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As His Mother Loved Him

"THE GENTLE BOY" AND FREUD’S THEORY OF MALE HOMOSEXUALITY

To commence our exploration of the intersection of Freudian theories of narcissistic male sexuality and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction, I begin with a discussion of the most difficult aspect of Freud’s theory of narcissism, its centrality in Freud’s understanding of male homosexuality. My reading of Hawthorne’s work touches frequently on issues of same-sex desire, but I should make clear at the outset that the chief goal in my reading of Hawthorne is not to establish him as a prototype of the homosexual author, if it is to be accepted that modern homosexual identity is a phenomenon that can be dated from the latter nineteenth century into the twentieth. (I remain skeptical of this Foucauldian view of sexual history.) Rather, I am interested in the ways in which Hawthorne’s narcissism provides a conduit for the free play of sexuality, allowing for concepts such as same-sex desire, cross-gender identification, and gender liminality to intersect with traditional modes of sexual representation. Like many other antebellum American authors, Hawthorne, in classically Freudian terms, appears to have had a bisexual disposition in terms of responding to the beauty of both sexes. But Hawthorne doesn’t simply respond to the varieties of beauty; indeed, beauty becomes a highly fraught, sustained discourse in his work with deep relevance for his career-long interests in gendered and sexual identity and, as his career develops, race.

Thinking through Freud’s theory of narcissism from the perspective of male homosexuality allows us to accomplish several things at once. We can immediately address the controversial nature of the methodology this study
uses, making a case for the methodology but also amply demonstrating that it will itself be subjected to reevaluation. Finding a persistent value, as I do, in one of Freud’s most debunked theories, I make the case that Freudian theories of male homosexual narcissism retain a general relevance for male sexuality. In that Freud’s theory focuses on the relationship between mother and son, it provides insights into Hawthorne, who throughout his work explores the nature of parent–child bonds, especially those between mother and child. As discussed in the previous chapter, a longing for lost origins, figured in the mother–child bond, suffuses Hawthorne’s work. Hawthorne, in my view, challenges rather than perpetuates the oedipal logic of normative masculinity, the basis of which is a rejection of the mother. While there are certainly oedipal aspects to Hawthorne’s work, and while Hawthorne himself idealized such man’s-man figures as President Andrew Jackson, on balance it is maternal identification that informs his fiction.

In that Hawthorne foregrounds and illuminates the problematic nature of gendered identity itself, his work sheds reciprocal light on Freud’s views of childhood psychosexual development, especially his insistence on the centrality of the Oedipus complex. If Freud provides a counternarrative to his own oedipal orthodoxy in his theory of narcissism, Hawthorne refuses any linear, clear-cut understanding of how normative gendered and sexual identity gets formed, thus refusing assimilation into oedipal orthodoxy. This view of Hawthorne runs counter to Frederick Crews’s influential thesis of the oedipal paradigms of Hawthorne’s work (discussed in the next chapter). By exploring narcissism in Hawthorne, I believe that we gain a deeper and more complex appreciation of Hawthorne’s interest in several issues: gender, sexuality, race, but also trauma, shame, vision, power, and politics.

In their scrupulous study Sexual Orientation and Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, Richard C. Friedman and Jennifer I. Downey challenge the uses of Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex for the pathologization of homosexuality. Going through the Oedipus complex successfully in one’s childhood means emerging as properly heterosexual. Traditionally, deviations from the normative resolution of the Oedipus complex, such as homosexuality, have been diagnosed as pathological forms of the complex and therefore of properly heterosexual adult sexuality. Friedman and Downey, making note of “profound change[s] in psychoanalytic theory in recent years in the areas of sexual orientation,” argue that, contrary to classical psychoanalytic thought, “superego development, gender identity, sexual orientation, personality structure, the etiology of the neuroses (and the psychoses)—all seem to be subject to influences other than oedipal conflict resolution or failure thereof.” Salutary though their revisionist work proves to be for new, antihomophobic
psychoanalytic methods of interpreting the dynamics of gay identity in a rapidly changing world, that the authors dispense with narcissism—a crucial aspect of Freud’s thinking on homosexuality and, indeed, within his thought generally—altogether in their reassessment of classical psychoanalytic theory and survey of new approaches seems to me a disturbing and worrisome error.4

The opprobrium that narcissism has historically elicited—from its endurance as a cautionary tale throughout Western literature to its familiar usage as a pejorative assessment of an overly prideful character—intersects with the psychoanalytic diagnosis of narcissism as pathological. Freud’s thinking on narcissism, particularly as it pertains to homosexuality, has contributed to this model. Yet it can also challenge the prevailing derogations of narcissism.5

The figure of the homosexual narcissist, who could also be described as the narcissistic homosexual, recurs throughout Freud’s work. Great controversy over the Freudian view of homosexuality endures within queer theory: while many have condemned Freud’s theory of homosexual narcissism as pathologizing and inherently homophobic (Warner, 1990; Fuss, 1995), others have found enough complexity in Freud’s thinking on the subject to use his work not for the purposes of further pathologizing homosexual narcissism but, instead, to enlarge our view of desire and use psychoanalysis to challenge homophobic thinking (Dean, 2000; Dean and Lane, 2001; Bersani, 2001). My argument proceeds from this latter line of thought.

The historical psychoanalytic pathologization of narcissistic identity has hit homosexuals with particular force. Given that psychoanalysis has contributed to the pathologization of homosexuality generally (though not consistently), the pathologization of narcissistic personality also entails psychoanalytic homophobia. As I attempt to demonstrate here, homophobia can also be challenged through psychoanalytic means. My effort to recuperate narcissism, then, necessarily involves a challenge to this homophobia that emerges from within a psychoanalytic project. Finding the value in Freud’s view of homosexuality as narcissistic is a jumping-off place for this effort.

Freud’s theory of homosexual narcissism is only one piece of his larger thinking on narcissism. The narcissist and the homosexual, while distinct types, are sometimes indistinguishable from each other in Freudian thought, similarly “perverse” forms of identity. Moreover, they have consistently, as types, been broadly used as embodiments of the same negative character traits: obsessive if not pernicious self-involvement, an inability to love, arrested development, a hatred of the opposite sex, a deep and abiding penchant for surface rather than depth, and so on. Narcissism, it should be noted, is just as integral to Freud’s view of heterosexuality as it is to homo-
sexuality. Though it has not, to my knowledge, been read in this manner before, Freud’s theory of homosexual male narcissism provides a generally resonant interpretation of the mother–son bond that exceeds the boundaries of a specific sexual orientation. To make an obvious point pointedly, heterosexual men have mothers, too.

The Hawthorne work that I discuss in this chapter, “The Gentle Boy,” bears a striking resemblance in its thematic concerns to Freud’s treatment of the homosexual child. Freud illuminates the aspects of Hawthorne’s work that come closest to making a political statement about the ways in which males are socialized generally in Western patriarchy. Both provide insights into the experiential and social experience of maternally identified and narcissistically inclined male desire. Before turning to Freud’s 1914 essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (SE 14: 67–105), it is important to address some of the reasons why Freud remains for many a homophobic thinker. In my view Freud is, on balance, a thinker who challenges sexual orthodoxies rather than establishes them. This holds true, as I will show, for his controversial theorization of homosexuality.

HOMOSEXUAL NARCISSISM
AN INTRODUCTION

In his aversive Foucauldian reading of Freud, Michael Warner argues that the concept of narcissism has been “primitively” used in psychoanalytic theory to calumniate queer sexuality as regressive and self-fixated. I should make it clear that I do not concur with most of Warner’s social-constructionist positions; when exclusively maintained, with little consideration for the psychic life, these positions are far too orthodox to be fully useful to an understanding of either sexuality or the phobias that various forms of sexuality incur. The most useful point of Warner’s argument is his challenge to the prevailing view, in some circles, that homosexual desire is exclusively narcissistic, and that the homosexual subject chiefly desires himself or herself reflected in someone else. “Why is gender assumed to be our only access to alterity?” questions Warner. “Can it actually be imagined that people in homosexual relations have no other way of distinguishing between self and not-self? That no other marker of difference, such as race, could intervene; or that the pragmatics of dialogue would not render alterity meaningful, even in the minimal imaginary intersubjectivity of cruising?” Warner specifically locates Freudian thought within heterosexual ideology, the “central imperative” of which is that “the homosexual be supposed to be out of dialogue on the
subject of his being.” Imagining the narcissistic homosexual’s “unbreakable fixation on himself” serves two purposes: first, it allows “a self-confirming pathology by declaring homosexuals’ speech, their interrelations, to be an illusion”; second, “and more fundamentally it allows the constitution of heterosexuality as such.”

