CHAPTER 3

“A MONTH OF SUNDAYS: TEXTS TALK BACK”
"A Month of Sundays : Texts Talk Back"

"Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intention of their authors". – Umberto Eco.

[“Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage.”]

Any attempt to make an intertextual study of Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter and John Updike’s “Hawthorne novels” or what is popularly known as “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy” would inevitably lead us to two most pertinent questions: (a) why Hawthorne? and (b) why The Scarlet Letter? Any reader of Updike must have noticed the strong allegiance of Updike to his great nineteenth century predecessor, Hawthorne, who has impacted on some of Updike’s works in terms of motifs, themes, ideas and even appellation of characters. Updike’s works are shot through with the disseminations of Hawthorne’s spirit. In Updike we find a kind of what may be termed “Hawthorne obsession”. Thus in this intertextual study of the two authors belonging to two centuries, those two questions seem to be as much indispensable as they are ineluctable.
Fortunately, the answers are provided by Updike himself. In his essay entitled "Hawthorne's Creed" Updike describes Hawthorne as "The author of our classic novel of religious conscience and religious suffering"(73), and feels that Hawthorne’s "work itself invites us to search out the involuntary creed professed by his recurrent themes and artistic reflexes"(76). In an interview with Prof. Sukhbir Singh of Osmania University, Hyderabad, Updike acknowledges his indebtedness to Hawthorne:

I think Hawthorne remains a very interesting writer and has a lot to say to modern writers[--------] The Scarlet Letter is in many ways a stern indictment of the Puritan world. His vote is with Hester Prynne, an anarchic vital woman who resists the order.²

And yet Updike strikes a somewhat discordant note in another interview with Jean-Pierre Salgas³ when he frankly declares that Hawthorne "hasn't had anything like the influence on me that Proust or other authors have", but however, goes on to clarify that if Hawthorne "really struck me, it is because he must be the only classic American author who talks about sex!"(178) In another illuminating interview with the great Updikean critic, James. A. Schiff, conducted
through the mail, Updike categorically expresses his strong predilection for Hawthorne:

He (Hawthorne) struck the American note, it seems to me in a most unexpected place and way. And (Hawthorne) is the major American novelist until James to write persuasively of male / female relations.4.

In the same interview Updike explains why he had chosen The Scarlet Letter:

*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 as redefined by Dr. H. Lawrence, that interested me.

If Updike considers *The Scarlet Letter* to be a book of seminal import in American literature, he also places it in the same paradigm of the greatest literatures of adultery the world has ever produced. As Updike comments in another interview with Mervyn Rothstein5:

*The Scarlet Letter* is our *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. It is our contribution to the novel of adultery.
No wonder then, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* loomed large over Updike who felt it necessary to retell the tale with a manner and temper befitting his society and his twentieth-century American perspective. It thus resulted in Updike’s “The Scarlet Letter Trilogy”: *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger’s Version* (1986) and *S* (1988). The present chapter purports to dwell on the intertextual resonances and dissonances between Hawthorne’s masterpiece and Updike’s *A Month of Sundays* (1975) which happens to be the first book in the Trilogy.

Updike’s observation about *The Scarlet Letter* and his conscious retelling of it in *A Month of Sundays* have been recorded in his candid confession in an interview with Charlie Reilly: 6

That book (*A Month of Sundays*) is, of course, a re-telling of *The Scarlet Letter* in some way, and Hawthorne was very much on my mind when I wrote it. I re-read Hawthorne before beginning and there are a couple of passages where some of Hawthorne’s words are simply inserted into the text. But it’s more than just a rehash of *The Scarlet Letter*. I think that even though there may be greater American books – let’s say, for the sake of argument, *Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* — *The
Scarlet Letter somehow sticks in my mind as the first American masterpiece.

Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter — set in mid-seventeenth century Boston and published in 1850 — gives us a paradigmatic portrait of puritanical indictment, adultery, the diabolic punishment and its concomitant suffering engendered by a sinful passion, the incompatible coherence of religion and sex, the question of morality and the human preoccupations with sin and guilt. Quite amazingly, Updike’s preoccupations remain more or less the same, although in an altogether different temporal setting. It is indeed telling that John Updike should be so obsessed with religion, theosophy, sin, guilt, morality, etc. even with his strictly twentieth-century background where science and technology largely govern the human civilization. It would be relevant to note in this context that Updike’s family background provided an impetus for his religious preoccupations. As Updike admitted to Terry Gross:

I was raised as a Lutheran, and I have never escaped the Christian church. I am now an Episcopalian and at various points in my life I took a fairly intense interest in theology. My grandfather
Updike was a minister, and my parents were — and in my
mother's case, still are — churchgoers,[ ...](208).

The basic triangle of *The Scarlet Letter* comprises the heroine (Hester
Prynne), her estranged husband (Roger Chillingworth) and her pastor-lover
(Arthur Dimmesdale). In Updike's Trilogy each of these three major
characters is dealt with due attention. While *A Month of Sundays* retells the
story from Dimmesdale's point of view, and while *Roger's Version*
reexamines it from Roger Chillingworth's point of view, *S* is a re-enactment
of the tale from the viewpoint of the heroine, Hester Prynne. As Updike
stated in an interview with Richard Burgin in 1986:

I gave Dimmesdale's version, in an of course updated,
askew and irresponsible way, in *A Month of Sundays*.

Elsewhere Updike referred to *A Month of Sundays* as "Dimmesdale's
version".9

The phrase "a month of Sundays" refers to an indeterminate length of
time. The implication is obviously a long phase of inaction and
indolence. The book contains two epigraphs which suffuse the novel
with art, religion and sex. It may be noted that George Hunt, a pro-
Updikean critic, has keenly analysed this particular aspect in his illuminating study of Updike.\(^{10}\)

The first epigraph taken from Psalm 45 — “my tongue is the pen of a ready writer” — apart from its apparent allusion to the celebration of the marriage of the Messianic with Israel, takes on a sexual undertone when we concentrate on the word ‘tongue’ with particular reference to the series of erotic actions of Rev. Thomas Marshfield, the Updikean equivalent to Arthur Dimmesdale. Updike’s own reflection on the first epigraph is, however that of a flippant joke played on himself:

I was aware of the psalm being one of praise and celebration[...] The first is a little joke on me: I’ve often been accused of being much too ready a writer, and Marshfield is himself, of course in the book a very ready writer.\(^{11}\)

Here, we may refer to the famous pen/penis equation put forward by feminist critics. As Gilbert and Gubar have put it:

In patriarchal western culture[...] the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis.\(^{12}\)
This equation becomes all the relevant to Rev. Marshfield who delights in a series of orgiastic encounters and writes them in a secret diary.

