves all. Hawthorne's Leech assures Hester, "Think not that I shall interfere with Heaven's own method of retribution, or, to my own loss, betray him to the gripe of human law" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:75). In other words, Chillingworth will go against neither God nor religion. He will let nature take its course — his own, and Dimmesdale's as well.

While Updike seems to build a meticulous case for Nature winning out, with Van Horne a necessary evil needed to "redeem" the witches briefly from their boredom, their redemption is short-lived. Each of the witches marries again, leaving their sisterly paradise and leaving behind any power they enjoyed as divorced women. Whereas Hester, in her isolation, "roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:199), Alex marries her ceramics instructor, and he "took her and his stepchildren back west, where the air was ecstatically thin and all the witchcraft belonged to the Hopi and Navajo shamans" (*Witches*, 303-4). If Updike thinks the adulterous triangle a natural state, it is not, apparently, a permanent one.

In personifying gossip, Updike may "give gossip a body," but he does not give gossip much of a voice. The two women who would speak out against the witches — Felicia Gabriel and Brenda Parsley — are silenced with spells of feathers and butterflies, symbols of flight, trademarks of witches, and, one might speculate, a reflection of *human* nature. In giving gossip a body in a novel about sex, Updike also poses a Freudian alternative to Hawthorne's dilemma regarding the spirit and the flesh: that guilt is an internalized projection of external values transmitted, among other ways, through language. Alex's lover, Joe, is a strict Roman Catholic, and therefore "adultery had been a step toward damnation for him, and he was honoring one more obligation [in sleeping with her with the same weekly loyalty devoted to sports teams], a Satanic one" (59). Likewise, Sukie thinks about "the storms of [Ed Parsley's] guilt she would have to endure once he was sexually satisfied" (80). In *Witches*, only those who carry the vestiges of religion are bothered by guilt, and as Schiff observes, anyone who would condemn the divorcees/witches, such as a "highly judgmental moralist" like Felicia Gabriel or Brenda Parsley, is quickly silenced (*John Updike Revisited*, 83).

Though Updike claims he's "not a good Barthian" (Plath, ed., 103), he nonetheless accepts Karl Barth's views of nothingness as "that which God does not will. . . . Thus the devil — to give nothingness his name — thrives in proportion, never falls hopelessly behind, is always ready to enrich the rich man with ruin, the wise man with folly, the beautiful woman with degradation, the kind average man with debauches of savagery" (*Picked-Up Pieces*, 90). "Barth's formulas fit," he wrote in his introduction to *Soundings in Satanism*: "man is a battlefield, and Satan at best is 'behind one'" (*Picked-Up Pieces*, 90). In giving

Giving the Devil His Due

the devil his due, Updike, whether consciously or subconsciously, apparently tries to even the score, or at least underscores the primacy of a moral and ethical dialectic for balance or variety. "The heart *prefers* to move against the grain of circumstance; perversity is the soul's very life," Updike has written (*Assorted Prose*, 299). In the end, evil — whether it takes the form of mischief or malice, Nature or Satan — is more than just a welcome diversion from the boredom and routine of everyday goodness. It's edifying. As Alex senses, in "vileness there was something to push against and give her spirit exercise" (*Witches*, 71). Hawthorne ends his novel by having the narrator wonder if Pearl's "wild, rich nature had been softened and subdued, and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness" (*Centenary Edition*, 1:262), or if the "demon offspring" (1:261) and little witch (1:95) "might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan" (1:261). In *The Witches of Eastwick*, perhaps Updike suggests an answer.