Warner wants us to understand that psychoanalysis, as an arm of power, facilitates the “utopian erotics of modern subjectivity” that works to obscure what institutionalized heterosexuality has in common with homosexuality, a dependence on “a self-reflexive erotics of the actual ego measured against its ideals,” a dependence made visible in homosexuality but decisively obscured in heterosexuality. “Heterosexuality deploys an understanding of gender as alterity in order to mobilize, but also to obscure” what are its own “narcissistic sources,” hence the crucial function of a “discourse about homosexuality as a displacement” of these disavowed sources.

I am in agreement with Warner about the primitiveness of a view of homosexuality that reduces it to desire for sameness and as a stunted inability to recognize and erotically respond to “difference.” Yet Warner’s argument, which is not without value, hinges on a reductive reading of Freud that irons out the inconsistencies in his thought. It is these inconsistencies that make Freud an unpredictable and suggestive thinker. Freud returned to the subject of homosexuality several times, sometimes seeing it as one of the perversions, sometimes as the “most important of the perversions” (cold comfort, to be sure), but his attitude was not one of “complacent” hostility, as Warner describes it. How “inappropriate to use the word perversion as a term of reproach,” he writes in his 1905 Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (SE 7: 160). Freud clarified that perversions become pathological when they assume “the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation” (7: 161). In counterdistinction to Warner’s presentation, Freud found, as a site of inquiry, homosexuality to be as interesting as it is disturbing, and his treatment of it cannot be simply dismissed as phobic. Moreover, Freud found exclusive heterosexuality no less perplexing a problem than homosexuality. For his era, and despite his lapses, particularly concerning lesbianism, Freud was a fairly progressive thinker on homosexuality.

The most surprising omission in Warner’s critique of Freud’s views on homosexuality is the centrality of the mother–son relationship to Freud’s theory of homosexual development. In a footnote added in 1910 to his 1905 Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Freud conjectures that homosexual identity emerges from an identification with the mother.

In all the cases that we have examined we have established the fact that the
future inverts, in the earliest years of their childhood, pass through a phase of very intense but short-lived fixation to a woman (usually their mother), and that, after leaving this behind, they identify themselves with a woman and take themselves as their sexual object. That is to say, they proceed from a narcissistic basis, and look for a young man who resembles themselves and whom they may love as their mother loved them. Moreover, we have frequently found that alleged inverts have been by no means insusceptible to the charms of women, but have continually transposed the excitation aroused by women on to a male object. They have thus repeated all through their lives the mechanism by which their inversion rose. Their compulsive longing for men has turned out to be determined by their ceaseless flight from women. (SE 7: 145n1)  

Certain aspects of Freud’s argument indisputably lend themselves to homophobic views and were perniciously exploited as a basis for homophobic practices at certain points in the history of American psychiatry. I argue, however, that Freud’s theory of the mother–son relationship in terms of homosexuality should not necessarily be treated as itself pernicious; at the very least it should be re-examined.

The sheer range of cultural myths about the male homosexual encapsulated in this passage from Three Essays does, admittedly, stagger the mind: male homosexuals and their mother-fixation; male homosexuality as narcissistic self-love; male homosexual desire as desire for sameness, for the replica of the self (they “look for a young man who resembles themselves”); homosexual desire as an expression of panic over female sexuality; homosexual desire as a substitute for normative heterosexual desire; homosexual desire as a kind of repetition-compulsion through which some form of sexual trauma can be relived, re-experienced, but never “resolved” (“repeated all through their lives,” “their compulsive longing”); male homosexuality as an attempt to escape women (“ceaseless flight”). Only a footnote, this passage wields a prescriptive power that managed to install a particular set of images about male homosexuality in the popular imagination. To be sure, there are difficulties with Freud’s theories of homosexuality.

If one of the great phenomena of American culture is its profound receptivity to the new science of psychoanalysis, surely the Freudian view of homosexuality was one of the most widely assimilated of psychoanalytic concepts in the United States. Used to pathologize homosexuals and then to effect their elusive cure, Freud’s theories were reduced to cartoonish essences of themselves, made to serve the ideological needs of a nation eager to normalize all of its citizens in every conceivable way, perhaps especially in sexual
terms. Yet Freud’s extraordinarily complex and often bizarrely contradictory ideas resisted such homogenization, much more its broad, normalizing application. In his complex approach to homosexuality, Freud was light-years ahead of figures such as Charles Socarides, one of the most prominent and virulently homophobic voices in American psychiatry.11

Warner leaves something else out of his discussion of Freud’s view of homosexuality as a perversion: the centrality of perversity to Freud’s thinking. As Jonathan Dollimore points out in his superb treatment of Freud in Sexual Dissidence, “Freud described homosexuality as the most important perversion of all,” “as well as the most repellent in the popular mind,” while also being “so pervasive to human psychology” that Freud made it “central to psychoanalytic theory.”12 As Dollimore writes, if the value of psychoanalysis lies in its exposure of the essential instability of identity, “then this is never more so than in Freud’s account of perversion. At every stage perversion is what problematizes the psychosexual identities upon which our culture depends.”13 As Freud’s own words in his famous Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality attest, “a disposition to perversions is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct” (SE 7: 231).

In Freud’s most famous formulation, the Oedipus complex eradicates the infant and young child’s access to polymorphous pleasure. In the process, we become properly socialized, learning how to desire normatively. For Freud, the oedipal conflict works differently in boys and girls. In boys, erotic attraction to the mother arouses aggressive, violent feelings in the form of sexual rivalry with the father whom he wishes to supplant. It is by learning to identify with, rather than to compete against, the father that the boy resolves his oedipal conflicts and becomes properly socialized. It is the boy’s fear that his father, whom he imagines to be as competitively enraged against him, will castrate him that ends the boy’s oedipal conflict. In contrast, for girls it is the recognition that they have been castrated that commences their Oedipus conflict. Freud frequently claimed to find the female Oedipus complex an essentially perplexing and mysterious process while nevertheless repeatedly submitting it to theoretical reformulations. Clearly, Freud is as frustrating a theorist of female psychosexual development as he is an illuminating one of the male’s. As I will demonstrate in chapters 6 and 7, Freud’s theories of femininity, however, are not altogether without value and interest.14

Part of socialization is the prohibition of both homosexuality and incest. By learning to identify rather than to compete with the same-sex parent and by learning to desire someone outside of the family and of the opposite sex, we find our way out of both homosexuality and incest and into normative desire and social identity. This is the area of Freud’s thinking that has proven
especially interesting to queer theory. Judith Butler wrote in her 1990 *Gender Trouble* of the “melancholia of gender identification” within Freud’s model of normative childhood psychosexual development, the Oedipus complex. Butler drew out the implicit Freudian point that “it would appear that the taboo against homosexuality must precede the heterosexual incest taboo; the taboo against homosexuality in effect creates the heterosexual ‘dispositions’ by which the Oedipal conflict becomes possible.”\(^{15}\) Because homosexuality must be, along with incestuous relations, repudiated, same-sex relationships are always already haunted and left bereft by an internalized awareness of the prohibition against homosexual desires. That these desires were foundational to the formation of a sexual subjectivity makes the prohibitions against them especially wounding. An extraordinary range of queer theory treatments of these themes have followed Butler’s line of argument.\(^{16}\)

Socialization buries our polymorphous perversity under repressive decorum. What constitutes repression are an odd assortment of “social dams” such as the curious triumvirate of shame, disgust, and pity. The social and cultural neuroses that ensue are the “negative” of the perversions, the ills produced by their repression. Our oedipalization drives the pulsating waves and experiences of polymorphous pleasure underground, leaving a good deal of our libidinal energies repressed. But a burial is not an eradication, as Poe’s writing makes so abundantly clear again and again: our perverse desires continue to destabilize the dams of repression.

