

Towards a Sustainable Culture of Textual Sexuality: The Textual Delineation of the Sexual Instinct  
in *the Scarlet Letter*

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**Towards a Sustainable Culture of Textual Sexuality: The Textual Delineation of  
the Sexual Instinct in *the Scarlet Letter***

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**Abstract**

This study explores the textual delineation of the sexual instinct in *The Scarlet Letter* from a cultural ecological paradigm. Based on Hubert Zapf's 2017 book, *Literature as a Cultural Ecology*, a cultural ecological paradigm is an explorative perspective of literature which views literature as a special form of ecological knowledge with an aim to connect and integrate the cultural system with its evolutionary and ecological roots. Such a harmonization of the cultural and natural spheres, balances the cultural system, making literature a source and site of cultural sustainability. The underlying premise of the study is that if literature aims to reconnect the culture to its ecological roots, the most fundamental and basic of all these roots is the sexual instinct. Therefore, literature, as a form of sustainable textual sexuality, serves to rehabilitate the undeniable role of the sexual instinct, whenever and wherever; it is repressed and marginalized by the other dominant cultural discourses, making it a sustainable form of sexual textuality. Thus, the novel, when viewed from such a sexual perspective of literary textuality, serves an important ecological function, that is, the

rehabilitation of the existence of the reproductive instinct, in the cultural sphere, against its suppression and marginalization by the dominant cultural discourse systems. Such a counter cultural textual delineation of the sexual instinct makes the novel a source and site of reproductive sustainability, since it highlights the pathological consequences of its lack in a cultural system, foregrounds its importance to the existence of human species, and tries to reconnect it to the larger cultural system.

**Keywords:** Culture, Ecology, Sustainability, Cultural Sustainability, Sexual Sustainability, Textual Sustainability, Reproductive Instinct, Morality, Social Institutions

### **Introduction**

“Interpretations are inevitably *metafictions*, that is, fictions about fictions” (Murfin, 1991, p.221). Such a typically deconstructionist stance suggests that the interpretative differences caused by theories and perspectives, through which a work of art is viewed, which inevitably influence the ways different readers and communities of readers try to make sense of a work of art. This has been particularly true of one of Hawthorne’s most celebrated novels, *The Scarlet Letter*. In a letter, to his childhood friend Horatio Bridge, he wrote that when he read the final chapter of the novel to his wife, Sophia Hawthorne, “it broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache which I took as a triumphant success” (Crowley, 1971, p.151). As the later critical history of the novel has proved, Sophia Hawthorne was not the only person which the novel left with a headache; it has rather left most of the critics with grievous headaches, “although not for the same reason the novel left Sophia Hawthorne with one” (Murfin, 1991, p.206).

Since its appearance on the critical stage, it has continued to stir the critical world. Nevertheless, what has stirred the critical world the most, about the novel, is its theme of adultery, around which, the whole web of the story has been woven. Orestes Brownson called its subject matter into question by arguing that Hawthorne *invested* and *wasted* his God-given faculties into a subject (adultery) which is “not fit...for popular literature.” Arthur Cleveland Coxe, writing in the *Church Review*, found himself “astonished” to see a writer of Hawthorne’s caliber choosing such a subject (adultery) for his theme. He calls the novel a precursor of the “French era” in the American literature, referring to its subject matter as mere “filth.” On the other hand, George Bailey Loring called the novel a “vehicle of religion and ethics” because of its exposition of the puritan inhumanity which always sought to repress the sensuous element in human nature” (Crowley, 1971, p.169). E. P. Whipple, in the same spirit, on account of its extremely moral theme, called it the most “*un-French*” novel, of its time (Murfin, 1991, p.207).

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Such conflicting remarks about the treatment of the theme of sex, outside the socially and culturally set category of marriage is bound to generate a debate on the moral status of the novel. The celebration of the fallibility of the moral, social, religious and cultural institution of marriage, at the hands of the followers of the reproductive instinct was destined to be questioned, repudiated and rejected. It is, however, this unbound reproductive instinct and its rebellious energies that interest this researcher the most. For love, whether moral or immoral, has always been a recurrent theme in literary works of the past and present. Will Durant has called it “the most interesting of all forms of human experience.” In a characteristically poetic style of his own, he says, “what a majestic stream of literature has poured forth about it in every language, and from almost every pen-what epics, what dramas, what fiction, what passionate and endless poetry- and yet how little science, how scarce the efforts to scrutinize the wonder objectively, to find its source in nature, and the causes of its marvelous growth from the simple merging of the protozoa to the devotion of Dante, the ecstasy of Petrarch, and the loyalty of Heloise to Abelard!” (1981, p.100). It is the aim of this researcher to understand the wondrous world of lovely sex that Hawthorne has created from a scientifically verified and culturally acceptable paradigm, in an effort to scrutinize its nature objectively and locate its roots in both nature and culture. Such a scientifically verifiable and cultural acceptable paradigm, in contemporary literary theoretical world is provided by Hubert Zapf’s 2017 book, *Literature as a Cultural Ecology*. The research, therefore, aims to view the treatment of the reproductive instinct in the novel from a contemporary cultural ecological paradigm, as proposed by Hubert Zapf.

As a new direction in the contemporary ecocriticism, a cultural ecological perspective views literature, as a distinct and special form of cultural textuality, which serves a special ecological function, within the larger cultural system, by providing a discursive space to the themes and perspectives, which are deliberately excluded, marginalized and repressed by other forms of cultural discourse systems, but which are, nevertheless, vital to the survival of cultural system. In this view of art, literature serves a special function, that is, the function of cultural sustainability. “Literature keeps alive its productivity by relating, in ever new forms, the cultural memory to the biophilic memory of the human species.” In other words, literature’s function, within the larger cultural system, is to bind us to our evolutionary past and maintain the symbiotic connection between humans, non-human and more than human nature. Such a functional view of literature assumes that the knowledge provided by literary works, about human nature and its connections to the non-human world, is at par with the contemporary ecological knowledge about the human connection to the more-than-human world.