The first epigraph also prepares the readers for the ingenious narrative trope of the novel — Marshfield’s diary jottings, intermittently interspersed with Nabokovian footnotes and Joycean pun— which provide Updike with a greater scope for delving deeper into the subjective recesses of Marshfield’s mindscape. Quoting form Robert Alter’s *Partial Magic the Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkley: University of California, 1975), Hunt shows us how Updike “has seemed content with the conventional framework of psychological realism in his fiction and has been resistant to the ‘self-conscious’ techniques employed by his contemporaries like Pynchon, Hawkes and Barth” (*Secret Things* 183).

The second epigraph taken from Paul Tillich — “This principal of soul, universally and individually, is the principal of ambiguity” — hints at the paradox of human predicament in which Updike’s minister is circumstanced to live in. Like Hawthorne’s minister (Dimmesdale), this ambiguity is embodied in Rev. Thomas Marshfield in whom sex and religion cohere and coalesce. But unlike Dimmesdale, Marshfield
treats this coalescence of sex and religion in an altogether different manner.

It is this ambiguity — this seemingly incongruous alliance of the sexual and the spiritual — that has obsessed both Hawthorne and Updike. "I feel I would be a poor novelist indeed, if I avoided trying to say what I can about sex", Updike had admitted in a close interview with Katherine Stephen.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{A Month of Sundays} Updike has consciously chosen this inherent ambiguity in the tension between one's sexual imperative and the strong religious stricture as the dynamics of this novel:

Also a book like \textit{A Month of Sundays} is full of ideas in a way — that is, the man is, unlike my usual heroes, somewhat learned. My central idea there was that clergyman are exposed more than most men to sexual temptations and that, furthermore, there is some deep alliance between the religious impulse and the sexual.\textsuperscript{14}

If Hawthorne had set a paradigm for all adulterous ministers through the character of Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, Updike offers a host of additions to that paradigm: Rev. March in \textit{The Centaur}, Rev. Eccles and Rev. Kruppenbach in \textit{Rabbit, Run}, the priest Hook in \textit{The
Poorhouse Fair, Freddy Thorne in Couples, Rev. Thomas Marshfield in A Month of Sundays, Arthur Steinmetz (the Arhat) in S, and so forth. Both Dimmesdale and Marshfield are clergymen manque who combine religion and sex. As George Steiner has described it so rhetorically:

In A Month of Sundays, the sexual and the clerical, the scatological and the eschatological are intimately, almost violently meshed.  

Like the barren setting of Kush (an Eliot-like ‘waste land’) in The Coup and like the desert of Arizona in S, A Month of Sundays is set in the arid desert, or to put it more precisely, in a motel where Rev. Thomas Marshfield has been deported as a punishment for his adulterous indiscretions. If on the one hand the desert invariably symbolizes spiritual aridity and moral desiccation, on the other, the desert setting – like the forest-setting in The Scarlet Letter – stands for American wilderness. The barrenness of desert also provides an antithesis to Hawthorne’s lush virescence of the forest scenes in The Scarlet Letter. The irony lies in the fact that both in S, as also in this novel, spiritual replenishment is sought in a desert, a place symbolically associated with spiritual sterility.
Tom Marshfield, Updike's equivalent of Dimmesdale, embodies the ambiguity of sex and religion, the former being his preoccupation, the latter his occupation. It is this dual existence of religion and sex, of the mystic and the erotic that constitutes the major intertextual filiation between Hawthorne and Updike. Donald Griener has referred to the same point of commonality, though in a somewhat naive equation:

Little wonder, then, that *A Month of Sundays* bows to *The Scarlet Letter* the first great American tale of the erotic within religious sensibilities. But where Hawthorne saw the lure of sexual pleasure as a sign of man's weakness, Tom Marshfield argues that not Calvinistic prohibition but delightful emancipation is the message of the commandment "be fruitful and multiply".16

Griener had elsewhere17 rightly argued that the basic point where Hawthorne and Updike meet is the "inextricable unity of religion, sexual transgression, and guilt. Erotic desire and religious sensibility shape the centers of their fiction".
Like his Hawthornesque counterpart, Marshfield is a facile speaker and a competent user of the language. If Dimmesdale was a gifted orator and could mesmerize his audience through the facility and felicity of his rhetorical flourishes and through the sweetness of his voice, Marshfield possesses a similar panache, with the difference that we find him both as a writer as well as a speaker. Hawthorne himself preserves effusive eulogy for the oratory eloquence and charisma of Dimmesdale:

His eloquence and religious fervour had already given the earnest of high eminence in his profession (61).

Dimmesdale possessed a “sweet tremulous but powerful” voice (107) and his “vocal organ was in itself a rich endowment” (235). Hawthorne romanticizes the oratorical skill of Dimmesdale:

[...] a listener, comprehending nothing of the language in which the preacher (Dimmesdale) spoke, might still have been swayed to and fro by the mere tone and cadence. Like all other music, it bred passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart [...] (235).
When we turn to Updike’s version we find that he exploits the device of intertextual conversion by turning Marshfield chiefly into a gifted writer. Hawthorne’s facile speaker is converted into a “ready writer”, as has been implied in the first epigraph. But writing, after all, is nothing but an orthographic translation of verbal speech. Language or words may be expressed either in speech or in writing. Here Updike’s own observation regarding language is worth-quoting:

What is language? Up to now, until this age of mass literacy, language has been something spoken. In utterance there’s a minimum of slowness. In trying to treat works as chisel strokes you run the risk of losing the quality of utterance, the rhythm of utterance, the happiness [...] But, as for a writer, if he has something to tell, he should perhaps type it almost as fast as he could talk it. 18.