As Freud consistently argued, civilization was a triumph for the human species and a tragedy for the individual. The lost histories of our childhood responses to the world—the unimaginable range of polymorphous pleasures, the sheer openness to feelings and sensations of all kinds—remain buried in our unconscious, largely hidden from us, accessible only in those unsettling moments of *parapraxis*, those slips of the tongue and other fissures through which our own truths slip out from beneath our repressive self-control. The Oedipus complex successfully transforms us into properly socialized beings, but this is not in and of itself a necessarily laudable process, only the one our culture demands. Freud’s own ambivalence about the Oedipus complex hovers over his discussion of homosexuality. He unsettles his own account of childhood homosexual development through his frequent discussions of the *negative Oedipus complex*, an “inversion” of the “normal” version rather than an exceptional case of pathology. Indeed, there is in Freud a strange and unsettling continuum of childhood sexual “disturbances” that undermine the oedipal model. The negative Oedipus complex of heterosexual male masochism is particularly interesting as a complement to Freud’s theory of male homosexuality.\(^{17}\)
Freud’s Theory of Narcissism and Its Uses

The erotic predicament that lies at the heart of the Ovidian and Freudian versions of the Narcissus myth is the paradox of desire—the ultimate inaccessibility of another person. Our longing for the other person, our desire to connect to and at times to possess them despite the obvious and less apparent barriers that separate one person from another, is no less ardent despite their inaccessibility. The Narcissus myth is a heightened, particularly and peculiarly affecting version of the essential pathos of desire, the gulf between self and other. Moreover, thinkers such as Freud help us to see that what we long for is our self in the other, suggesting, as does Ovid, that desire may actually proceed not from a primary longing for the other but from an original desire for self.

As Leo Bersani puts it, all desire, at heart, has a narcissistic basis.

We love . . . inaccurate versions of ourselves. . . . we relate to difference by recognizing and longing for sameness. All love is, in a sense, homoerotic. Even in the love between a man and a woman, each partner rejoices in finding himself, or herself, in the other. This is not the envy of narcissistic enclosure that Freud thought he detected in male heterosexual desire; it is rather an expression of the security humans can feel when they embrace difference as the supplemental benefit of a universal replication and solidarity of being. Each subject reoccurs differently everywhere.

Recognizing our narcissistic disposition can lead to a utopian erotics of seeking sameness in difference and difference in sameness, an alterity not determined by such narrow concepts as gender (however decisive a role these concepts play in our lives).

The most valuable aspects of Jacques Lacan’s work are his theory of the subject’s development from identification with an illusory and misrecognized image of wholeness (the mirror stage) and his decoupling of desire from biological or physical needs. Because desire is a term I use frequently here, some clarification of my understanding of it is in order. As the Lacanian queer theorist Tim Dean describes, “Distinguishing desire from biological or physical needs, Lacan conceived desire as the excess resulting from the articulation of need in symbolic form. Thus where bodies may be said to have needs such as biological sustenance and physical protection, subjects have desires—principally, overcoming the loss constitutive of subjectivity as such—hence the requirement to ‘find the subject as lost object.’ It is because desire remains distinct from need that sexuality is cultural rather than bio-
If desire is the differential between need and demand, desire always exists outside of corporeal wants and wishes. As Freud made sure we understood, desire has neither aim nor object. I mean always to evoke desire’s possibilities in my use of the concept, which I leave deliberately open-ended; often, I mean to suggest sexual desire, but only as one of several forms desire can take.

Given the special emphasis that Freud will place on the homosexual narcissist, and that he begins his discussion with the specific problem of schizophrenia, it is intriguing that Freud frames the entire question of narcissism as a question of a fundamental human need and experience: love. In the “last resort we must,” Freud writes, “begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we cannot love” (SE 14: 85). Freud uses narcissism primarily as an opportunity for the discussion of love and a rubric through which to explore it. Here, Freud’s controversial penchant for universalization has its affecting dimension. Though narcissism has been both a pathologized and a minoritized identity, Freud actually makes it central to his understanding of human relationships.

Freud universalizes narcissism within his discussion of the two types of infant sexual object-choice, which he distinguishes as the “anaclitic” and the narcissistic. The first, the anaclitic, “or attachment,” type of object-choice focuses on “the persons who are concerned with a child’s feeding, care, and protection . . . that is to say, in the first instance the mother or her substitute.” The second, the narcissistic, can be found “especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of their love object they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed ‘narcissistic.’” But the next line, which concludes this paragraph, anticipates Freud’s argument that narcissism bears a much greater significance than its prevalence among “perverts and homosexuals especially” would suggest: “In this observation we have the strongest of the reasons which have led us to adopt the hypothesis of narcissism” (SE 14: 87–88). Freud not only establishes the validity of narcissism as another kind of sexual object-choice, he also takes great pains to emphasize that narcissism, far from a minority disposition, is as available a sexual object-choice as the only seemingly more normative anaclitic type:

We have, however, not concluded that human beings are divided into two sharply distinguished groups, according as their object-choice conforms to the anaclitic or to the narcissistic type; we assume rather that both kinds of
object-choice are open to each individual, though he may show a preference for one or the other. We say that a human being has originally two sexual objects—himself and the woman who nurses him—and in doing so we are postulating a primary narcissism in everyone, which may in some cases manifest itself in a dominating fashion in his object-choice. (SE 14: 88)

This universal, primary narcissism is complexly significant (and endur-ingly controversial for psychoanalytic theory). First, it makes it clear that an individual will have not only another person upon whom to fix his erotic hopes but also himself (to use Freud’s preferred gender for the moment). Although someone may “show a preference for one or the other,” both kinds of object-choice—that involving someone else, that focusing on the self—are available to the desiring subject. I would go further than Freud and say that one can make both desiring choices; one can desire oneself as well as someone else. But Freud goes far enough; his language here about the choices open to every individual between anaclitic and narcissistic objects is remarkably neutral, even though in the previous paragraph he associates narcissism with those reliable transgressors, “perverts and homosexuals.” By the time Freud describes, at a later stage in the essay, that the “aim and the satisfaction in a narcissistic object-choice is to be loved,” one has a hard time distinguishing “normal” from narcissism—it is the rare person for whom being loved can be of no concern (SE 14: 98). Indeed, Freud reveals narcissism, the special penchant of perverts and homosexuals, as a universal sexual disposition: it is one of the two sexual object-choices available to everyone; moreover, we have all experienced the state of primary narcissism.

Freud then proceeds to distinguish anaclitic from narcissistic object-choice in terms that suggest the old, enduring problem of Freud’s sexism: males are generally anaclitic in their object relations, females narcissistic. Sex-ism would appear to be at work here in that the more normative, the ana-clitic, model of erotic attraction is generally the domain of males, whereas women and their sexuality are relegated to the sidelines of perversion. Yet because Freud’s depiction of narcissism lies suspended between modes of universality and sexual specialism—just as his view of homosexuality lies between an offhand admiration and a steadfast understanding of it as deviant—the normal heterosexuality of males and the narcissistic perversity of women, while ostensibly the sexual order of things as Freud establishes it, will come to seem less secure and more odd. And, as if presciently aware of our contemporary objections to his limited and limiting views of women, Freud provides one of his most thoughtful demurrals when he qualifies what he has just said about the narcissistic sexuality of women.
Perhaps it is not out of place here to give an assurance that this description of the feminine form of erotic life is not due to any tendentious desire on my part to depreciate women. Apart from the fact that tendentiousness is quite alien to me, I know that these different lines of development correspond to the differentiation of functions in a highly complicated biological whole: further, I am ready to admit that there are quite a number of women who love according to the masculine type and who also develop the sexual overvaluation proper to that type. (SE 14: 89)

Had Freud consistently maintained the levelheaded and thoughtful tone of the above passage in his treatment of female sexuality, he would not remain burdened, as he will always be, by charges of misogyny. Here we have, as well, a reminder that what had seemed the normative mode of sexuality, the anaclitic sexuality of men, relies on “overvaluation,” a kind of idealizing blindness that makes male desire something less than clear-eyed. Going back to the way that Freud theorized anaclitic male desire, the tendency to overvaluation that characterizes it stems from “the child’s original narcissism and thus corresponds to a transference of that narcissism to the sexual object” (SE 14: 88, emphasis mine). In other words, at the heart of anaclitic object-choice, the normative choice that is in opposition to narcissism, that special penchant of homosexuals and other perverts . . . lies narcissism, which engenders the more normative choice. In other words, narcissism is the authentic core of any sexual object-choice.