The specific interest of this research is to locate the existence of a unique biological and ecological knowledge of the reproductive instinct, provided by a classical American text, within the contemporary cultural ecological paradigm. The basic premise, in this regard, is the idea that if literature, as a source of ecological knowledge, is a mean of cultural sustainability, it follows that the existence and treatment of the reproductive instinct, in a classical text, could also fall within the cultural ecological scope of the contemporary cultural ecological paradigm. For, if literature is a source of cultural sustainability, the reproductive instinct is an integral part of the biological sustainability for all the human and non-human species. Such a study helps a researcher to analyze and conceptualize the existence of an intuitive understanding of the reproductive instinct, in a classical text, written in time, when the very world ecology was not yet even coined. This notion of the existence of ecological themes and motives is also the foundational premise of contemporary cultural ecological thinking. “In the same way in which, in Sigmund Freud’s view, psychoanalysis was a modern scientific version of the knowledge of the unconscious and of the human drives which had already been part of the literary imagination of humankind since ancient tragedy, the literary works of the past appear, to a number of eco-critics, as anticipating the ecological knowledge of modern times” (Zapf, 2006, p.54).

### **Problem Statement**

Sustainability, in a biological sense, means the ways in which living systems remain alive and productive over time; in a cultural sense, it means the ways in which the life of culture can be kept in “equilibrium with basic ecological support systems” (Stivers). Literature, as a form of cultural ecology, provides a space to cultural critical discourses, where it, as Zapf has put it, “maintains a deep-rooted affinity between its modes of (re-)generation and the ecological processes of life that it both reflects and creatively transforms” (2017, p.4).

Of all the ecological process, which maintains and sustains life, the instinct to reproduce is one of the most basic and fundamental of all instincts. Life as whole revolves around, as Will Durant has put it, “nutrition and reproduction as the great foci of its orbit. Nutrition is a mean to reproduction and reproduction is a mean to nutrition (1981, p.101). Biologically speaking, reproductive sustainability is the need which worries a creature the most, for it is the source and fountain of life. Based on the above assumptions, this research hypothesizes that sexual sustainability, as an ecological concern, has been a pervasive theme in literary textuality. As a cultural critical meta-discourse, literature offers a discursive space to the theme of sexuality, which other discourse systems, deliberately exclude and marginalize. Literature, as a cultural ecology, explicates the role of the reproductive instinct in ever new ways and forms in order to reintegrate it into cultural

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systems, thereby connecting the later to its evolutionary roots, which is the source of its survival. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that *The Scarlet Letter* is a classic example of textual delineation of the theme of sexual instinct, which highlights the pathologies caused by its suppression and marginalization by the other dominant cultural discourses, with an aim to reintegrate it into the larger system of culture. Such a delineation of the sexual instinct contributes towards the cultural sustainability, whereby a culture could be kept in connection with the basic life support systems which lie at its roots.

Having said that, the present study deals with and probes into the following research questions: Why does the puritan social order fail to sustain its existence? How does the novel delineate importance of the sexual instinct in the realm of culture? How does the novel offer a counter cultural critique to the institution of marriage? and How does the novel celebrate the sexual instinct at the cost of morality?

A cultural ecological perspective of the sexual instinct, in a literary text, can contribute towards the cause of the cultural sustainability, by combining the insights from the diverse disciplines of humanities and natural sciences. A culture, which is devoid of nature, cannot sustain its existence. Likewise, an understanding of the human nature, if it utterly ignores the influences of its cultural history, would be inadequate. A cultural ecological perspective of the fundamental human drives, such the issues of human sexuality, aims to benefit from the insights of both culture and nature, without reducing one to the other. It can help to understand the fact that cultural artifacts, such as literary texts, do carry an ecological function and can contribute to the issues of sustainability of the human species, by connecting it to the nonhuman and more than human world. Such an ecological sensitization of the world of literature, towards fundamental human drives, as envisioned in literary texts, can bridge the warring disciplines of sciences and humanities, on the precise and exact function of human nature and its cultural manifestations.

### **Literature Review**

The debate on the precise nature of sustainability has crossed over a variety of disciplines, such as forestry, economics, architecture, sociology, education, politics, biological sciences, cultural studies and literature. Such a varied use of the term in such distinctly different disciplines has resulted in an epistemological, ontological, political and ethical extension of the term. For a sustained discussion on the nature of sustainability, it is pertinent to take into account a brief survey of the nature of the

term across the various disciplines where sustainability, as a term, is thought, preached and practiced.

The notion of sustainability first emerged in the context of forestry, in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it was used to refer to a “management of forests that would not deplete resources, but allow the renewable natural resources to regenerate and thus ensure its exploitation in the long term” (Kagan, 2011, p. 9). Laying dormant for almost two hundred and fifty years, the term reappeared in the later twentieth century, in connection with the future industrial capitalism and the limits of its growth. As a result of the fears and worries, caused by the ever-increasing demand for the earth’s depleting natural resources, in the wake of a ceaseless economic struggle, among the industrialized nations, sustainability of the human species now became a major concern. Consequently, the Club of Rome report of 1972 and the United Nations Brundtland report of 1987 were issued, which aimed to align economic development with the issue of sustainability, which defined sustainability as a trans-generational justice problem: “Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

In the wake of such growing concerns for the economic sustainability in connection with the sustainability of the human species, along with other species, the term gained its current currency and was incorporated into other disciplines. This crossing over of the notion of sustainability resulted in the alternative notions of sustainability which called for a radical and deeper understanding of the notion. With the realization that the existence of human civilization depends on a crucial and delicate balance between the economic, ecological and social factors, the agenda of sustainability was extended into the domains of disciplines, other than economics. Efforts were made to spread and popularize the sustainability related ideas in terms of its relevance to other disciplines, such as education, sociology, culture and politics. These efforts resulted in the establishment of different centers which aimed to increase Eco-literacy across cross disciplinary lines. The establishment of Center for Eco-literacy: Education for Sustainable Living at Berkeley and Center for Sustainability and Cultural Ecology at Siegen University were the results of such efforts (Wanning).