Whether in speech or in written form, the basic thing is the use of language in which both Dimmesdale and Marshfield excel. The language that they use is also largely conditioned by their characteristic temperament. While the grave and serious Dimmesdale uses a solemn, august and sublime idiom, the frivolous Marshfield’s diary jottings are couched in a highly
jocular, witty and often explicitly raunchy style. The formal and measured
diction of Dimmesdale is thus contrasted against Marshfield's colloquial,
candid diction, occasionally replete with bawdy expressions, slangs, risque
suggestions and clinically frank realism.

This change is not only shaped by their temperamental flair and
behaviour, but also by the fact that while a speech is addressed to a
second person or to an audience and therefore entails some sort of
formality, a diary-jotting gives one more freedom to write at one's
sweet free will and thus is stripped of the film of formality. For
example, at the very beginning when Marshfield introduces himself,
he uses a highly jocular language:

My bishop, bless his miter, has ordered (or, rather, offered
as the alternative to the frolicsome rite of defrocking) me
brought here to the desert, far from the green land [...]The
month is to be one of recuperation — as I think of it,
“retraction”, my condition being officially diagnosed as
one of “distraction” (3).

A competent user of the language and a highly ratiocinative man,
Marshfield exploits scriptures for his voluptuous ends. Like Doctor
Faustus in Marlowe’s play, Marshfield distorts the Biblical passages
— only conveniently highlighting the sections pandering to his carnal tastes and suppressing the sections forbidding such exercise — to put forward his invulnerable arguments for luxuriating in sensuality. For example, during a Sunday preaching Marshfield refers to St. John (8:11) in which Christ said to a woman who had committed adultery: "Neither do I condemn thee". Marshfield tactfully quotes this portion which invariably sends a wrong signal to any listener that Christ is, as it were, not against adultery. What Marshfield cleverly suppresses is the subsequent portion: "go, and sin no more". Marshfield tries to promote and justify adultery by making sporadic references to scriptures and myths. Marshfield alludes to Bathsheba who, in spite of her adultery with David, became the queen of Israel and gave birth to Solomon. Similarly the seduced Eve happened to be the mother of mankind. When Joseph became aware of the infidelity of Mary, he was "minded to put her away privily" (St Mathew 1:19). Having referred to all these Biblical stories, Marshfield infers:

Of the two adulterous women Christ encounters in the Gospels, [...]one is commended, and the other is not condemned(44).
A doubting Thomas, Thomas Marshfield thus equivocates in a highly manipulating and deceptive language to succeed in his adulterous ends. Dimmesdale was equally competent in equivocating, though in an altogether different context. For example, during the judgment of Hester Prynne, he addresses for and speak in a language which betrays himself for its ironic undertone:

[...] I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him, for believe me Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life (62).

We cannot but infer that the "fellow-sufferer" of Hester Prynne is ironically none other than the speaker Dimmesdale himself. Whether the fellow-sinner is simultaneously the 'fellow-sufferer' can be determined by the sufferer alone. This speech also prepares us towards Dimmesdale’s stooping down from his social status for his final confession at the scaffold.

Detweiler offers a structuralist interpretation of A Month of Sundays on the basis of Jacques Lacan’s structuralist psychoanalysis and
observes that in *A Month of Sundays* Updike expresses his dissatisfaction with traditional forms of fiction. The implication of the narratology, according to Detweiler, "is that sex and religion as forms of communication are fundamentally flawed, consisting of paradoxical structures that render one's involvement in them ambiguous, uncontrolled, full of distortions, and somehow always partial and broken". Detweiler goes a step further to equate Marshfield's dilemma with Updike's:

This depressing assessment seems also to be Updike's own and is illustrated by the depiction of the inability of language itself to communicate adequately [...] In *A Month of Sundays* that effort has evolved to the point where language has become so self-conscious that it is self-critical[...] All of these suggest a language sliding out of control, struggling to speak itself out of the unconscious and to say something other than what the speaker actually utters(611).

A spokesman of Updike, Marshfield strikes the keynote of his contemporaneous American society where adultery has become inevitable,
'necessary' (in Aristotle's sense). Marshfield upholds the cause of adultery with invulnerable logic:

Adultery, my friends, is our inherent condition [...] was not the First Divine Commandment received by human ears, "Be fruitful and multiply?" Adultery is not a choice to be avoided; it is a circumstance to be embraced (44-45).

[Emphasis added]

Marshfield aptly detects the leitmotif of American "condition" where adultery has become all-pervasive and inevitable. Indeed, it is this unscrupulous permissiveness that maps the realm of Updikean oeuvre. What was a lapse and aberration for Arthur Dimmesdale thus becomes a natural experience and celebration for Thomas Marshfield. Therefore while the former was hounded and pounded by an excruciating sense of guilt, the latter suffers from no guilty feeling. Not to speak of any sense of guilt, what is more interesting to note is that Marshfield is virtually rhapsodized about his adulterous liaisons. In a flippantly jaunty manner Marshfield tries to uphold the banners of
adultery (almost like a political campaign or an advertisement), as it characterizes the ruling passion of modern American men and women:

Wherein does the modern American man recover his sense of worth, not as dogged breadwinner and economic integer, but as romantic minister and phallic knight, as personage, embodiment, and hero? *In adultery.* And wherein does the American woman, coded into mindlessness by household slavery and the stupefying companionship of greedy infants, recover her power of decision, of daring, of discrimination — her dignity, in short? *In adultery.* [...] They meet in love, for love, with love; [...] *We are an adulterous generation; let us rejoice* (46-47).