I return to the issue of gendered object-choice below. But for now, what I want to establish is the centrality of narcissism to Freud’s thinking about how we desire and how we love. Initially described as a heretofore unsuspected component of our erotic life, then as the characteristic of perverse sexualities, narcissism gathers momentum and achieves universality, finally emerging as one of the fundamental principles of desire.

Narcissism even impels the parental love for children. The “affectionate love” parents have for their children revives and reproduces their own, “long since abandoned narcissism” (SE 14: 90–91). Overwhelmed by their potent feelings for their offspring, parents indulge in newly reactivated narcissistic fantasies that they had long suppressed in accordance with “cultural acquisitions,” and attempt to extend to their children the narcissistic “privileges” they had themselves long forfeited (SE 14: 91). If one of the major critiques of Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex is that, in his focus on the oedipal child, he pays insufficient attention to the desires and aggressions of the parents, here, Freud redresses this oversight in his theory of narcissism. One might say that he does so with a vengeance, rather frighteningly theoriz-
ing parental love for children—commonly perceived as the height of selfless love—as a passionate expression of narcissistic desire: “Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents’ narcissism born again, which, transformed into object love, unmistakably reveals its former nature” (SE 14: 91). If parental love for children is one of narcissism’s masks, it is certainly not the only one. Freud’s depiction of narcissism here makes it hard to find a love that is not either a disguised form of narcissism or some kind of attempt to make up for its loss. “He who loves has, so to speak,” Freud states, “forfeited a part of his narcissism, which can only be replaced by his being loved”—or, as Freud suggests in his depiction of the fond parent, in loving another (SE 14: 98).

The theme of parental narcissism proves crucial to an understanding of the broad relevance of narcissism to Freud’s thinking and also to the depathologization of homosexual narcissism. It will be helpful to turn to Freud’s thinking on heterosexual development and oedipalization—certainly the normative model of human sexual development for Freud—in order to frame our thinking on homosexual narcissism.

Jean Laplanche’s theory of the “enigmatic signifier” illuminates the questions that attend to the mother–child relationship.21 “Laplanche’s concept of the enigmatic signifier,” as Leo Bersani elucidates it, “refers to an original and unavoidable seduction of the child by the mother, a seduction inherent in the very nurturing of the child. The seduction is not intentional; simply by her care, the parent implants in the child ‘unconscious and sexual significations’ with which the adult world is infiltrated, and that are received in the form of an enigmatic signifier—that is, a message by which the child is seduced but that he or she cannot read, an enigmatic message that is perhaps inevitably interpreted as a secret. The result of this original seduction would be a tendency to structure all relations on the basis of an eroticizing mystification.”22 To take this point further, all sexuality flows from the essentially seductive mother–child relation, in that we always desire enigmatically and that we always desire the enigmatic.

As Steven Angelides further defines Laplanche’s concept,

The enigmatic signifier (of adult desire) is first inscribed in the infant’s bodily, or, eroticogenic zones. In a second phase, because the child cannot fully or successfully integrate the excessive libidinal excitation, or, unintelligible erotic messages from the parent, this enigmatic signifier undergoes a primal repression. The repressed, residual elements thereafter ensure a permanent conflictual relationship with the ego, producing a subjective core of
irreducible otherness. The child is thus split unto him or herself, and sexuality is ever after inflected by an enigmatic otherness. This universal theory of primal seduction and the enigmatic signifier is therefore the foundational structure for the constitution of the primordial unconscious, and thus sexuality, in the child.  

As Freud makes remarkably clear, the boundaries separating anaclitic from narcissistic desire are fluid; and as Laplanche suggests, desire begins in the relationship the child has with the mother. Given that the male homosexual’s tie to and identification with the mother has been perhaps the most fundamental component of the view of homosexuality as pathological and the theory of male homosexuality itself, it seems well worth considering that desire understood in its broadest terms in Freudian thinking stems from the mother–child relationship.

Tim Dean writes of Freud on the Narcissus theme in his 1910 essay on Leonardo da Vinci as Freud at his “most inventive,” and of this work as part of “a bizarre narrative of Freud’s own construction—as if Freud felt compelled to rival Ovid’s imaginative genius by creating a story of impossibly elaborate metamorphosis: the transformation of a boy into his mother.”  

“We might say,” writes Dean,” that psychoanalysis reveals the otherness within sameness, and so explodes the myth that sameness only involves self-sameness.” To take just one example, the boy Leonardo, “by installing his mother in and as his own mind, has become other to himself.” This is the radical potential in Freud’s treatment that critics such as Michael Warner have overlooked. (I will touch on Freud’s study of Leonardo in chapter 7.)

Freud called narcissism a wound. If this wound is the customary psychoanalytic lack, lack marks our separation from the powerful being who gave us life alongside our desires—our mother, whose body we narcissistically mistook for our own. Following Otto Rank, who “argued that the universally traumatic experience of birth is the true origin of all anxiety, not castration,” Marcia Ian describes the phallus as the phobic screen for something else: the umbilical cord, which literalizes and symbolizes the trauma of birth and our separation from the mother. Rank did not do away with the central Freudian notion of castration; rather, he theorized that it was birth trauma that alone explained it. On some level, all sexuality stems from an essentially traumatic relationship with our mothers and our mothers’ bodies. Lacan argued that desire emerges from the differential between need and demand, the moment when our need for the nourishment that comes from the mother’s breast transmutes into a demand for the breast not related to the instinctual need
for hunger. But we could also argue that desire emanates from the traumatic separation from the body of the woman who gave us life—we want to replace that first fatal cut with the remerging of bodies.

Along these lines, we can interpret narcissism in its manifestation in the homosexual male as a strategy for the repair and restoration of the split, unmoored subject. What the homosexual child (in Freud) desires is to preserve the intensity of the bond between his mother and himself, the feeling of wholeness, of oneness, when he was his mother’s own object of desire. Freud doesn’t mention, in his treatments of male homosexuality, the concept of parental narcissism, but we do well to remember his discussion of it in “On Narcissism.”

The mother’s own narcissism implicitly drives the process whereby the child learned about desire, how to desire himself, and developed his sustaining fantasy of preserving the scene of maternal desire that was so influential and affecting for the mind and heart and life of the child. The child acutely experiences, one could theorize, the force of the mother’s own investment in the child’s success in mirroring back her own desires, needs for self-reflection, and fantasies of self-perpetuation; the child experiences her own desires, needs, and fantasies so acutely that he begins to imagine that they are his desires, needs, and fantasies. Installing his mother’s psychic life into his own mind, the child develops a kind of double vision that, on occasion, becomes one: he sees the world both through his mother’s eyes and through his own; he seeks to find the same rapturously satisfying image that his mother saw in him; he wishes for the opportunity to see as she saw, to find the fulfillment of his own desire reflected in another’s face, body, eyes.