In the wake of a growing demand for sustainable practices, sustainability related ideas began to find a voice in disciplines, such as architecture, culture and humanities. The Royal Institute of British Architects endorsed the idea of sustainable architecture as a “broad concept which aims to reduce the adverse effect of human activities on our world, particularly climate change” (RIBA). Meanwhile the agenda of sustainability has also gained attention in arts, particularly eco-art, Earth Art and Land Art, where natural elements and process were interfused and integrated and even became elements of sustained aesthetic activity. Moreover, sustainability was also integrated into

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waste art and post environmental art where the difference between natural and cultural elements was blurred and emphasis was based on procedures of cycling, recycling and up-cycling or even reusing natural artistic material (Kagan, 2011, P.372). In the first exhibition directly featuring sustainability as a topic, *Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art* at the Smart Museum in Chicago in 2005, sustainable art was described as “an approach that balances emotional, social, economic, and aesthetic concerns ... emphasizing the responsible and equitable use of resources and linking environmental and social justice” (Smith, P.13).

Despite the widespread attention that sustainability has received in other disciplines, it has not received a deserved attention in disciplines such as cultural and literary studies. One of the very few books that have done justice to the idea of sustainability in the domain of cultural studies is Ulrich Grober’s *Sustainability: A Cultural History* (2012). The book is an invaluable addition to the much needed void that characterizes the field of cultural studies with regard to the sustainability related ideas in the field. The book traces the history of the idea of sustainability far beyond its contemporary debate. For the most part, however, definitions of cultural sustainability remain general and unspecific: “To us, sustainability is the dream of living well; sustainability is a dynamic balance with others and the environment, it is the harmony among differences” (Gadotti, 2009, p. 13-14).

Stacy Alaimo, a member of the research center, in the School of Sustainability, at University of Texas, traces the roots of the lack of popularity of sustainability related notions, in humanities and cultural studies, to the usurpation of the word by the economic and technological models of environmental epistemology and agency. According to Alaimo, “the sanitized term of sustainability” that seems to be unwilling to discard the “in any way the capitalist ideas of unfettered expansion” is unable to make peace with those working in humanities and literary studies, because its agenda of progress inevitably links it to disciplines like “engineering, the sciences, and may be architecture, rather than “philosophical questions, social and political analyses, historical reflections and literary musings” (Alaimo, 2013, p.560). In order to find a true place, in humanities and literary studies, the notion of sustainability needs epistemic extension from its current “techno-scientific focus” in order to include the “issues of human choice involved in putting sustainability into effect and... the socio-cultural practices, behaviors and structures such choices involve” (Goeminne, 2011, p.20). The ideas of sustainability needs to come to the recognition that “one’s very self is substantially interconnected with the world” (Alaimo, 2102, p.561). In a truly cultural sense, sustainability involves the transformative adaptation of its contemporary “technocratic, anthropocentric perspective” towards a more complex epistemological, ontological, ethical and political perspectives” in order to counter the tendency “to externalize and

objectify the world” to broaden and expand the term to include “lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part” (Braidotti, 2006, p.393). Braidotti’s idea of sustainability involves the “sustainable becoming” which means incorporation of the principles of sustainability in everyday practices of personal life as “transformative micro practices” which have to be complementarily practiced on all levels in the form of environmental justice and environmental health activism” (Alaimo, 2012, p.561).

Sascha Kagan’s book, *Art and Sustainability* (2011) is a valuable addition to the idea of sustainability in its cultural sense. His approach to sustainability conjoins complexity science, systems thinking, and aesthetic theory into unique model of sustainable art, differentiating it from “unsustainable”, socially disconnected modernist art forms. Kagan’s approach to sustainability relies on the “sensitivity to patterns which connect” as a pivotal and fundamental aspect of sustainability in art, in which complex process of interaction in the living world of material nature are considered analogous to the complexity of cultural processes, in which participatory aesthetic response becomes an intrinsic part of artistic sustainability. Kagan’s approach to the notion of sustainability, however, is only limited to visual art and does not relate directly to literary art. Moreover, it favors a more exclusive and normative notion of sustainability, regarding arts as a mere mean to certain political and ethical environmental agendas, rather than a separate and distinct form of sustainable aesthetics and textuality in its own right.

A recent issue of the *American Literary History*, devoted exclusively to the issue of sustainability received valuably varied contributions to the subject of sustainability within literary culture. These contributions included environmental justice aspects of sustainability in the works of indigenous authors (Adamson,2012), disruptive weather and water conditions as environmental-historical subtext in Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and Fury* (Parrish) and more general epistemological questions on the potential contributions of the humanities to the sustainability discourse in terms of a critical and self reflexive meta-discourse defining that discourse. These contributions are enlightening but seem to suggest the plasticity involved in the nature of sustainability related discourse. The diversity involved in the sustainability discourse seem to suggest that the term is not a concrete concept but rather carries a deep fluidity in its nature, as Slovic has put it, that sustainability is no fixed concept, content, or program but “a moving target, a distant goal, not a permanently achievable plateau of being” (2012, p. 187).They also seem to suggest a thematic and environmental content rather than focusing on art and literature itself as a medium and site of cultural sustainability.

In a recent contribution to *ISLE*, John P. O Grady’s article “How Sustainable is the Idea of Sustainability?” seems to provide useful insights on the mutually complementary relationship



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between sustainability and literature. It suggests the notion that sustainability is connected to the long term ethical perspectives of human living that is transmitted through literary texts. He questions the idea of a managerial, economic-developmental and scientific approach to sustainability. O Grady's account of sustainability targets the hidden ambiguities of the term by emphasizing the fact that the reality of life and nature is not characterized by static constancy but by a constant change, since "all beings move" and "everything is in flux." Therefore, predictions about future, which are required by any rational sustainability, are quite unreliable and uncertain. The notion of sustainability requires not just external but also internal, ethical values, which have to be understood in relationship with what is meant by a "good life" in the ancient sense of eudemonia, the sense of living well in a responsibly balanced relationship between the self, other humans and the nonhuman environment. This ethical sense of a good and sustainable life" is not an objective fact but is rather a question of imagination of literary texts which can help reconnect the modern abstract mind to the lost face of the world (Hillman, 1999, pp.149-50, quoted in O Grady, 2003, p.7). O Grady exemplifies this by sharing a poem of Wendell Berry, "A Meeting in Part", in which the mutability and changeability of the world, in which the most certain existential fact is death, becomes a source of "what it is that truly sustains us" (p.8). Dealing with the return of a dead friend in dream, the poem becomes a medium of a spiritual form of sustainability, which reflects and redeems what is continually lost in time, material and history.