[Emphasis added]

If Marshfield distorts scriptures for his carnal carnival, he can blasphemously use smithy idiom for scatological exercise:

[...] (he goes to bed without the pajama bottoms for at least a *trinity* of reasons: to facilitate masturbatory self-access,
to avoid belly-bind due to drawstrings or buttons, to send an encouraging signal to the mini-skirted female … ) (11)

[Emphasis added]

Another point of commonality between Hawthorne’s minister and Updike’s is that both are well-versed in theology and are highly appealing to women. Dimmesdale “was a person of very striking aspect” and was endowed with “his high native gifts and scholar-like attainments” (61). As D. H. Lawrence so acutely sees through the real weak man lurking within the layer of the confident and assured minister, Arthur Dimmesdale:

He (Arthur Dimmesdale) depended on women for his Spiritual Devotees, spiritual brides. So, the women (Hester) just touched him in his weak spot, his Achilles Heel of the flesh (85).

Thomas Marshfield, like Updike himself, is steeped in theosophy in general and Barthian philosophy in particular. Highly attractive to women, he cultivates physical relationship with at least four women: Jane Chillingworth (his wife), Alicia Crick (the church organist), Mrs. Frankie Harlow (the undeviating devotee) and the elusive manageress
of the motel, Ms. Prynne. A literary precursor of Marshfield may be found in Humbert, the 37 years old narrator in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, who possessed a peculiar psychopathic obsession for nymphets.

Both Dimmesdale and Marshfield are members in the same paradigm, for both are hypocrites in terms of speech and action. Dimmesdale had committed adultery with Hester Prynne, and yet initially he did not have the courage to confess his sin in public. This flagrant discrepancy between his private self and public self, between his speech and action, lacerates him. The inevitable consequence is that Dimmesdale is snowed under with an avalanche of guilty feelings. As Dimmesdale himself puts it to Hester in his forest assignation with her:

> Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! (185).

Unable to reconcile between his public and private selves, between his passion and hypocrisy, Dimmesdale remains a broken man whose “mind was darkened and confused by the very remorse that harrowed it” and whose dilemma of being caught “between fleeing as an avowed criminal, and remaining as a hypocrite” preoccupied his entire being (193).
Marshfield, on the other hand, is a hypocrite in that he profanes his profession of a minister, and engages in a random delightful exercise of seducing women. Fully aware of the falsehood of his situation, Marshfield describes himself as a “poor Wasp stung by the new work-ethic of sufficient sex, sex as the exterior sign of inner grace” (218).

If psychological torment leads to Dimmesdale’s physical ailment, Marshfield is physically harassed by colds, insomnia, tooth-ache and constipation (chapter 29). Mauled by his exacerbating guilt, Dimmesdale became physically devitalized and enfeebled. The former flush of his cheek grew pale and his “form grew emaciated” (113) and the gradual decline of his health hastened his wreck. Dimmesdale was occasionally seen “laughing bitterly at himself the while, and smiting so much the more pitilessly because of that bitter laugh” (138). He resorted to secret vigils “night after night” and “his brain often reeled and visions seemed to flit before him[…]” (138). In an anguished maze Dimmesdale would resort to secret walks at the dead of night towards the same scaffold where Hester had been punished publicly. “He had been driven hither by the impulse of that Remorse which dogged him everywhere”, describes Hawthorne (141) and Pearl, too, describes the peculiarity of Dimmesdale’s behaviour:
In the dark night time he (Dimmesdale) calls us to him, and holds thy (Hester’s) hand and mine, as when we stood with him on the scaffold yonder! [...] A strange man is he, with his hand always over his heart! (221).

In Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment we see that the murderer compulsively visits the site of murder. Dimmesdale’s clandestine nocturnal visit at the same scaffold where Hester had been punished, brings out a similar criminal psychology. Almost like a Lady Macbeth, Dimmesdale suffered from insomnia and his nocturnal vigils were undertaken “perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism” (140). As an intertextual echo of this, we find a similar insomnia and physical unrest in Updike’s minister, Marshfield:

Tom returned to bed but could not sleep. His eyes had sipped poison. Covetousness threatened to burst his skull, ire his spleen, and lust his groin. He twisted, he writhed; [...] (76).

The minister’s nocturnal vigils in The Scarlet Letter find intertextual correspondence to Marshfield’s surreptitious spying on Ned’s house
or what he describes as “my grotesque but somewhat happy vigil” (78). There are repeated references to Marshfield’s sleeplessness, as in Chapter 23, Chapter 24, Chapter 26, Chapter 28 (“In my insomnia now, between masturbatory spurts of fantasizing about you, Ms Prynne, ... I pray”) and Chapter 30 (“I am delirious with poor sleeping”). Any perceptive reader may find intertextual echoes with Macbeth who “hath murdered sleep” and with Lady Macbeth who is driven to bouts of somnambulism. Like Macbeth again who could not pray when he was desperately in need of it and whose “Amen” stuck in his throat (Act.2, Scene 2), Marshfield realized that “prayer had become impossible for me” (85).

Marshfield’s unleashing of sexual energy through his indiscriminate sexual acts as masturbation, seduction and the final orgiastic union, can be read in sexual terms as an intertextual inversion of Dimmesdale’s withholding the dark secret until he releases it in the final scaffold scene in a climactic outburst. D.H. Lawrence interprets the forceful suppression of Dimmesdale’s secret as an exercise which is tantamount to self-flagellation:

Now he (Dimmesdale) has a good time all by himself torturing his body, whipping it, piercing it with thorns,
macerating himself. It's a form of masturbation. (Studies 85.)

If Marshfield chiefly approximates to Dimmesdale, he also loosely resembles Hester Prynne in his religious interpretation of his adulterous acts. In her secret assignation with Dimmesdale in the forest Hester asserts:

What we did had a consecration of its own (188).

Marshfield, too, describes his orgasm in scriptural terms. After his sensual encounter with Alicia Crick, the church organist, Marshfield writes:

Alicia in bed was a revelation. . . . (33)

[Emphasis added]

Marshfield's diary is bestrewn with similar religious idiom:

[...] under my good wife's administration sex, had been a Solemn, once-a-week business, ritualized[ ... ] (34)

[Emphasis added]

Similarly his erotic encounter with Mrs. Frankie Harlow has been described in prelapsarian terms:
She (Frankie) held my limp penis in her hand and called me lovely. Her forgiveness and the pre-Adamic, cave-woman fall of her hair to her bared shoulders broke a capsule inside me. [...] I dropped to my knees, a pro at that, and arranged her hands tangent as in prayer in front of her [...] (131).