One of the problems with the ways in which Freud’s theory has been interpreted over the years is that homosexual narcissism’s investment in gendered sameness has been taken as an interest in finding oneself replicated, another version of the self. Surely, if Freud has taught us anything, it is that this craving for self-sameness is the universal condition of human desire, since we all experienced the state of primary narcissism. Behind an interest in gendered sameness lies a radical otherness—the mother’s desire behind the gazing eyes of the desiring boy, the fantasy that the mother’s desire has been incorporated into and enmeshed with one’s own.

Because patriarchy insists upon the perpetual reenactment of the Oedipus complex—far from some natural, inherent process, it is the narrative of socialization, the patriarchal script that Freud decoded—the erotic affiliations a male may feel with his mother’s desire are never valorized. Given the patriarchal cast of our culture, the only male desire which culture valorizes is that which replicates the father with whom one has properly identified.
Feelings for mothers; the mother’s own feelings; a woman’s sexual drives and desires, what motivates her own erotic life: historically, all of these aspects of human life have been suppressed, repressed, and subordinated. The chief problem the homosexual male has encountered in terms of his desire—and this is to speak of it only within the Freudian context of our discussion—is that his desire falls precipitously and disastrously out of the patriarchal, oedipal loop. Sexism, therefore, accounts just as powerfully and poignantly as homophobia for the pathologization of male homosexuality. (The Freudian girl is at such a loss during the Oedipus complex and its aftermath because of the essentially paralytic nature of her social position. Were she to identify with the father to too great an extent, she might become masculinized in a way threatening to and for her in social terms; she cannot easily identify with her mother because the mother has not only failed to protect her but represents a reified version of the misogynistically determined subordination of women. One wishes, in exasperation, that Freud had more sensitively explained the misogynistic social construction of femininity, rather than femininity’s biological “inferiority.” But, at the same time, Freud’s account of female social experience is also unflinchingly realistic, at least for his own era.)

The male homosexual’s strategy for preserving the scene of maternal desire resists patriarchal oedipalization, but, as Freud describes it, it is also a different kind of oedipal tragedy; it is a different kind of destruction of the erotic mother–son bond that enables desire even as it demands to be eradicated. Just as the heterosexual male child must abandon the mother as an erotic object, using her as a model for exogamous erotic attraction, the homosexual male must leave behind the mother to proceed with his desiring life; the difference is that the homosexual child devises a brilliant strategy for preserving the mother’s role in his desire. This is, of course, only one difference among many.

What drives homosexual desire is what drives all desire: an attempt to repair loss, the lack of something we believe we once possessed, somehow, somewhere. “They proceed from a narcissistic basis, and look for a young man who resembles themselves and whom they may love as their mother loved them.” If Freud draws upon the terror and violence of the Oedipus myth to describe our first confrontation, when we are very young, with adult sexuality, which is to say normative heterosexuality—most evocatively and provocatively drawn, in all senses of the word, in his case study of “The Wolf Man” in which he develops his theory of the primal scene, in which the child literally observes parental intercourse—he draws upon the incomparable frustrations and the plangency of the Narcissus myth to describe homosexuality. Both are tragic myths that mirror each other,
providing alternative scenarios of the same theme of impossible desire—they reveal, as does Freud’s treatment, that desire is as paradoxically absurd as it is irresistible.

Given that homosexuality has so often been seen as the Oedipus complex gone awry, as a failure to complete the process and be normalized by it, it behooves us to reconsider oedipal conflict. Specifically, we should reconsider any stable notion of the Oedipus complex in Freud’s work, for his views on it are characteristically inconsistent; moreover, the Oedipus complex and its narcissistic-homosexual foil bear far more similarities than are commonly acknowledged. If we can demonstrate the similarities that exist between heterosexual and homosexual development, narcissistic sexuality can be seen as an alternative form of identity to an oedipalized one rather than its stunted inferior. As Kenneth Lewes puts it in his superb study *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality,* “there is no straight line from preoedipal constitution to postoedipal result.” Instead, there is only a “bewildering series of transformations”: “the mechanisms of the Oedipus complex are really a series of psychic traumas, and all results of it are neurotic compromise formations.”

If it is absurd to see the transition through the Oedipus complex into heterosexuality as a normal, inevitable, natural process, it is also absurd to view narcissistically inclined, mother-identified homosexual childhood development as stunted, counterfeit, unnatural. Though it has been deployed in resolutely homophobic ways throughout American psychiatric history, and though it bears the traces of Freud’s inconsistent views on homosexuality (certainly far from an exclusively inconsistent Freudian topic), Freud’s theory in and of itself seems as plausible a way of theorizing male homosexuality as any other; moreover, it movingly captures the emotional complexity of being a mother-identified male in a patriarchal culture. But perhaps the larger topic here involves what I call Freud’s subversive children: children who devise all manner of resisting, thwarting, eluding, and generally mucking up, for distinct reasons, the course of their sexual development, normative or otherwise. The homosexual child is far from the only subversive agent in the Freudian field of childhood sexual development. The masochistic male and the phallic girl join the homosexual child in contesting the consolidation of normative sexual roles into which we must all ostensibly fall.

I now turn, at last, to Hawthorne’s short story “The Gentle Boy.” I read the story from a Freudian perspective, though not the one influentially limned by Frederick Crews. Crews saw the story as a rather unwieldy indulgence on Hawthorne’s part in masochistic fantasy. What I will suggest, instead, is that Freud’s theory of male homosexual narcissism here serves
as a general allegory for male sexuality rather than a minor myth for a sexual minority, and as such provides key insights into Hawthorne’s story. In turn, Hawthorne’s tale explores the fate of a mother-identified male desire in a male-dominated social order.

“THE GENTLE BOY”

HAWTHORNE’S 1830 MASTERPIECE

Nathaniel Hawthorne sets his short story “The Gentle Boy” (written in 1829, first published the year after) in 1650s Puritan New England.30 The titular boy, a Quaker named Ilbrahim, is adopted by a Puritan couple, Tobias and Dorothy Pearson, after Tobias discovers the boy mournfully keeping vigil at his father’s fresh grave. At this time, the Puritans were actively persecuting the Quakers. Ilbrahim had been in the same jail cell as his imprisoned father and has watched him being hanged. Not only have the Puritans killed his father, but they have sentenced his mother to death as well, leaving her to die of exposure in the wilderness. Bereft, abandoned Ilbrahim occupies a liminal state between life and death. Ilbrahim’s tremendous tenderness and delicacy of spirit are commingled with a “premature manliness,” a gravitas born of suffering.

The Quakers match the Puritans’ punitive zeal with an ever-increasing proselytizing passion: “The fines, imprisonments, and stripes, liberally distributed by our pious forefathers; the popular antipathy, so strong that it endured nearly a hundred years after actual persecution had ceased, were attractions as powerful for the Quakers, as peace, honor, and reward, would have been for the worldly-minded” (9: 69). The strange, delicate, remote child Ilbrahim will be the battleground for contending forces: the sadistic Puritan desires to quash rebellion and the masochistic Quaker avidity for their own persecution. But the most resonant battle rages within Ilbrahim himself, between his desire for his biological mother, the wild, enflamed, visionary Catharine, who evades death in the forest, and for the care and concern of his strong, subdued, steadfast adoptive mother, Dorothy. When the two women meet in a dramatic scene in the church and decide with whom Ilbrahim’s fate lies, they form “a practical allegory,” “rational piety and unbridled fanaticism, contending for the empire of a young heart” (9: 85). Evincing her quiet strength of will throughout the tale, Dorothy unflinchingly withstands the Puritan opprobrium that the Pearsons’ adoption of Ilbrahim engenders, whereas her husband Tobias much less steadily stands
by his adopted son. Nevertheless, by the tale’s close, as Ilbrahim, the boy too gentle for this world, lies dying in his bed, Tobias will embrace the boy’s faith.

