Defining the Self: States of Consciousness in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

Historically, *The Scarlet Letter* has been defined as morality’s advocate and sin’s antagonist, but critics like Constance Hunt search for deeper meaning within the text. She defines it in terms of colonialism, culture, and societal behaviors. Hunt writes that “Hawthorne portrays the… Puritan settlers of New England as seeking liberation… only… to establish their own rigorous moral and religious structures… the Puritans’ understanding of liberation cannot be separated from strict adherence to their own dogmatically certain moral code” (2). Hunt presents this statement as her explanation of the townspeople’s extreme and peculiar behavior toward Hester, Dimmesdale, and other aspects of colonial life. Similarly, critic Laura Doyle suggests that “we meet [Hester] as the figure turning between two worlds, a woman choosing the abode of colonization, [but whom] Hawthorne makes [as an example of] interior freedom” (25-6). In summation, although Hester lives in a colonized, rigidly strict Puritan community, she represents individual thought and autonomy. R.V. Young draws an inclusive comparison and writes that, “Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne, and… Roger Chillingworth in varying ways embody the tensions that arise in a community based on individual assertion” (2). *The Scarlet Letter* undoubtedly details the dynamic relationship between the community and the individual. My intention is to more closely define this relationship within *The Scarlet Letter*, and supplement these and other critics’ analyses by applying French sociologist Émile Durkheim’s theory of the collective consciousness. I will explore ways in which this theory influences the Boston community, as well as how that community, in turn, influences the individuals Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne. By so doing, I hope to more fully illuminate those factors involved in defining the self.

The Boston community certainly reflects Durkheim’s theory of the collective consciousness. Throughout the novel the townspeople epitomize the general Puritan thought process. Man in societies all over the world is unavoidably influenced by a collective consciousness, but the Puritans may be especially susceptible because they did not consider religion and law as separate entities. Religion was life. Critic Dénes Némedi, explaining the connection between religion and the collective consciousness writes, “in Durkheim’s thought, religion acquired a paramount position, and the new concept of ‘collective consciousness’ was developed in accordance with the new role of religion as a central example. As Durkheim says, ‘Religion is… the characteristic way of thinking of collective existence’” (42). However, the collective consciousness is not only a product of religious principles. Durkheim also explains:

> The individual does not invent his religion, his morals, his laws… his language, the patterns of his everyday behavior… the infinite detail… of his thought or his conduct. All these he receives ready-made, thanks to education, to instruction, and to language, from the society of which he is part. These include, to be sure, conscious activities; but they are… a mental reality which constitutes and at the same time transcends the individual consciousness, such is the essential nature of collective representations. (Qtd. in Halbwachs 814)

Although the Puritans of Boston were “rebels” from Great Britain who sought “a New World where they would be able to practice [and cleanse] their religion,” their lifestyle, law, and moral principles were immensely influenced by those of the cultural traditions of the mother country (Hunt 28). Despite the difference in religious belief, early Puritan colonists remained loyal to Britain in other aspects and defined themselves as such. By application, this theory of collective
consciousness centers on the community atmosphere in *The Scarlet Letter*, with characteristics clearly influenced by religion as well as culture. These characteristics, in connection with Dimmesdale’s and Hester’s individual consciousness, facilitate each character’s self-development.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Boston is a Puritan community not unlike others: a body governed by religious conviction and social expectancies. Hawthorne describes the people as having a “grim rigidity” and “very much the same solemnity of demeanour… as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful” (Hawthorne 55). Durkheim “calls these societies ‘mechanical’ because the patterns of social action, based on the ‘collective consciousness’ … operate with little variation…In brief, these societies are distinguished by the ‘likeness’ of their members and the environment in which they exist” (Harms 397). Hawthorne provides several descriptions of the novel’s community in terms of a collective consciousness. Hawthorne generalizes the women waiting outside the prison as, “wearers of petticoat and farthingale” and “wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding… the beef and ale of their native land… entered largely into their composition…” (Hawthorne 55). This description of the women’s dress and appearance directly denotes a British heritage. The phrase “wearers of petticoat” is particularly striking because Hawthorne defines the entirety of Boston’s female persuasion therein. The men are likewise collectively described as “a throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats,” who had the “early severity of the Puritan character” (Hawthorne 53, 55). Hester humbly serves the community in a kind of penitence, but “in all her intercourse with society… there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact…expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere” (Hawthorne 78). One can hardly imagine the torment when not one soul, but an entire community collectively turns against you, such as in the case of Hester Prynne. Even the children demonstrate such collective behavior; “the little Puritans… had got a vague idea of something… at variance with ordinary fashions in the mother and child; and therefore scorned them in their hearts… and reviled them with their tongues” (Hawthorne 85). Throughout the novel, the community’s principles, mannerisms, and appearances seem to be uncannily in-sync and, as demonstrated, are typical of those steeped in the traditions of a collective consciousness.