One significant aspect of Updike’s *A Month of Sundays* that brings in an intertextual resonance is the omega-shaped motel in which Marshfield has been consigned to stay. Omega (ω), as we know, is the terminating letter and is the opposite of Alpha (A), a letter which has been used in *The Scarlet Letter* as a social stigma. Updike means to turn the tables on Hawthorne. In Updike’s version the connotations of stigma and shame are subverted and become symbol of glory and fun. As John T. Matthews has put it so tellingly:

[…] Marshfield notices that his “recovery” begins in an omega-shaped sanatorium; perhaps his is the story that will close out the saga of the alpha of adultery in *The Scarlet Letter.*

Whereas in *S* Updike directly refers to the A-framed Ashram of Sarah Worth and thus applies an overt intertextual echo, in *A Month of*
Sundays he applies the more artistic device of intertextual inversion. Or to put it in the Derridean vocabulary, we may say that Updike resorts to "difference", differing from the Hawthornesque connotation of shame and deferring any ignominious stamp on his characters. At another level, the letter 'w' has an implicit connotation of woman, womb, etc. and thereby connotes the novel's sexual preoccupations.

In Updike's Trilogy there is an updating and reorientation of the triangle of adultery. The Hawthornesque triangle comprising Hester Prynne, Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale keeps on changing with different persons assuming the triangular ends at different times in Updike's intertextual version. Ned Bork's liaison with Alicia Crick is being clandestinely spied by Marshfield at the dead of night. Here Marshfield loosely assumes the role of Roger Chillingworth, the jealous husband of Hester Prynne. The proximity of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth because of Hester finds its correspondence in the proximity of Ned and Marshfield because of Alicia. Watchful and vigilant, Marshfield finds his "pleasure in verifying that Ned and Alicia were screwing" (19). However Marshfield's spying is detected by Alicia who immediately takes him to task:
I didn’t ask you to spy on me (80).

Updike’s fiddling with Hawthorne’s triangle may be roughly presented through the following configurations:

**Case I**

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   Jealous Counterpart
     /       \
Lover -       - Beloved
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Hawthorne:

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   Chillingworth
     /       \
Dimmesdale -       - Hester
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Updike:

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   Marshfield
     /       \
Ned Bork -       - Alicia Crick
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In this case therefore Marshfield occupies the upper end in the triangle resembling the jealous counterpart, Chillingworth.

Significantly, along with the replacement of the beloved, the position of the characters also changes. In the second case, when we consider Marshfield-Jane-Ned relationship, the entire triangle is reoriented in a
new way. Jane Chillingworth, the legal wife of Marshfield develops an intimacy with Ned Bork. Here the triangle may be presented in a different way.

\[\text{Case II}\]

\[\begin{array}{c}
\text{Hawthorne:} \\
\text{Dimmesdale} \\
\text{Chillingworth} \\
\text{Hester} \\
\text{Updike:} \\
\text{Ned Bork} \\
\text{Marshfield} \\
\text{Jane}
\end{array}\]
Here Marshfield, on the one hand assumes the role of Chillingworth in that he is the husband of Jane, and because of his profession as a minister resembles Dimmesdale, on the other. Here Updike applies the technique of what we may call intertextual 'fusion' in which the dual roles of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are fused in Marshfield. Like Chillingworth's malicious suspicion and jealousy, Marshfield continually provokes Jane with uneasy queries about her relationship with the young Ned. "Don't be so jealous", Jane tells him (68). Further like Chillingworth who was very much aware of the fact that his marriage to Hester was an uneven match, Marshfield tells Jane of her conjugal dissatisfaction:

You know I don't satisfy you (69).

Maintaining the same triangular matrix, if we consider a third case, the characters once again change their positions. Marshfield's liaison with the devoted Mrs Frankie Harlow, the wife of Gerry Harlow, enables him to assume a different role in a different position.
No wonder then, Marshfield here assumes the role of Dimmesdale.

In this way the Updikean characters engage in random liaisons and thus keep on changing their counterparts and their so-called positions in this mythical triangle as readily as one changes chairs in a musical chair game. The triangular positions of the characters concerned thus become slippery, a fact which indicates the instability, inconsistency
and precariousness of human relationships. The interchangeability of roles (and the triangular positions) also disrupts the popular notion of fidelity in human bonds. The flexibility of roles in Updike deconstructs and subverts the sense of finality, solidarity and determinateness, and throws the entire ontological status of human relations into disarray. I have deliberately exploited the metaphor of a game (i.e., musical chair) simply because sex no longer remains a moral taboo for Updike whose characters take it to be a fun like any other game. As Thomas Marshfield jocularly puts it:

Skin is an agreeable texture. Penises and vaginas notably so, patent pending [...] Sex can be fun (38).

Similarly he jocundly refers to his pre-marital erotic desire for his wife Jane in terms of binaries:

She (Jane) was serenity and beauty; I agitation and energy.
She was moderate, I extreme. She was liberal and ethical and soft, I Barthian and rather hard. Above all, she was female and fruitful and I masculine and hungry (49).

Gilbert Sorrentino, in his review of the book, comments:
While it is not “about” sex, sex is the engine that drives it.\textsuperscript{24}

In Updike’s novels the problem of moral dilemma is often created by the presence of the women between whom the lover must choose. Thus while in \textit{Rabbit, Run} Rabbit Angstrom is caught between his wife Janice and his mistress Ruth and if in \textit{Couples} Piet Hanema must choose between his wife Angela and his mistress Foxy, Marshfield’s moral choice straddles the dual options of his wife Jane and Alicia on the one hand, and Jane and Frankie Harlow, on the other.