Let me state the obvious: Hawthorne didn’t read Freud and knew nothing of psychoanalysis; when Hawthorne was writing the term “homosexual” did not exist; any overlaps between Hawthorne’s work and Freud’s theory of homosexual childhood development are coincidental (I have found no evidence that Freud read Hawthorne, though it is not impossible that he did). These disclaimers out of the way, I find remarkable correspondences between Hawthorne’s and Freud’s depictions of a feminine and female-identified male child. At heart, Freud’s theorization of male childhood homosexual development is an account of the process of the development of a male who identifies with the mother rather than the father. Hawthorne allows us to experience the affectional and social ramifications of Freud’s theorization of this form of male childhood desire. Hawthorne locates in patriarchy an unyielding refusal to tolerate deviance of any kind and a rapacious drive to destroy the most vulnerable and defenseless in its midst. In his delicacy and, most acutely, in his desire to love, Ilbrahim exquisitely embodies Freud’s theoretical construction of the homosexual child, emulating the mother’s love for him in his love for another male. In Hawthorne, however, the child emulates a maternal love only haphazardly and incoherently given, and attempts to bestow this love on a wholly inadequate and unworthy object. The love Ilbrahim bestows on others is a phantasy enactment of a love he craves but never receives from his biological mother (and perhaps cannot accept from his adoptive one).

Hawthorne uses all of his already considerable skill in this early tale to create in Ilbrahim a figure of strangeness and beauty, qualities that set him apart from the rest of the characters in the story. With his “pale, spiritual face, the eyes that seemed to mingle with the moonlight, the sweet, airy voice, and the outlandish name,” Ilbrahim seems more like a visitor from a distant planet than a seventeenth-century New England child: “He was a sweet infant of the skies, that had strayed away from his home” (9: 79). By representing Ilbrahim as alien, Hawthorne establishes that a feminine, mother-identified male has no place in this world; Ilbrahim chafes against the masculinist, patriarchal Puritan order because the values he embodies can never be affirmed within it. “Quaker” identity in this tale emerges as a broad allegory for phobically perceived differences of all kinds. When Tobias learns that the young, mourning child he attempts to help is Quaker, the “Puritan, who had laid hold of little Ilbrahim’s hand, relinquished it as if he were
touching a loathsome reptile” (9: 73). Difference dissolves human kinship, renders the other a different species altogether.

“Do we not all spring from an evil root?” Tobias then asks himself, allowing his reason to overcome his prejudice. The specificity of this imagery makes a decisive point: Ilbrahim, a queer child, opposes the destructive phallic power of patriarchy. What can be the fate of a “little quiet, lovely boy, whose appearance and deportment were indeed as powerful arguments as could possibly have been adduced in his own favor,” in such a grimly oppressive world (9: 77)? The stern old man—representative of the pattern of intergenerational male conflict that informs all of Hawthorne’s work—who will turn his “repulsive and unheavenly countenance” against this boy as if he has “polluted” the Puritan church, synecdochically stands in for the Puritan community, “a miserable world” toward whom Hawthorne feels a repulsion he can barely contain (9: 79).

Dorothy, who immediately takes in the new child as her own, asks Ilbrahim if he has a mother, and “the tears burst forth from his full heart” (9: 75); Dorothy tells him to dry his tears “and be my child, as I will be your mother” (9: 75). Ilbrahim longs for the oral mother, the original mother with whom he experienced, or wanted to experience, the greatest intimacy; Dorothy represents the oedipal mother, custodian of the social order. While Ilbrahim submits open-heartedly to his adoption, it is clear that he never relinquishes his love for Catharine, shown to be almost entirely unsuitable for the role of parent. With her wild, unkempt appearance and feverish, fanatical speeches of condemnation to the Puritans who destroy her and her people, Catharine commands great pity but evokes greater fear; abused, victimized, condemned, her rage and wrath against her oppressors, Hawthorne makes clear, galvanizes as much as it depletes her.

Catharine calls to mind Freud’s indelible portrait of the Medusan mother, who represents the terror of adult sexuality. In the iconography of the Medusa, Freud located a metaphor of castration and the child’s attendant revulsion—the writhing snakes being representations of pubic hair and also compensatory substitutions for the castrated penis. If the Medusa’s head represents the female genitals—and specifically the “terrifying genitals of the Mother”—it isolates “their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones” (SE 18: 274). Catharine, looming before the Puritans in their church, condemns those who have condemned her: “her raven hair fell down upon her shoulders, and its blackness was defiled by pale streaks of ashes. . . . Her discourse gave evidence of an imagination hopelessly entangled with her reason. . . . She was naturally a woman of mighty passions, and hatred and
revenge now wrapped themselves in the garb of piety . . . her denunciations had an almost hellish bitterness” (9: 81).

With disorienting urgency, Hawthorne anticipates Freudian themes. He directly pits this Medusan mother against the community that calumniates her; he also matches her against a different kind of phallic maternity, the coolly rational (though also deeply feeling) oedipal mother Dorothy, who represents the reason and rectitude the community claims to possess but obviously sorely lacks. But indirectly Hawthorne also opposes Medusan Catharine with narcissistically inclined Ilbrahim. Ilbrahim’s tender, feminine disposition can in no way correspond to the phallic, vengeful fury of the wronged but wrathful Catharine. Nor can Dorothy’s courageous and inspiring moral orderliness satisfy Ilbrahim’s needs. Ilbrahim roams this inhospitable world in a state of authentic loneliness, in a no man’s land of oedipal deprivation; the mother he loves loves her own appropriated phallic power, her rage, above all else, and the mother who loves him loves him from a position within the patriarchal order that the boy, in his very essence, opposes. The most positive embodiment of the feminine in the story, the gentle boy provides a stark contrast to the myriad representatives of phallic power—phallic mothers, phallic Puritans, phallically aggressive children—that dominate the tale.

One of Hawthorne’s 1837 revisions of the story uncomfortably clarifies parental narcissism as one of the major themes of the work.31 In the original version, when Tobias brings Ilbrahim home for the first time, Dorothy prepares a meal for him which the boy, with tearful tentativeness, manages to eat. But in the revised version of the story, Ilbrahim never eats and Dorothy never makes him a meal. Dorothy and Tobias have lost all of their children; the implication Hawthorne now makes is that the role Ilbrahim serves, that of replacement or substitute for their deceased children, for Dorothy in particular, is more important than his actual, living, breathing, needing, person. Even Dorothy, shown to be of far greater courage than her husband and greater benevolence than their community, in the revised version attends to her own needs before that of the child; Ilbrahim’s appeasement of her hunger for a child takes the place of the appeasement of his own hunger. Dorothy, therefore, in a far more muted way, resembles Catharine in her ego-absorption. Tobias, shown to be faltering in his resolve to claim Ilbrahim as his own child despite the scorn of his community, seeks to repair his own lack of a spiritual life; his primary goal seems to be to find a religious conviction, and so it makes sense that the wild, almost antic religious zealotry of the Quakers would be seductive to him. In any event, Hawthorne doesn’t seem especially interested in Tobias’s portions of the narrative. What chiefly interests Haw-
thorne is the fate of a gentle boy in an ungentle world; I argue that this was Hawthorne’s most personal work, and it is for this reason that the themes of the mother–son relationship are central to it.

Hawthorne wrote of his relationship to his own mother that “there has been, ever since my boyhood, a sort of coldness of intercourse between us, such as is apt to come between persons of strong feelings” (8: 429). Nevertheless, as Hawthorne’s astute contemporary biographer Brenda Wineapple observes, the feelings between son and mother “reached deep.”

Catharine, Ilbrahim’s mother, can be seen as a nightmarish version of Elizabeth Manning Hawthorne; like Catharine, the author’s mother had “raven-dark hair,” a trait she shared, along with “fine gray eyes,” with her son. Both Hawthorne and his mother dreaded separations, several of which they were forced to endure during Hawthorne’s fatherless childhood. (Hawthorne’s maternal Manning family, who ran a stagecoach business, divided their time between Maine and Massachusetts.) During one separation in 1819, Hawthorne despondently wrote, “I am extremely homesick. Why was I not born a girl that I might have been pinned all my life to my mother’s apron?” (15: 117).