O Grady's article differentiates between the poetic and scientific concepts of sustainability. In a response article to O Grady's essay in *ISLE*, "Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood," Hannes Bergthaller (2010) stresses the importance of the scientific concept of sustainability for the future of eco-critical thought. Exemplifying and supporting his claims with regard to the scientific concept of sustainability, he points out the fundamental flaws in human nature, which cannot be trusted as a source and guidance for understanding the concept of sustainability, on the grounds of its ego-centric tendencies. He points out, through his analysis of Atwood's novels, *Oryx and Crake* and *In the Year of Flood*, that human nature is an ego-centric and fundamentally flawed apparatus, which is not driven by ethical and environmentally responsible motives. He reminds us of the fact that the human nature needs the correctives of scientific and rational cultural self management and self domestication, as well as the potential role and influence of "anthropotechnologies" like art (Sloterdijk, 1999, p.23, quoted in Bergthaller, 2010, p.729). The creation of a new, ecologically perfected and well adapted species, post human species, which represent the egocentric and perverted extreme of civilizational impulse of self optimization and immunization, by the social genetic engineer Crake, is what the novel opposes, as a mean of

sustainability. However, it also opposes the traditional and flawed humanism of Snowman alias Jimmy. Bergthaller opposes both of these extremes by claiming that human nature is in need of the “imaginary order of culture” which has the power to “transcend and, as it were, extenuates the biological givens” for its successful adaptation to the goal of sustainability. Sustainability in this sense doesn’t result from adaptation of humans to nature but from cultural attempts to adapt human nature to imperatives of survival that are posed precisely by the disastrous results of the uncontrolled and ruthless but nevertheless “natural” species expansion of humans.

As evident from O Grady’s and Bergthaller’s accounts of the idea of sustainability, the concept of sustainability within the context of literature is in a constant state of flux. It is an epistemic extension of the idea of sustainability as developed in its scientific and economic sense which is different from its original meaning in its ethical and political sense. O Grady’s account of sustainability is internal, mystic and poetic whereas Bergthaller’s account is comparatively scientific, objective and external. This is precisely due to the nature of the literary discourse. Literary discourse, as a distinct form of textuality, in the course of its cultural evolution has acquired certain features, forms and functions, which makes it different from all other types of discourses. It doubtlessly contains ideas, notions and concepts, which it has acquired in its course of co-evolution with other forms of cultural textual practices; it is also, however, the “other” of those discourses:

Imaginative literature is clearly interacting with other forms of cultural discourse and is in many ways composed from the ideas, concepts, themes, values, symbols, and worldviews transmitted by them. But it is also the *other* of these discourses, a different form and medium of representation with its own codes and auto-poetic rules of production. (Zapf, 2017, p.12)

Imaginative literature, on account of its polysemic openness and indeterminacy allows for a greater participatory role of the reader in its meaning making process. This participatory function of the receiver is a fundamental aspect of imaginative literature’s role as a distinct form of textuality which is also a source of its sustainability as a cultural system. It tries to mould and transform the behaviors and socio-cultural practices by making the receiver, along with the text, a part of, as Braidotti puts it, “sustainable becoming.” It is this aspect which makes literature as sustainable cultural practice. By countering the dominant cultural narratives, literature as a counter meta-discourse give a voice and space to the socially and culturally marginalized voices. The same goes for the idea of sustainability within the context of imaginative literature. It represents a sustainable form of textuality, which, in the very indeterminacy and polysemic openness of aesthetic processes,

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provides a source of critical self-reflection and ever-renewable creative energy for ever new generations of readers (Rueckert, 1996).

Though sexuality, textuality and sustainability seem to be an odd combination at first sight but there exists a deep connection between the three, when viewed from a cultural ecological paradigm. In a truly Darwinian and biological sense, sexuality is the cause and origin of all art. It is one of the fundamental sources of all types of artistic creations. The very idea of the aesthetic sense, from a Darwinian perspective of art, owes its origin to the sexual impulses of the artist. Literature as a sustainable cultural practice has accommodated this theme since antiquity and is a source of creativity.

As a distinct form of textuality, the delineation of sexual themes in imaginative literature also takes distinctive forms. It is often expressed in an overt manner, but usually more often than not, it is symbolically and metaphorical expressed. If literature is a mean of cultural ecology which binds us to our evolutionary past, the expression of sexuality in literary and artistic forms of sexuality is a natural corollary of the idea, since sexual impulse and drive is one of the most fundamental drives in artistic creations.

A comparison, between sexuality, textuality and sustainability, though occasionally touched upon by researchers, has rarely been explored. Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to explore the relationship between these three aspects from the cultural ecological perspective as proposed by Huber Zapf. This present research, therefore, attempts to explore this relationship in a classical American text, *The Scarlet Letter*, which takes the idea of sexuality as its primary theme in comparison to culturally dominant narrative of sexual celibacy. It aims to lay bare the function of the sexual impulse as a source of sustainability in characters as opposed to those characters which lack this impulse.

### **Methodology of Research**

The theoretical framework of the research is based upon the following assumptions about literary textuality, sexuality and sustainability:

The first and foremost assumption is about the precise nature of literary textuality. Based on Huber Zapf's notions about the form and function of literary textuality, it assumes that the discourse of literature is different from other types of cultural discourses, both in its functional and formal dimensions. According to Hubert Zapf (2017), "a cultural ecology of literature is based on a functional-evolutionary view of cultural and literary history, in which literary texts *as imaginative and artistic forms of textuality* have acquired specific qualities, modes, and features of writing that are both interrelated with and different from other forms of writing" (p.12). In its functional

dimensions, literature, does not only contains the ideas, notions and concepts, present in other forms of textuality, it is also the “other” of those discourses. It tries to give a symbolic space to those themes and concepts which are marginalized and suppressed in other forms of discourses. Thus, literature tries to serve as a counter cultural discourse by accommodating voices which are excluded in other forms of cultural discourses. Thus, it tries to serve as a site for those ideas, notions and themes which have been marginalized and repressed in other forms of cultural discourses.