In \textit{A Month of Sundays} Updike plunges us in the first-person confessional mode and provides greater scope for examining Marshfield more closely than we could afford to do in the case of Arthur Dimmesdale. Writing and language itself become a viable medium for expressing the sexual permissiveness and dealings of Marshfield. The textual reflects the sexual, the graphic represents the erotic. As John T. Matthews so keenly observes, “Marshfield comes to understand that writing repeats[ ...] adultery” and also intends “to cure it”.\textsuperscript{25} Tony Tanner endorses the same view when he suggests that “puns and ambiguities are to common language what adultery and
perversion are to ‘chaste’ (i.e., socially orthodox) sexual relations”. If adultery entails a subversion of authority and social order, Marshfield’s diary-writing undermines the authority of the very text and delights in ambiguity and precariousness:

Or perhaps these words were never spoken, I made them up, to relieve and rebuke the silence of this officiously chaste room (33).

Here Roland Barthes’s concept of textual pleasure is worth- quoting:

The text of pleasure is not necessarily the text that recounts pleasures; the text of bliss is never the text that recounts the kind of bliss afforded literally by an ejaculation. The pleasure of representation is not attached to its object: pornography is not sure. In zoological terms, one could say that the site of textual pleasure is not the relations of mimic and model (imitative relation) but solely that of dupe and mimic (relation of desire, of production).27

Referring to his father’s typing sermons on Saturdays, Marshfield describes:
On Saturday he would type—ejaculations of clatter after long foreplay of silent agony. These sounds of ministerial activity engraved themselves upon a deadly silence. (18)

Not only language, even sound stimulates sex in Marshfield:

O how Alicia’s exclamations, sweeter than honey in the hive, as they were claimed in the sticky, warm, living vise of her thighs! And down beyond down, those toes, [...] what rapture it gave me to kiss them, [...] (21).

While describing his carnal wooing of Jane Chillingworth, the daughters of Doctor Reverend Wesley Augustus Chillingworth (Updike’s intertextual equivalent of Roger Chillingworth), Marshfield exploits a hilariously witty style in which his sexual pleasure parallels Chillingworth’s lecture on ethics:

[...] as modern ethics unfolded under Chillingworth’s muttering I had the parallel pleasure, as it were in running footnote, of seducing his daughter. We met in the cool British sunshine of Hobbesian realism, hit balls at each other with unbridled egoism, and agreed to play again, as
partners[ ...] Our first kiss came during Spinoza, more *titillatio* than *ilarita* [ ...] As Kant attempted to soften rationalism with categorical imperatives and *Achtung*, Jane let me caress her breast through her sweater. By the time of Hegel’s monstrous identification of morality with the demands of the state, my hand was hot in her bra and my access had been universalized to include her thighs (50-51).

Just as the Pue manuscript of “The Custom House” unfolds a story of passionate adultery and its concomitant suffering, so also the diary-jottings of Marshfield reveals the vivid account of sacerdotal infidelity. The text — in the form of its diary writing — dwells on the excess of sex experienced by Marshfield. The diary itself (and hence the text) reveals the story of adulterous indiscretions of a clergyman and becomes an evidence to Marshfield’s permissiveness, and thus approximates to the scarlet letter itself.

In fact, seduction of the reader — implying all the readers in general and the enigmatic manageress of the motel, Ms Prynne, in particular — becomes one of objectives of Marshfield’s writings. In *The Scarlet*
Letter it was Hester Prynne who could rumble through Dimmesdale’s tortured psyche. In the famous forest meeting with Dimmesdale (chapter 17), Hester “read his heart more accurately” (186). The intertextual tie may be established by the fact that in *A Month of Sundays* it is the enigmatic, elusive Ms Prynne, Hester’s namesake, who becomes the “Ideal Reader” of Marshfield’s diary. If Updike continually engages in a dialogue with the reader throughout *A Month of Sundays*, Hawthorne had provided a precedence to it in the final chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* where the conjecture of the readers regarding the mysterious scarlet letter is invited by Hawthorne:

The reader may choose among these theories (250).

Similarly chapter 9 begins with a reference to the reader:

Under the appellation of Roger Chillingworth, the reader will remember, was hidden another name […] (111)

Roland Barthes in his article “The Death of the Author” (1968) puts forward his famous concept of a text:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the
message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.  

Barthes thus refers to the ‘intertextual’ nature of a text which is “made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation […]”  

In the famous scaffold scene where the notorious judgment was meted out to Hester Prynne, she did not speak out the name of her adulterous partner despite the judges’ egging her on to reveal the secret. Hester declined to speak out and said:

Never![ …] It is too deeply branded ye cannot take it off[ …] (63)

Dimmesdale’s comment at this point is less an observation than a glorious tribute paid to Hester’s sense of being a woman:

She will not speak ! […] Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart ! (63-64).  

[Emphasis added]
In *A Month of Sundays* while describing his experience of kissing Alicia when she had been driving, Marshfield writes:

It seemed strange, to be kissing right to left, the woman behind the wheel. She dropped her hands to my lap[...] *Miraculous woman*!

*Not a word was spoken; [...] (84)*

[Emphasis added]

Here the laconism of both Hester and Alicia put them in the same paradigm. Our amazement knows no bound when we come across the verbatim echo of Dimmesdale’s words in Marshfield’s diary jottings:

*You (Ms Prynne) have been inflexible and chaste.  
*Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart!*

(215)

[Emphasis added]

Any reader of intertextuality must be reminded of Kristeva’s description of a text as a “mosaic of quotations” and “absorption and transformation of another” in this context.

Ms Prynne, whose very name recalls Hawthorne’s heroine, resembles Hester on more scores than one. To begin with the physical
description. Hawthorne highlighted the exquisite beauty and the elegant dignity of Hester Prynne in his characteristic romantic style:

The young woman (Hester) was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from the regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; [...] (49) [Emphasis added]

And here is Updike’s, or to put it more precisely, Marshfield’s rendering of Ms Prynne:

You, Ms. Prynne. You with your figure of perfect elegance on a large scale, your dark and abundant hair, your even darker eyes under the eyebrows as pronounced and swift in their curve as two angry strokes of unsharpened charcoal [...] That I found your manner, always ladylike and dignified [...] (213-14) [Emphasis added]
The above two extracts bear ample testimony to the intertextual resonances of the two texts which are, as it were, engaged in an intertextual dialogue between themselves. Significantly, Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne has been diffused through all the four ladies with whom Marshfield gets involved in: Jane Chillihgworth, Alicia Crick, Mrs. Frankie Harlow and of course, Ms. Prynne. Here Updike applies what may be termed the device of intertextual ‘fission’, as distinct from ‘fusion’. The characteristic trait of Hester Prynne is, as it were, scattered among each of these four women. Updike’s intertextual rewriting therefore embraces all possible devices: conversion, inversion, fusion, fission, transposition, adaptation, alteration, verbatim echo, etc.