The collective consciousness unavoidably resonates within the individual. Durkheim’s “assumptions… show the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society and… how [the] society affects individual life” (Harms 394). Boston’s collective consciousness, so strict in its religious observance and moral expectations, unfortunately has a hand in fabricating Dimmesdale’s suffering and eventual death. In such an unforgiving society, Dimmesdale’s status as minister prevents him from having the non-conformity and impudence Hester is free to imbue. If his sin were to be revealed, he would not only lose his livelihood, but also his life. By societal standards Dimmesdale believes himself to be “a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity” (Hawthorne 120). He suffers “inconceivable… agony” as the public imperceptibly deems him a “miracle of holiness” and “the mouth-piece of Heaven’s messages of wisdom” (Hawthorne 119). Tragically, the minister is eaten away by his fear of the community’s judgment, of “the whole tribe of decorous personages… [without] a single hair of their heads awry…turning up their amazed and horror-stricken visages… [at] the reverend” (Hawthorne 125). Similarly R.V. Young writes that
“Dimmesdale’s fate is tragic because there is no possibility of a… ‘happy’ ending… this is a tragic, not a therapeutic world,” and Dimmesdale does not “have the laws of society and community on his side” (5). Although Dimmesdale’s pain and suffering is self-inflicted, it is such because of learned societal behaviors and the community’s collective opinion of and response to sin. Dimmesdale allows the community’s consciousness to seriously affect him individually, and thus it plays a role in defining the self.

Whereas Dimmesdale permits the collective consciousness to negatively affect him, Hester is ironically strengthened by it. As previously noted, Durkheim proposes that “society affects individual life” (Harms 394). Hester does not allow the community to define her in its terms, but it nevertheless influences her self-development. The community’s scorn serves as Hester’s “teacher” and makes “her strong” (Hawthorne 158). Hester, “so long… outlawed from society, had habituated herself to… speculation… She had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all… The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free” (Hawthorne 158). This final phrase seems to suggest that Hester’s social exclusion in fact “set her free” by opening her eyes to the corrupt state of consciousness present in manmade institutions. Critic Laura Doyle writes that “by making Hester a singular and radically interior self… [she becomes] one who doesn’t actually want social membership in this blood-tainted and hypocritical community” (19-20). Hester’s scarlet letter, boldly bestowed by the communal institution, does not and cannot redeem her repentant soul, but her virtues of charity, service, honesty, and love certainly can. R.V. Young writes:

Hester Prynne… embodies the paradoxical relation between the individual and the community. A community demands of its members a high level of conformity to the practices and principles that make common life feasible… As an adulteress who bears an illegitimate child, Hester is by that fact alone a threat to social cohesion and subject to… public [dishonor]… Hester’s isolation from the community led her to question all of its standards. (7)

Ultimately, Hester is a heroine because she refuses to be defined by society. The “Scarlet Letter had not done its office” because Hester becomes immune to Boston’s collective consciousness (Hawthorne 135). Without sensitivity to its creator, the letter became a useless and pathetic emblem. Hester rises above society’s trivial constraints, continues believing in her potential despite her crime, and comes to define herself and her happiness as she sees fit; thus relying on individual perceptions and openly disregarding the collective consciousness.

Perhaps The Scarlet Letter’s most prominent message is that of learning to disregard public opinion, judgment, and expectation in favor of regarding self-definition: having the courage to be true to one’s self rather than society. In every aspect, The Scarlet Letter concerns the relationship between society and the self. By applying Durkheim’s theory of the collective consciousness, I hope to have more fully explained how the community embodies the collective consciousness, as well as how that consciousness plays a role in Dimmesdale’s and Hester’s individual development. Ultimately, Dimmesdale’s and Hester’s level of happiness is sorely affected by their individual response to the pressures of societal expectations.
Works Cited