In its functional dimensions, the literary forms of communication, not just serves to counter the themes of other cultural discourses but also serves as a source of civilizational self renewal by binding the human species back to the biophilic memories of its evolutionary past. This ecological function of literature serves as its creative and generative potential. This assumption is derived from Hubert Zapf’s notion of imaginative literature which state that literature “In the course of cultural evolution, literature seems to have developed into a cultural form in which the reconnection between the changing historical world and the awareness of bio-centric origins became one of its hallmarks as a specifically complex, holistic, and self-reflexive form of discourse even and especially under the conditions of advanced modernization.” This cultural ecological function of literature makes it a source, site and medium of cultural sustainability. This notion of literature, as a sustainable form of textuality, is in line with Stivers’ notion of cultural sustainability which says that sustainability, in a cultural sense means, the ways in which the life of culture can be kept in “equilibrium with basic ecological support systems” (Stivers, 1976).

If literature’s task is to bind us to our evolutionary roots, the most crucial and important of all these roots is the reproductive instinct, which is at the root of all creation. Thus, literature, by extension, also serves as a source and medium of reproductive sustainability. For if sustainability in a biological sense means the ways in which living systems remain alive and productive, the cultural sustainability of literature originates from the sexual sustainability which is based on an animal’s desire to maintain its existence through its sexual and reproductive instinct. Such an assumption of reproductive sustainability is derived from the notions of reproductive energy as the root and cause of all arts and literature. As Will Durant has observed, “it is this subterranean river of the erotic energy that feeds the creative passion of the artist. In some of the relationships, it takes the form of a rapid development of sex and art at once; and from this union the romantic type of geniuses comes” (1981, p.200).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Based on the above assumptions, the researcher presumes that *The Scarlet Letter* presents a classic example of the cultural ecological function of art. The novel articulates those aspects of the human personality, which have been marginalized, neglected and repressed. Of these neglected,

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marginalized and repressed parts of the human personality, the provision of a discursive space to the role and importance of the reproductive instinct occupies the primacy of the place. It does not just propagate and delineates the important place of the reproductive instinct in human life, but is also a critique of those cultural institutions which marginalizes, represses and subverts the reproductive part of the human personality. The novel presents these institutions, customs and morals as biophobic and life paralyzing forces which are countered by the biophilic and life enhancing power of the reproductive instinct. Thus, the novel serves as a symbolic space for the expression and re-integration of the reproductive instinct into the larger ecology of cultural discourses.

### **Methodology of Research**

The methodology of this research is neither deductive nor inductive. A deductive method of reasoning often tries to draw concrete and specific observations from the general premises of thought. An inductive method tends to draw generalized statements from the observation of a concrete and specific phenomenon. The methodology of this research is “abductive” in the sense used by Charles Sanders Peirce (1998). Such a strategy involves intuitive guesses and methodological leaps, across distinctive different disciplines, in order to establish hitherto unknown connection and analogous linkages, between these diverse fields of knowledge. In the present case, the methodology aims to connect the disciplines of ecology and literature.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In the delineation of the theme of sexual sustainability, from a cultural ecological paradigm, *The Scarlet Letter* is a richly resourceful text. It is an account of a community which practiced customs, installed institutions and preached morals which were utterly devoid of any earthly connections and bodily desires. As a meta-discourse and a cultural critique of such unsustainable customs, morals, laws, social and spiritual institutions, the novel presents an imaginative counter cultural space against such unsustainable customs, institutions and morals. Not only does it identifies the pathologies, which ails the society, it also serves as a counter discourse for all those instincts, emotions and desires of the human personality which this social setup tries to marginalize and repress with an aim to reintegrate these emotions and desires to the larger system of the culture. Thus, the novel serves an imaginative space for the body against mind, instinct against reason, Eros against Thanatos and sexual freedom against unnatural laws and systems of morality. As a classical example of O Grady’s notion of sustainable art, it is in stark opposition to the unsustainable art. The

characters in the novel seem to be divided between sustainable living practices and unsustainable living practices in their personal and public lives.

### **The Puritan Colony: An Unsustainable Settlement**

The puritan settlers of this new colony are involved in a variety of tasks to maintain the social, moral, legal and political sustainability of their new colony which they have decided to establish on a virgin soil. They try to build various structures, such as a prison, a scaffold and a cemetery to sustain the life of their colony and provide long term solutions to the problems created by those who might prove otherwise to the existence and sustenance of their new colony. The great care with which these structures are built is manifested from the usage of the words like “heavily timbered” and “ponderous iron work” which speaks of the over employment of the available timber (p.53). This over employment of the natural resources brings to the mind the fact that they were oblivious of the natural resources and the limits of its employment. For the creation of their colony, a considerable area of the forest was cleared and gigantic pines and oaks, the natural and original inhabitants of the colony, were cut and employed. Thus, the very first chapter of the narrative proper brings to light the change in the geographic features of the land caused by this new demographic change.

The omniscient narrator of the novel informs of the unsustainability of these carefully built structures. Though strong and carefully built, these structures, however, seem to be unsustainable, are marked by weather stains and seem much older than their original age. The prison is described as a structure which seems to have never known a youthful era. Decaying marks, weather stains, aged appearance and other signs of death and decay seem to suggest, in a symbolic form, the unsustainability of these structures. These colonial structures seem to be at odd with the natural environment of the place. The narrator calls the prison “the black flower of the civilized society” which is a symbolic reference to the unsuitability of this oppressive human structure on a soil where it was not needed to be constructed (p.53).

Not only does this puritan society fail in providing sustainability to these structures, they also fail in their attempt to change the biosphere. The introduction of the foreign and exotic species of plants into this new soil, with an aim to facilitate the agricultural needs of this new colony does not prove fruitful. These exotic species of plants, like the prison and the scaffold fail to prosper and groom in the new soil. The soil resists this new floral expansionism and instead disconnects the flow of vital energy and nutrients into these plants. These foreign species of plants fail to form any symbiotic relationship with the new soil. This is lack of symbiosis manifests the unsustainable agricultural ambitions of the puritan settlers: “But the proprietor appeared to have relinquished, as hopeless, the

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effort to perpetuate on this side of the Atlantic, in a hard soil and amid the close struggle for subsistence, the native English taste for ornamental gardening” (p.93).