Dogged by his exacerbating sense of guilt, Dimmesdale surreptitiously goes to the scaffold “in the dark gray of the midnight” (Chapter-12), accompanied by “the dank and chill night air […]” (140,141). He meets Hester and Pearl who ascend the scaffold at his instance. At this moment, Dimmesdale envisions a cosmic phenomenon, the falling of the meteor:

[…] a light gleamed far and wide over all the muffled sky.

It was doublets caused by one of those meteors which the night watcher may so often observe burning out to waste in
the vacant regions of the atmosphere. So powerful was its radiance, that it thoroughly illuminated the dense medium of the cloud betwixt the sky and earth. The great vault brightened like the dome of an immense lamp. (147)

Here Dimmesdale is haunted by a cosmic evidence of his guilt. As if, in the form of a divine retribution, there is a visitation of the numen. A cosmic nemesis, as it were, overtakes him, leading to “a revelation, addressed to himself alone, on the same vast sheet of record!” (148)[emphasis added].

Updike’s equivalent, Marshfield, goes out on a “frosty” and “dark” night when the “moon peered crookedly”(12) to keep a vigil on Alicia and Ned Bork at Bork’s quarters. Although he is visited by no angels, he is chilled at his revelation in “the ubiquity of sex, the infallible Providence[...]” (16). If Dimmesdale’s revelation was “addressed to himself alone”, Marshfield’s rumination on Alicia’s anatomy and her oomphs “addressed itself to him” (11)[emphasis added]. His revelation culminates in bedding Alicia:

ALICIA IN BED was a revelation. (33)

[Emphasis added]
If Dimmesdale envisions a meteor, Marshfield projects his covert wistfulness for copulating Ms. Prynne in cosmic terms:

[...] I fall toward you as a meteorite toward the Earth, as a comet toward the sun. (217)

His invocation to Ms Prynne is couched in similar cosmic and mythic metaphor:

Think of me in the sky, think of me as a Sky-god, Uranus to your Gaea, raindrops to your desert, gospel to our despair, [...] Give me a body. Otherwise I shall fall through space forever (220).

Like Miles Coverdale in The Blithedale Romance, Marshfield is consigned to loneliness in an isolated motel in a desert. If Marshfield resembles Dimmesdale, he is not unlike Miles Coverdale who furtively spies upon the graceful Zenobia through the window of his hotel in Boston. Updike’s Trilogy seems to be in an intertextual dialogue not only with The Scarlet Letter but with Hawthorne’s sensibility in general. The voyeur-seeking instinct of Marshfield finds literacy precedents in Hawthorne’s corpus: Coverdale (in The Blithedale Romance), Paul Pry (in “Sights from a
Steeple”), Giovanni (in “Rappaccini’s Daughter”) and Donatello (in The Marble Faun).

Both Dimmesdale and Marshfield are prisoners of their own selves. Dimmesdale was immured in the self of his sin, guilt, hypocrisy and self-deception:

He had striven to put a cheat upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but had gained only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame without the momentary relief of being self-deceived. (137)

Marshfield is a prisoner of sensuality, of uninhibited concupiscence. And yet both are capable of self-examination and introspection. Dimmesdale was wont to “viewing his own face in a looking glass, by the most powerful light which he could throw upon it” and was capable of “the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not purify, himself” (138).

Marshfield similarly goes “to the mirror” and takes a careful look at himself (7). He undergoes a process of self-evaluation and records it in his diary:

So, perhaps these moments of naked megalojoy show the true face of my groveling, my comical wriggle in the mud
of humiliation.[ ...] what is all this reduction I have described, my defrocking myself of dignity, righteousness, respectability, fatherhood, husbandhood, even of an adulterer's furtive pride of performance [...] ? (189)

Marshfield's therapy, also, has not been able to purge him of his adulterous inclinations. In one of his lectures Marshfield refers to a passage from St Mark:

    Why doth this generation seek after a sign? Verily I say unto you, there shall be no sign given unto this generation(102).

    (Mark 8: 12)

In St. Matthew (12: 39) we get a similar reference:

    [...] An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall be no sign given to it[ ...]

Towards the end of A Month of Sundays (chapter 30) Marshfield quotes from a book What Boys and Girls Are Asking and refers to a drought-stricken Chinese village where “the people had looked hopefully toward the sky for signs of rain”(226). But as Marshfield goes out “under the dome of desert stars”, he is haunted by a sign-phobia and is “afraid to be
born again” (226). This strikes a parallel chord with the putative appearance of the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale’s breast (chapter 24) and in his experience of the meteor (chapter 12).

And yet it is the differences between the ministers of Updike and his great predecessor that also define their existence in the same paradigm. “Texts are [...] not structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness”, observes John Frow. Intertextuality is not an overt echo of a previous text but, as Kristeva has pointed out, “the transformation of utterances (to which the text is irreducible) into a totality (the text) as well the insertion of the totality into the historical and social text” (37). Intertextuality can never be an exact replication, but involves process of “transposition of one or more systems of signs into one another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position” (15). Kristeva further describes a text as “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (36).

Riffaterre argues that an inter-text “is a corpus of texts, textual fragments, or text like segments of the sociolect that shares a lexicon and, to a lesser extent, a syntax with the text we are reading (directly or indirectly)
in the form of synonyms, or even conversely, in the form of antonyms” (142). We therefore need to locate Updike’s points of departure from Hawthorne.

