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Critical Summary

The Ethics of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

In Erika M. Kreger’s article, “‘Depravity Dressed up in a Fascinating Garb’: Sentimental Motifs and the seduced Hero(ine) in The Scarlet Letter,” she argues that Hawthorne’s main agenda in writing *The Scarlet Letter* is to provide a novel for Romantic readers that has an ethical, moral undertone that was missing from general literature of his time; he does this through writing “domestic” fiction, rather than “sentimental” fiction.

In the article, Kreger visits Hawthorne’s idea of a specific “ethical conclusion” that the reader is supposed to come to. However, it is important to note that “the characterizations underscore the narrative’s conservative lesson about the need for self-denial and social responsibility” (309). Kreger argues that Dimmesdale and Hester represent two reactions to seduction. She notes that “the young minister’s passivity and hypocrisy link him to […] weak heroines and deceptive villains,” while “Hawthorne’s ‘fallen woman,’ however, possesses the strength, selflessness, and positive influence attributed to […] heroines” (310). Dimmesdale falls victim to the negative reaction, Hester the positive.

A point that Kreger touches on often is that of Hawthorne’s novel not fitting into the stereotypical antebellum mold. The writing in his day was termed “sentimental fiction” (312), a style used mainly by female writers, where female characters were described as “gullible victims” like the popular, but melodramatic, main character in the 1850 novel *Charlotte Temple* (311).

Kreger argues that the time period that Hawthorne was writing in was a turning point when she relates the difference between the reception of *sentimental* books and Hawthorne’s: “[His] audience made distinctions—between uplifting sentiment and mawkish emotion; between the melodramatic tales of the previous century and the domestic novels of their own—that have been obscured by the generalizations of later historians” (316).

Next, Kreger goes into the specifics of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s characters. She contrasts the two, arguing that Hester embodies strength and fortitude while Dimmesdale is weak and flighty. She argues that Dimmesdale “does not possess a tendency to be honest” and is the “embodiment of a corrupt and corrupting cultural text” (326). Hester, on the other hand, is the embodiment of the “new age” and “she develops into the model of womanhood,” which is quite the opposite of her “partner in crime” (326).

Kreger ends the article by discussing the role motherless women must take on: “Deprived of a mother’s guidance, heroines of woman’s fiction have to learn on their own to control the passionate tempers and individualist impulses that endanger their security and salvation” (328). Characters like this give in to their passions, like Hester does when she “exhibits an abundance of ‘spirit,’ ‘desperate recklessness,’ a ‘combative energy of…character,’ and ‘lawless passion.’” (329). The characters have no choice but to reflect the people of their time until someone like Hawthorne turns the tables and writes a character who is so radically different that she stands the test of time.

Kreger, Erika M. ""Depravity Dressed up in a Fascinating Garb": Sentimental Motifs and the Seduced Hero(ine) in The Scarlet Letter." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54.3 (1999): 308-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Nov. 2013.