In a sharp contrast to these invading species of foreign plants, whose existence is unsustainable in the soil of this new found land, the indigenous species of plants continue to grow, prosper and flourish. The soil is rich and barren, at once; it is rich for the indigenous flora but barren for the foreign species of plants. Despite serious attempts at the cultivation of the foreign plants by the puritan settlers, the soil continues to grow its own vegetation, which is a part of its natural and original flora. The stubbornness of the indigenous flora is evident from the existence of a “wild rose bush” which is almost rooted at the threshold of the prison. This rose bush is said to be “reminiscent of the stern old wilderness” (p.54). The luxuriance of the wild rose bush, which is covered with countless flowers present it in a sharp contrast to the gloomy and beetle browed front of the prison. This countering of the prison door, by the wild rose-bush, seems to suggest a deep ecological meaning when viewed from a cultural ecological paradigm. The rose bush is a symbol of feminine fertility. The appearance of countless gems seems to suggest feminine fertility at its peak. The prison has been referred to as a “black flower of civilized society” which is dying and decaying (p.53). In a sharp contrast to this decaying structure, the rose bush is shown to offer “its fragrance and fragile beauty” to those who have been imprisoned and condemned by the puritan settlers, on account of their crimes (p.54). The crime, in the present case, is that of a lady, who has committed an act of adultery, which can be defined as a desire of reproductive fulfillment out of the bond of marriage. The prison, as a social and moral apparatus of the society, acts to control the reproductive instincts of the people, who seek its fulfillment out of the socially instituted structures. However, this apparatus is presented as an aging and decaying apparatus. The rose bush is a symbolic representation the pervasive presence of the reproductive instinct found across the whole of nature, which could not be controlled by the prisons, scaffolds and cemeteries.

The wild rose bush, as a symbol of the reproductive instinct, needs a little ecological elaboration. In the light an ecological/biological epistemology, flowers enshrine the reproductive parts of the plants. They are, as Will Durant has put it, the means of generation. The presence of “countless gems” on this wild rose-bush represents sexual and reproductive fertility at its peak. Moreover, the month of June refers to that part of the year when the floral kingdom germinates through pollination. In other words, it is the reproductive season of the year. The adjective of wild adds an element of wildness to the rose bush, meaning a plant that is wild in its birth and growth, which could not be gardened, civilized and humanized. Thus, the author, through this symbol, represents the defense of the reproductive instinct, which is wild in birth and growth. Like the structure of a wild bush, the reproductive instinct defies human understanding. The death and decay of the prison

building, the weather stains on the scaffold's surface and the sad colored garments of the puritan settlers are countered by this symbol of the reproductive fertility. The prison serves the purposes of the puritan settlers by imprisoning the followers of the reproductive instinct; the defiance of the rose bush serves as a symbol of the stubbornness and rootedness of the reproductive instinct in the human nature. Thus, from a cultural ecological paradigm, the symbol of the rose bush serves as a counter discourse, on the theme of reproductive sustainability in a society which tries to control, repress and punish its existence in its members:

But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold was a wild rose-bush, covered in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in the token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him. (p.54)

### **The Institution of Marriage: An Unsustainable Solution to Reproductive Fulfillment**

The novel, along with this broader presence of un-sustainability in the social and agricultural activities of the settlers, is also an account of the issues of sustainability in the social institution of marriage. It is an account of an unsustainable marriage, between a young girl and her old scholar husband. The marriage has proved unsuccessful and un-sustainable, precisely on account of biological and reproductive grounds. The wife was a "budding youth" and the husband an old and "decaying scholar" (p.72). The false and unnatural relationship was bound to fail, since it defied the ecological principles which lie at the root of any reproductive relationship.

*The Scarlet Letter* celebrates the fallibility of the institution of marriage at the hands of the followers of the reproductive instinct. The institution of marriage serves a societal and moral function of sexual regulation. It has been installed as a social and cultural institution to regulate and organize the sexual life of the community. Thus, in its very nature, it balances the sexual desire with the societal organization and regulation. The puritan society values this function and, therefore, takes this institution in the highest esteem. However, the novel provides a counter narrative to this institution. It targets the institution of marriage on ecological and naturalist grounds. Ecologically speaking, the reproductive instinct, in the state of nature, thrived on variety, which was necessary for the variation in the hereditary characteristics of a species. Variety served an important genetic function, that is, the widening of the gene pool. However, this variety was often constraint by the lack of availability of the opposite sex for the purpose of reproduction. The cultural institution marriage was installed as a compromise between the need for variety and the lack of availability. It



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restraint the variety but ensured the availability. Moreover, it served the purposes of patriarchy by ensuring the rights of property in the context of children.

The novel defends the followers of the reproductive instinct precisely on the biological grounds of the need for variety and the lack of availability. The reproductive instinct, as one of the most fundamental instincts, thrives on variety and quality in the opposite sex. Since it is responsible for the procreation, it is genetically, as well as psychologically, embedded in the health of the opposite sex. A woman seeks robust paternity in her opposite whereas a man seeks the promise of a robust maternity in the opposite sex. Moreover, it is also genetically as well as biologically driven by variety, since the lack of variety, in the reproductive business, leads to the thinning of the genetic pool, a fundamental cause of genetically transferable diseases. Again, a cultural ecological view of art, views cultural as something analogous to the natural process. Culture may transcend and mould nature, but it cannot totally traverse it. As Santayana has put it, everything natural has an ideal growth. Thus, the cultural institution of marriage stands as a compromise between the two extremes of the reproductive business; it balances the lack of variety with the ever present availability of sexual opportunities.