Whereas Hawthorne endows his minister with an aura of mystery, dimness, doubt and privacy and whereas Dimmesdale remains a somewhat distant, veiled figure to us, Marshfield is ingenuous, frank, extrovert and straightforward. The narrative trope that Updike employs — the diary-jottings of Marshfield — also becomes the subtext of the text, and provides ample scope to have a better view of Marshfield unburdening his mind in an intimate, confessional, less disturbed and more carefree way than Dimmesdale. If Dimmesdale is characterized by an august gravity, Marshfield is marked by a flippant frivolity. The taciturnity of Dimmesdale appears to be in stark contrast with the volubility of Marshfield. Whereas Dimmesdale’s language is extremely formal and liturgical, Marshfield’s utterances, in spite of occasionally being steeped in theosophical references, is out and out risqué and clinically bawdy. If Dimmesdale is formally attired in his vesture, Marshfield “goes to bed without pajama bottom[...] to facilitate masturbatory self-access”[...](10-11).

But the point where Updike differs sharply from Hawthorne is the ways in which Dimmesdale and Marshfield react to adultery respectively.
Adultery was to Hawthorne a weakness of the flesh, a sin perpetrated by man in a new Eden. Adultery, no longer remains a lapse or a transgression to Updike’s Marshfield who delights in the religion of adultery. Consequently, the guilt-ridden plight in Dimmesdale has been inverted into a carnivalesque celebration of sensuality:

We are an adulterous generation; let us rejoice. (47)

In his article entitled “Hawthorne’s Creed” Updike observes:

Guilt, of which Hawthorne was such a connoisseur, pervades his work without any corroborating conviction of sin— for we do not feel that Dimmesdale and Hester, or Donatello and Miriam, are guilty of anything more than flashing out momentarily against, in their creator’s phrase, “the moral gloom of the world”. Yet they scrub and scrub at their stains, under a Providence too delicately balanced to offer absolution (“Creed” 78).

The puritan dualism of body and soul which Hawthorne so intensely believed in, has been updated by Updike. For Hawthorne, the body and the soul were disparate entities, and hence could not be reconciled; for Updike they are inalienably one. As Donald J. Griener \(^{34}\) observes it so prudently:
The difference between Updike's minister and Hawthorne's is that the former can live with the ambiguity. The latter only despairs. Sex entices both men to adultery, but unlike Dimmesdale, Marshfield also acts on the ancient notion that sex in a Biblical metaphor for the love between God and Israel[...] Marshfield embraces Tillich's principle of ambiguity, celebrates both transcendence and temporality, and welcomes Nurse Prynne to his bed (486-87).

Updike does not subscribe to the Hawthornesque separation of the body and the soul, and deconstructs, as it were, Hawthorne's retentiveness of eroticism latent in his heroines. Following Dimmesdale's final moral advice, "Be true," Marshfield resorts to his own double-edged motto, "Be true to your Dick". As Griener argues elsewhere:

Hawthorne might not agree with Marshfield's conclusion, but his spirit lingers behind the minister's confession and Updike's novel. The way to control duality is through art. Yet where Hawthorne winces, Updike winks.35
Marshfield, with all his sexual raunchiness and his post-Freudian desire to verbalize and emote, tries to reconcile the body and the soul in a composite whole. Marshfield asserts that “we and our bodies are one” and that “we should not heretically [...] castigate the body and its dark promptings” (135).

One must have noticed that unlike The Scarlet Letter Updike has deliberately kept Pearl outside his design in A Month of Sundays. In spite of Pearl’s indispensable presence in Hawthorne’s book — for, she bears the stamp of the scarlet letter more prominently than the stigma of the alphabetical letter ‘A’ — Updike omits her from this book. This is simply because Pearl’s relationship with Hester provides much of the dynamics in The Scarlet Letter, and since Updike is writing his book, or to put in another way, rewriting Hawthorne’s book, from the minister’s point of view, Hester and other characters are relegated to the background. Updike’s point of focus in this book was the adulterous minister and neither Hester nor Pearl. It is only when Updike rewrites Hawthorne’s text from Hester’s point of view in S that Pearl is brought into prominence.

What Hawthorne and Updike try to hammer at is that in America individual impulse and social ethics are always waging an invisible cold war with each other. But whereas Hawthorne reverently conforms to the ethical
mores of his society, Updike delights in the instinctual promptings of an individual. Theorists may claim that Updike subverts and deconstructs Hawthornean code of morality, but what we should bear it in mind is that in spite of the overt intertextual resonances and dissonances, both Hawthorne and Updike are true to their own ages. Hawthorne was writing at a time when the puritanical forefathers of New England ruled the roost of society. Further, Hawthorne’s own descent from a highly infamous puritan family — one of his forefathers was John Hathorne, the notorious judge in the witch-trial of 1692 — had virtually put a gag on what he wanted to say. A puritan wrestling with his own puritanism, Hawthorne had no other choice but to punish Hester for her adultery. On the other hand, Updike’s frank realism is in keeping with the contemporary scenario of America which has, as it were, internalised adultery within its social fabric. Updike goes a step further to define transgression as an essentially human condition:

My own criteria is that we describe whatever we feel exist, but it must exist: it must be somehow mixed in also with the other parts of being human. In my rendering of sex, I always try to present it in the full context of the social embarrassment, the awkwardness, the uneasy, the rumbly stomach — the general humanness that these taboos are
woven into[...] My generation, and the one a generation before, was keen on breaking sexual taboos in print [...]36

Thus, A Month of Sundays is not only a successful intertext of Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, but a faithful projection of contemporaneous American society.
NOTES & REFERENCES

1. John Updike, “Hawthorne’s Creed”. In Hugging the Shore (New York: Knopf, 1983): 73-80. Hereafter all references to this article will be cited as “Creed”.


   Hereafter all references to Plath’s book will be cited as Conversations.

4. John Updike, Interview with James A. Schiff. E-mail interview. 26 January 1989.


Raskolnikov in this novel impulsively feels impelled to visit the site of the murder he had committed.


this book by Rice and Waugh will be cited as Modern Literary Theory (Rice and Waugh).