Juliet Mitchell has revised Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex through her focus on the role that sibling relationships play in childhood development. Along these lines, it is also important to remember that Hawthorne had passionate and complex relationships with his two sisters, Elizabeth and Louisa. “No wonder pairs of women,” observes Wineapple, “frequently haunt his fiction. . . . One of the two is usually an exotic beauty, dark-haired, brilliant, and eccentric, like his older sister, Elizabeth; the other, like Marie Louisa, is more overtly conventional, self-effacing, and domestic.”

Along these sisterly lines, Catharine can be seen as an Elizabeth figure, Dorothy as a Louisa. Further enhancing the biographical valences of the story, Hawthorne’s own father, a sea merchant, died in Surinam when Hawthorne was very young; moreover, his childhood health was extremely worrisome to his family. And like the unworthy boy that Ilbrahim will care for in the story, the young Hawthorne also suffered in 1813 a foot injury, one that kept him indoors for several months. The correspondences between Hawthorne’s own childhood and Ilbrahim’s are too acutely obvious to be ignored.

The greatest point of overlap between Hawthorne and his tale lies in Ilbrahim’s beauty and the disturbance it creates. Hawthorne came of age in Jacksonian America, a culture that valorized hypermasculine traits and saw effeminacy as a trait associated with degenerate Europe. Hawthorne’s own physical beauty, remarked upon by many people throughout his life, was a trait that most likely caused him discomfort, in that it made him the object of the gaze and therefore placed him in a feminine, passive position against
which he no doubt chafed. Quoting Hawthorne’s son-in-law George Lathrop’s biography of Hawthorne, Henry James recounts in his famous critical book on Hawthorne an episode in which Sophia and Elizabeth Peabody, desiring to see more of the charming writer, caused him to be invited to a species of conversazione at the house of one of their friends. . . . Several other ladies . . . were as punctual as they, and Hawthorne presently arriving, and seeing a bevy of admirers where he had expected but three or four, fell into a state of agitation, which is vividly described by his biographer. He “stood perfectly motionless, but with a look of a sylvan creature on the point of fleeing away. . . . He was stricken with dismay; his face lost colour and took on a warm paleness . . . his agitation was very great; he stood by a table, and taking up some small object that lay upon it, he found his hand trembling so that he was obliged to lay it down.” It was desirable, certainly, that something should occur to break the spell of a diffidence that might justly be called morbid.

Many fascinations abound here, not the least of which is Hawthorne’s own deep discomfort with being the object of visual fascination. (James makes his own specular fascination with Hawthorne palpable in this book.)

James provides another similar anecdote from Lathrop about what would become the famous evening in which the purportedly shy and reclusive Hawthorne sisters brought, at the invitation of Elizabeth Peabody, the New England activist who was the sister of Sophia, who would become Hawthorne’s wife, their even shyer and more reclusive brother with them to the Peabody home. “‘Entirely to her surprise,’ says Mr. Lathrop . . . ‘entirely to her surprise they came. She herself opened the door, and there, before her, between his sisters, stood a splendidly handsome youth, tall and strong, with no appearance whatever of timidity, but instead an almost fierce determination making his face stern. This was his resource for carrying off the extreme inward tremor which he really felt.”

In life, Hawthorne strenuously attempted to overmaster the tremendous anxieties, figured in trembling hands and inward tremors, the gaze stimulated in him. As Wineapple writes, Hawthorne’s sense of his own masculinity was “unstable”; early on, Hawthorne saw himself as “one apart, marked and wounded, a victim with a special destiny who was, at the same time, as angry as the lame boy in the story ‘The Gentle Boy.”

That Ilbrahim’s beauty makes his life more difficult Hawthorne makes quite clear. “Even his beauty,” the narrator tells us, “and his winning manners, sometimes produced an effect ultimately unfavorable; for the bigots,
when the outer surfaces of their iron hearts had been softened and again
grew hard, affirmed that no merely natural cause could have so worked upon
them” (9: 77). With remarkable insight, Hawthorne describes the difficul-
ties the feminine male encounters in a masculinist society: the beauty he
possesses, while not a curse, is certainly no gift; unsettling the onlookers, it
forces them to punish, at least in their own mind, Ilbrahim for having trig-
ggered feelings—of longing? of desire? or simply of confusion?—in them. The
male child of beauty encounters the same kinds of phobic treatment suffered
by women; he is despised for his witchlike powers to seduce and enthrall
through “unnatural” means.

Hawthorne, a male who physically and emotionally resembles his mother,
who writes fiction from a position of “rivalrous identification” with women,
as Millicent Bell puts it, acutely understands the experience of the narciss-
sistic mother-identified child who wishes to bestow upon someone else the
love his mother gave him, or that—here we must add to Freud—he wished
that his mother had given him. Ilbrahim’s name associates him with the
exotic and with the Far East (where Catharine and other Quakers prosely-
tize); the Orientalism of his name intersects with the homophobic ideolo-
gies that associated the East with loucheness, gross sensualism, abandon,
and effeminacy. Effeminate, beautiful, tender, and relentlessly persecuted by
both other children and their parents, Ilbrahim nevertheless wants nothing
more than to bestow his as yet “unappropriated love” on someone else. The
someone else that Ilbrahim finds reverses his traits in every respect; duplici-
tous where Ilbrahim is sincere, ugly rather than beautiful, and violently cruel
rather than tender, the boy with a leg injury whom Ilbrahim cares for leads
Ilbrahim to premature death rather than to shared love.

The Pearsons take in and care for a young, male Puritan child who has
suffered a leg injury; that his parents are so willing to let another family care
for their own child indicates something of this boy’s nature. Hawthorne
takes pains to let us know that this boy is as physically ugly as he will prove
to be spiritually. While this conflation of spiritual with physical character
commonly appears in Hawthorne’s work and in Victorian literature gener-
ally, here it has a deeper significance when considered in light of the story’s
psychosexual themes.

Ilbrahim, normally adept at decoding physiognomies, fails to read the
evil in this boy’s physical nature. But we, however, are more than encour-
aged to do so. He has a disagreeable countenance, slightly distorted mouth,
an “irregular, broken” near uni-brow; “an almost imperceptible twist” char-
acterizes his “every joint, and the uneven prominence of the breast.” Over-
all, his body, though “regular in general outline,” is “faulty in almost all its
details”; moreover, he is “sullen and reserved . . . obtuse in intellect” (9: 90). Nevertheless, Ilbrahim nests “continually by the bed-side of the little stranger, and, with a fond jealousy” assiduously nurses the boy. Deepening biographical valences, Hawthorne depicts Ilbrahim as a storyteller who recites “imaginary adventures, on the spur of the moment, and in apparently inexhaustible succession,” to the convalescent child of “dark and stubborn nature,” who responds to Ilbrahim’s airy fantasies with remarks of precocious and disturbing “moral obliquity” (9: 91). The force of love emanating from him makes Ilbrahim believe that this love will be returned. One day, seeing the boy he cared for playing with a group of other Puritan children, Ilbrahim approaches them, “as if, having manifested his love to one of them, he had no longer to fear a repulse from their society.” But Ilbrahim could not be more mistaken about the lack of reciprocity in matters of love: “the devil of their fathers entered into the unbreeched fanatics,” and, shrieking like banshees, they hit Ilbrahim literally with sticks and stones, displaying “an instinct of destruction, far more loathsome than the blood-thirstiness of manhood” (9: 92).

The worst part of this brutal assault occurs when the ugly, lame boy whom Ilbrahim cared for lures Ilbrahim toward him with an offer of protection; without hesitation, Ilbrahim complies, only to have the “foul-hearted little villain” lift up his staff and strike Ilbrahim on the mouth, “so forcibly that blood issued in a stream.” Ilbrahim had valiantly attempted to protect himself against a “brood of baby-fiends,” but after this brutal version of Judas’s kiss he wholly submits himself to the bashing crowd, an act of supplication that only intensifies their frenzied fury as they “trample upon him” and drag him by his “long, fair locks” (9: 92). It is impossible not to think of the contemporary crisis of bullying in our own era when reading such depictions of phobic and collective violence.