In the case of Hester and Chillingworth, both of these had been compromised. Chillingworth was an old and decaying man. Hester was a budding youth. In their first ever interview in the novel, Chillingworth himself accepts this lack of biological affinity between the two, when he confesses to Hester that he had betrayed her youth into a false and unnatural relationship with his own decay: "Mine was the first wrong when I betrayed thy budding thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay (p.72). Again, there was a dearth of sexual energies in his own body which is evident from his description of the lack of warmth which his heart was completely devoid off. He engaged in the business of marriage only to fulfill its social function. He was someone who had given his best years to study and acquisition of love. When Hester came to his life, he was already in the autumn of his life. Such descriptions seem to suggest the unsustainability of the institution of marriage in the novel on purely ecological and biological grounds.

In the case of Hester, we also see a lack of sexual attraction towards her husband. This is evident from her imagining of her life with him like "a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall" (p.61). In her interview with him, she makes it plain to him that she felt no love for him, nor feigned any (p.72). Such lack of reproductive attraction, on the part of Hester, makes the institution of marriage a merely superficial and shallow structure. It resembles the prison, the scaffold and the cemetery in its functional dimensions. It has never been a natural alliance but a mere social and cultural construct which was not supported by any symbiosis between the two partners who were locked

into it. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* seems to manifest the fallibility of such moral and cultural institutions, which have no biological sustainability at their roots. The novel seems, as a counter cultural text, to provide a thematic and imaginative space to such biological and ecological notions which are necessary for keeping the cultural institutions connected to its biological and ecological roots.

### **An Unsustainable Love Affair**

Hester, like the wild rose bush, is in the prime of her biological fertility. There is an exotic, oriental and voluptuous spirit within her. Like the wild rose bush, she has to bloom and bud, through fertility, which is natural to her, since all the creatures are forced to be fertile in the spring of their lives. She is an earthly being who has struck her roots to the soil. The surrounding wilderness reminds her of her inner moral wilderness. Unlike the godly puritan ministers, she is an instinctive creature: "Her sin and her ignominy were the roots which she had struck into the soil" (p.75). The society does not recognize her biological fertility and punishes her for following her instincts, rather than the established procedure of sexual conduct, enjoined by the puritan law. She is caught in a reproductive struggle, in the very spring of her life, between an old and decaying husband, on the one hand, and a startled and apprehensive lover, on the other hand. Her ex-husband betrayed her budding youth into a false a natural relationship with his own decay; her new lover suffers from a spell of spirituality which does not allow him to engage in worldly desires, which appear as a sin to him. Thus, Hester, as a reproductively productive female seems to be caught between a dilemma where her former husband is aged and her present lover is ailing on account of his spiritual sensibilities. This powerful presentation of the feminine sexuality brings to mind the power of the feminine in an otherwise masculine social order. The novel presents the lack of masculine sexual power in the face of a powerful feminine sexuality.

### **The Principle of Celibacy: An Unsustainable Religious Code of Law**

The novel is also a counter cultural critique of the principle of celibacy in the Christian church. It provides a counter narrative to the life of a spiritual father of a community, who was oblivious of the needs of his body. He was a symbol of piety who wanted to control his bodily desires and cultivate his spiritual sensibilities. Despite his staunch control over his earthly body and severe self punishment, he fails to do so. Time and again, the need of his body surface but he would control it with an ever renewed spiritual zeal and zest. This struggle fails him, at last. He falls in love with the very girl whose youth was betrayed by her old husband. At last, he comes to the recognition of his bodily needs but with disastrous consequences. It costs him his life but with recognition that in order to be spiritual one does not need to totally extenuate one's body. We are all earthly and

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evolutionary beings. The sweet, tremulous and broken voice, which affects his whole church, carries the promise of a reproductive desire which he deliberately muffled. He seems to be caught in an evolutionary struggle between his godly desires and his earthly instincts. The cause of his falling health is the deliberate self annihilation into which he has forced himself.

His repressed sexual sensibilities come to the fore when he meets Hester in the forest where he is possessed by his body. All that he had repressed, throughout his religious life, comes to the forefront in a violent and aggressive manner. He turns into an instinctive being which is body-bound to the rest of the biosphere. He feels possessed by his own self. So great is the impact of this meeting in the wild that he himself fails to come to its complete recognition. He begins to utter words he has never dared to utter; entertain thoughts he had never thought; sees things in his young maids he had never seen before and does acts he had never done before. The forest meeting had such an exhilarating effect on his personality that he turned into a completely new man: "The self was gone! Another man had returned out of the forest; a wiser one; with a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former never could have reached. A bitter knowledge that" (pp. 174-5). Afterwards, he eats with a "ravenous appetite" and feels the night like a "winged steed" on which he finds himself "careering" (p.175). His intellectual abilities are drastically transformed. He writes in a trans-like productivity, for when he wakes up in the morning, he still find the pen between his fingers and has left "a vast and immeasurable tract of written material behind himself." Thus, the novel is a powerful critique against the Christian principles of celibacy. No spiritual exercise can rescue a man's soul if it is utterly devoid of earthly love. The cause of appeal in his sermons is the presence of a reproductive desire that has been repressed. The effect of his sermons is the reproductive promise that people unconsciously perceive in his words. He seems to be a person caught between the life enhancing properties of the Eros and life threatening qualities of the Thanatos. His other colleagues lack this influence over their crowds of followers because of the total absence of the Eros in their sermons. They speak and smell only of the Thanatos. The rust on the ponderous iron work on the prison door, the crumbling walls of the institution of marriage, the weather stains on the scaffold surface and the priests ailing body share a similarity because of the lack of earthly connections.

### **The Unsustainable Patriarchal Structure of Family**

The novel offers a strong counter cultural critique of the institution of marriage, especially with regard to the proprietary rights, which this institution bestows upon the fathers of the children, born out of the institution of marriage. As a patriarchal structure, the institution of marriage serves only the masculine purposes, with regard to the ownership of the children. The right of inheritance is

allowed only to those children who are born out of the institution of marriage. The novel counters this cultural institution by providing an imaginative and counter discursive space to the existence of a child which is born outside this fold.

Pearl is mothered. The whole society is bent upon finding her father. She, however, refuses all fathering attempts and is happy to be mothered only. In her own words, she is her mother's child. She is a born outlaw of the infantile world. The society does not recognize her existence until and unless her biological father is known. It seems as if the existence of a father is the only right of propriety in a child: "Speak and give thy child a father." She lacks any reference to the community into which she is born. This is evident from words like "demon child" and "elf child". She is unnamed because she is unmanned. Thus the novel presents this lack of social existence for pearl in a society which is structured purely on patriarchal lines.

This unmanned and unnamed nature of Pearl's existence points towards another ecological and counter cultural critique against the dominant cultural view that a father is the central pivot in the organization of a family. In the world of nature, most of the creatures are only mothered and very slightly fathered. Fatherhood is a human construct. It is part of the culture. Motherhood is natural. It is part of nature. Therefore, the novel negates this cultural notion of fatherhood which the puritans of the town valued the most. As a counter cultural discursive space, the novel presents the strong influence and role of motherhood in the creation of a family. It endorses the ecological principle that creation is the work of woman's flesh and blood. That is why, the ancients revered and worshipped motherhood. Until the institution of marriage, father was but a fugitive figure, unknown and unrecognized.

In the absence of a known father, Pearl turns into a truly natural child. She is a law unto herself. The irreverence which she shows towards the puritan fathers, their institutions and even their graves is a criticism of the puritan principles of familial organization. She is untamed because she has been unnamed and unmanned. This throws her out of the whole sphere of culture. She becomes a truly natural child. She is recognized as one of their own by the species of the animal kingdom when she accompanies her mother to the forest. It is this lack of a known father that makes her a member of the faunal kingdom: "The truth seemed to be, however, that the mother forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child" (p.161). She is more at home in the forest with the members of the faunal kingdom than she is with puritan children "on the grassy margins" of the settlement (p.161). She is all nature and no culture, as if the lack of a father has barred her entry into the realm of culture.

Through the raising of a child, entirely on motherly lines, with very slightly touches of a fatherly figure, the novel offers a counter cultural discourse to the dominant cultural narrative of the

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supremacy of fatherhood in the business of procreation. The existence of Pearl is a proof that it is the motherhood which a child needs the most. Upon asking by the John Wilson about her creator, she says, “she is her mother’s child.” It counters the dominant paternal narratives of the importance of fatherhood, which has sidelined the role of motherhood. Nature only recognizes the existence of motherhood, since creation is the work of her flesh and blood. A woman is more nearer to the species than a father, who, until the installation of the institution of marriage, was a merely fugitive figure. Being raised on purely natural lines, Pearl is more at ease in the state of nature than she is in the settlement which is an emblem of the patriarchy.

### **Reproductive Instinct and the Wilderness: A Sustainable Connection**

Another counter cultural critique is the instinct entangling power of the surrounding wilderness on the lives of certain characters in the novel. Of all the characters, only Pearl and Hester enjoys a perfect communion with the surrounding wilderness. Hester sees the wilderness as her true home. The moral wilderness into which she has been thrown is found echoing by her in the surrounding wilderness. The exotic, oriental and voluptuous nature of her being finds an echoing presence, not in the Christian town, but in the heathen, primitive and unchristian atmosphere of the surrounding wilderness. Her sin is the cause of her connection to the soil. Whenever she dreams of a home, she dreams of wild treaties, like deserts and oceans. It is so because forests and wild territories are the shadows of civilization. Human civilization has been controlled by patriarchal structures, be it a prison, the scaffold, or the institution of marriage. These civilisational structures are the webs of patriarchy which have been designed to control women’s bodies. When she desires to meet her lover, she chooses the wilderness for her meeting. The wilderness reminds her of “the women” in her. The “woman in her” is the role which her species has chosen for her. She refuses the sisterhood of the community, a role she has scrupulously following for seven years, prior to her meeting with the godly priest in the wilderness: Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. (p.160). Therefore, when she decides to escape from the puritan settlement, she chooses the wilderness over the civilized cities, as a place of refuge. As an instinctive being, she is attracted only towards the wilderness.

### **Conclusion**

As shown by the analysis, the novel is a counter cultural critique of the issues of sustainability in a variety of cultural contexts. It presents the need of sexual sustainability in a community who’s moral, cultural, social and personal lives were devoid of it. It is an apology for the role of the

reproductive instinct in their/our lives. Any institution, divine or worldly, will not be able to sustain itself if it deprives its followers from the fundamental role of the reproductive instinct. The story of *The Scarlet Letter* is a proof of it. The marriage, between Hester and her ex-husband, fails precisely because of the lack of any sexual/biological affinity between the two. The relationship, between Hester and her new lover, proves fatal for the health of the priest because the latter lives in a complete denial of the reproductive part of his personality. Dimmesdale is all religion and does not allow his worldly and bodily desires to flourish. This lack of recognition of his bodily self makes him diseased and ailing. The prison, which is a contrivance of wood and iron, fails to hold Hester back from following her instinct. This is symbolically represented by the decaying appearance of all the tools of oppression which have been employed against Hester. The society does not recognize Pearl's existence, since she is born out of the institution of marriage, which is also a social and cultural tool of organizing the sexual instincts of the people. This lack of recognition does not affect Pearl's moral, social and natural growth. She is a natural child and is well received in/by the world of nature. Like all the species of the animal kingdom, she is mothered. Though the whole society, an emblem of patriarchy, is bent upon finding Pearl a father, she refuses to be fathered and is happy to be mothered only.

Therefore, the novel, when viewed from a cultural ecological paradigm, seems to reconnect the puritan society to its earthly origins. As a cultural critique of the puritanical code of existence, it pinpoints the lack of earthly and biological needs in the moral, social, institutional and personal lives of its people. It is a criticism of their ways of life which is so unearthly that it does not recognize the existence of the reproductive instinct, which is the source and origin of all existence. Not only does it show the various ailments of this society, it also provides an imaginative counter-cultural discursive space to the themes and ideas which are contrary to these manmade morals. Hester surpasses both of her lovers in her earthly existence and Pearl is more healthy and beautiful than all the children of the Puritan society. The godly priest is shown to show signs of recovery, albeit temporarily, when he comes to the recognition of his bodily desires, after his meeting with Hester in the forest. It is the unchristian and heathen forest which turns him into an instinctive being. Thus, the novel is a textual example of sexual sustainability in an otherwise unsustainable society. It is a reminder that culture is born out of nature; it can mold it, transcend it, but can never totally traverse and ignore it.

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