Some older Puritans happen to rescue him, but Ilbrahim never recovers. Indeed, when Dorothy attempts one day to amuse the utterly withdrawn child, Ilbrahim yields “to a violent display of grief,” and during the middle of the night cries “Mother! Mother!” (9: 93). Later, on the night that the child Ilbrahim lies dying in his bed, Catharine returns from her world missionary travels and imprisonments, flush with news that Charles II has repealed the hostilities against the Quakers. Ilbrahim dies in her arms, a relief for him and a punishment for Catharine, now wild with grief. Catharine is ultimately a pitiable figure. Yet she has also been “neglectful of the holiest trust which can be committed to a woman” (9: 95). Like many of Hawthorne’s most morally ambiguous figures, Catharine, though grievously victimized,
has more grievously erred by placing her ideological commitments above her emotional ties, even above her own offspring.

One of the reasons why Hawthorne's story is especially relevant to thinking about modern queer identity is its depiction of male homosocial violence and the inexpressibly precarious nature of queer identity in the face of it. Ilbrahim confronts the full violence of group male mentality, a confrontation with resonance for modern queer identity but certainly not it alone. As I attempted to make clear earlier, I am not arguing that Hawthorne was either himself homosexual in orientation or that he represented consciously a same-sex-desiring child; rather, I argue that Hawthorne provides us with an allegory of childhood sexual otherness that is especially useful for the study of various forms of queer childhood development (gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans). But the issue is larger still: between Hawthorne and Freud, whatever historical slippages are necessary to make such a statement, the homosexual male child emerges as the model for feminine-identified masculine identity, the model that pertains with greatest significance to those who most clearly match up with it but also relevantly captures the experiences of those whose experiences fall within the paradigms of the model. In other words, Freud's model of the homosexual male child illuminates Hawthorne's depiction—written before the fixing of sexual identities through new taxonomical categorizations that emerged after the American Civil War, if one adheres to Foucauldian paradigms—of a male child who does not conform to the gendered and social standards and practices of his day. (I would argue that *The Scarlet Letter*’s wild, intransigent, phallic Pearl is the female version of the same, and also the gentle boy’s avenger, punishing his enemies, at least before her own gender normalization by the end of the narrative.)

Hawthorne himself was a heterosexual man, married with children, whose gender-bending qualities provoked discussion, concern, even awe, as his supporters rallied around a view of him as a sensitive artist who therefore had a poetic, feminine side, and his detractors criticized him for precisely these qualities. I believe that he was quite aware of the reactions he provoked. In constantly conflictual responses himself to these reactions, he wrote fictions, such as “The Gentle Boy,” that addressed, problematized, defended against, and mournfully recorded his own difficult experience of gendered identity. As Kenneth Lewes reminds us, identification with the “castrated mother” of the Freudian Oedipus complex can occur in the development of both heterosexual and homosexual males, “since it is quite possible for a male with a primary identification with the castrated mother to make heterosexual object choices.”39
Ilbrahim, it would appear, dies of a broken heart, a heart broken by two indistinguishable traitorous loves: the boy who returned his love with hate, the mother who returned his love with absence. With exquisite economy and pathos, Hawthorne makes vividly clear that Ilbrahim reproduces a fantasy of being loved by the mother whom he loves with an equally illusory fantasy of loving and being loved in return by a boy who resembles Ilbrahim, not physically but in his position within Ilbrahim's own fantasy of having been loved and cared for by his mother. Hawthorne enlarges what Freud imagines to be the psychological basis of same-sex desire by representing another dimension to it, that it can also be an enactment of a fantasy for connection between mother and son on the son's behalf, an expression of longing for maternal love as much as a projection of having been its recipient onto another male. Ilbrahim's grief suggests why narcissism is so directly enmeshed with the grievous heart of all desire, which flows from loss: he mourns for something he has already lost, the mother's love so haphazardly and transitorily given, a time in which he and his mother were one. (While one could argue that Ilbrahim, found at the site of his father's murdered body, mourns his dead father as well, this dead parent plays no role in the story beyond the initial mention of him, and Pearson seems more involved in his religious conversion than in Ilbrahim's life or passage to death.) I do not in any way mean to reduce homosexual desire to a kind of misplaced desire for a mother's love. My chief effort here is to make the case that what Freud theorized as homosexual development retains its validity as one pathway to homosexual orientation. Moreover, it retains its validity as a model of the emotional urgency of mother-identified desire and the difficulties faced by a male who identifies with mother rather than father.

HAWTHORNE AND SHAME

“The Gentle Boy” would appear to be, on the face of it, the height of representations of masochistic male sexuality. Certainly, this is the view of Frederick Crews, whose famous (and then famously repudiated, by the author himself) Freudian study of Hawthorne theorized that oedipal conflict is the chief psychoanalytic paradigm at work in Hawthorne’s writings. Without disputing the importance of masochism to the story, I would argue that it is narcissism, and specifically homosexual narcissism, that informs the tale. If Ilbrahim desires the ugly, lame boy, what he also desires is to reproduce the scene of maternal desire that undergirds his phantasy life; he wants to love
this boy “as his mother loved him,” as Freud puts it. But, as we have seen, given that it is never clear that Catharine showed Ilbrahim the love he craves, and that Catharine has been largely absent from Ilbrahim’s brief life, this narcissistic process does not reproduce Ilbrahim’s own childhood experience of maternal desire but enacts a fantasy of its experiential fulfillment.

And herein lies perhaps the deepest poignancy of the tale. Ilbrahim’s lavish bestowal of affection on this ugly child—the descriptions of whom as such border on the gratuitous at first blush—reveals a great deal about how he has felt about himself. If he attempts to make real his mother’s desire for him through his desire for and expression of love toward another male, that the object of his affections is so deeply, clearly, irredeemably unworthy suggests that Ilbrahim sees himself as ugly, base, unworthy and wishes that his mother would have loved him despite these onerous traits. The disturbing disjuncture between Ilbrahim’s actual beauty, readily (if ambivalently) perceived by others, and his fantasy of what he actually is or at least appears to be—if the ugly and violent boy does indeed symbolize Ilbrahim’s shameful self-conceptualization—communicates a great deal about the ways in which social, cultural, and other kinds of experiential messages that convey hatred and revulsion against one’s own person affect—one’s own image of self. Moreover, Ilbrahim blames himself for his mother’s failure to love him or to love him adequately.

Mary Ayers has eloquently written about the role that mother–infant attachment plays in shame. “When the maternal intrapsychic conflicts that influence the mother–infant relationship become impingements that in turn become a pattern, the details of the way in which the impingement is sensed by the infant are significant, as well as the infant’s reaction to them.” The ways in which a child can respond to such emotional abandonment are myriad, and gender and culture will shape the response. Aggression is usually associated with the masculine response, shame with the other. I would argue that Ilbrahim clearly reflects the latter, feminine response, literally dying of shame—shame at public humiliation and betrayal and shame at his mother’s behavior, which he internalizes as behavior he himself caused. In the end, the enduring value of Hawthorne’s and Freud’s depictions of the mother–son bond lies in their evocations of the plangency and the urgency of the bond. It would appear that a desire not to perpetuate stereotypes has led modern commentators to eschew if not altogether do away with homosexual narcissism as a way of theorizing queer identity. When contextualized, updated, and freed from pathologizing impetuses, it remains a profound and meaningful way of thinking about some of the varieties of human emotional experience.
As I will be elaborating throughout this book, particularly in chapter 4, shame is one of the principle affects of Hawthorne’s work. But unlike other critics who have also located shame’s centrality in Hawthorne, I link shame to narcissism and to Hawthorne’s interest in the visual, an interest that becomes only more ardent, perhaps even obsessive, as his career develops. In order to make most sense out of the complexly intricate connections among shame, the visual, and narcissism, it will be helpful to explore further why narcissism, as well as the Oedipus complex, provides an illuminating perspective through which to examine Hawthorne’s work, an effort I take up in the next chapter.