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Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: Hester Prynne's counter
cultural feminism.

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Introduction

Early in history of humanity we witnessed divergences regarding beliefs and behaviors that marked diverse milestones throughout our history, as we tried to solve the conflicts provoked by the clash of ideologies. The most important confrontations in history brought the First and Second World War, where we saw the huge consequences that the differences between ideologies could provoke. However, one of the most antique confrontations known was between the church and the different communities that followed the teachings brought by the ancient Bible. This conflict was incredibly evident during the puritan period, where the English Protestants established a community based on sermons of Christian Charity after they arrived to New England, believing that God sent them to live in the Promised Land according to the model provided by the Bible, and where their role was to purify the world.

Nevertheless, as Puritans built a strict community, they were forced to solve ambiguities and fill the gaps left by their own discourse. As Bradbury and Ruland detailed in *From Puritanism to postmodernism*, explaining that this American society began to be known due to its writing, which started to demand a new style that fitted the new community and described clearly “the problems of its settlement, the harshness and grandeur of its landscape, the mysterious potential of its seemingly boundless open space.” (4). This statement defines how Puritans had to face the difficulties of the New World, while dealing with what their community required. Diverse literary authors are found within the walls of the New World and between the community of Plymouth, giving an extended description of the society from the 16th and 17th centuries. However, it’s during the 17th century that the behavior of their society started to

change, people were highly discriminated and repressed if their attitude was slightly different from what was imposed, creating a fissure within the Puritan society.

The claims of a new community were even louder as years passed by, inch by inch nearer to the American Civil War. This provoked that not only men took the matter in hands, but also women that were tired of a submissive living style, confined to the walls of their houses. The voice of feminism began to rise, building a new movement that sought equality and liberty for women, breaking the image of inferiority designed until then, which composed the puritan ideal female stereotype.

Taking these notions into account, the object of study of the present work is going to be focused on the paradox present in the female image during the puritan period, and how novels represent this perspective. It is important to highlight both points of view: the one present within puritan society, and the one established through the new concept of woman; bearing in mind that this is what shapes the new female role and future works within the Romantic period.

The Scarlet Letter was first published in 1850, and is known as one of the most recognized and outstanding works written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The context within the novel is situated in Boston, during the 17th century and within the context of Puritan society. Hence, the story narrated focuses on a young woman called Hester Prynne, and her infant daughter Pearl, where both of them begin the story in the prison of the town. While they are guided through the crowd, one of the citizens relates that Hester is being punished for committing adultery. She was supposed to wait for her husband to arrive to America, however, he never arrived, and Hester gave birth to Pearl while waiting for him. Regarding Hester's story, there are some points that will be important to take into account for the development of this thesis.

Firstly, it is important to highlight that Hester decides by herself to keep her lover's identity as a secret, being condemned to wear the scarlet letter "A" in her bosom as punishment for her sin and also secluded due to being rejected by the community for several years. Hester and her daughter live in a small cottage outside Boston, and she supports herself and her daughter by working as a seamstress, gaining the courage to trace her own path within society even when community officials try to take Pearl away from Pearl and Hester's missing husband appears.

Secondly, even as Arthur Dimmesdale, a young minister of the town, seems to be attached to Hester and her little girl, helping them to stay together, there is no intention from Hester's side to rely on this man completely. She keeps distance from him until the heart condition of Dimmesdale is worse, and she decides to intervene and help him, planning with him to leave to Europe, to a place where they can live as a family. Dimmesdale represents the distressed and emotional part, while Hester demonstrates that, even if she is a woman, a man can rely on her.

Finally, Hester is judged due to what is considered a crime during the Puritan period and suffers isolation due to this. However, as years pass by, people within the community find a humble, simple and warmhearted person that, even after enduring the hard critics directed to her, doesn't let resentment control her heart and mind. Her sympathetic personality allow villagers to see more than crime in Hester, which translates into them granting her to be buried next to Dimmesdale several years later, sharing a tombstone with the letter "A".

Keeping this notions in mind, it is possible to state that Hester Prynne is one of the first feminist characters depicted in literature, which follows the ideals portrayed by Margaret Fuller, the first woman to completely address the subject in her text *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

Fuller declares that she trusts in the stress provoked by the changes present within the period, to fully reform women and develop their hidden strength, beautifying and harmonizing them (83). Hester not only fulfils this expectations about the new woman, but also goes beyond them, considering that Hester is also distinguishably a strong, independent woman, she decides by herself to keep her lover's identity as a secret, bearing the consequences of her deeds by herself, and supporting herself and her daughter at the same time. This character demonstrates that the stereotypes marked by the community are not necessarily to be followed, but it is the individual who decides to walk the path already traced.

Nevertheless, as explained previously, Hester was judged for her determinations, being condemned by her community. Her empowered female image was not appreciated by society in a first instance, pushing her to live through gossips and critics. This perception will be relevant to analyze the character of Hester Prynne within the concepts of otherness and taboo, proposed by Julia Kristeva and Sigmund Freud respectively. This concepts shape Hester through the eyes of the villagers and the rejection they felt up front, being this one of the reasons she was forced to stand up by herself.

Insofar, this thesis aims to bring light to the topic of how Hester Prynne throughout *The Scarlet Letter* shapes the new figure of woman, representing the model of feminism and rebelling against the stereotypes forced to them, whilst this image is rejected as a sign of otherness and taboo, being pushed to stay hidden. These two opposite points of view converge within the characterization of Hester, revealing the new society expectations towards women, and conforming a counter cultural feminism. And, at the same time, a paradox between how women should be empowered and strong but still submissive in front of men, conforming a dichotomy

that Hawthorne explores thoroughly in the character of Hester Prynne and the other women in town.

Theoretical Framework

The following bibliographical discussion will present a background that is going to be useful for the understanding of this thesis, the sources selected will depict this proposal and its object of study in order to grasp a favorable conclusion at the end of this analysis. Firstly, the context of puritanism will be settled and detailed within the correspondent bibliography, giving an account of its importance for the analysis of the present work. Secondly, regarding the description of the model of puritan women that was present during the nineteenth century, texts about the new conception of women will be presented, which will converge with the image that Hester Prynne presents along *The Scarlet Letter*: a whole new conception of woman in relation to femininity and empowerment. Finally, and in third place, books that depict the notion of otherness will be detailed, shaping Hester within puritan society and illustrating how people rejected Hester for her determination as mother, which transformed her into the embodiment of feminine power.

As it is detailed in the book *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A history of American literature*, Bradbury and Ruland explain that Puritan society was focused on the Christian role model, following a path structured by the faith of the missions given, the patriotism in their promised land, the moral notions of the hard work of agriculture and honesty of oil (8). However, this ideals applied mostly to men, and for women it was depicted that they were feared, stating that women could surrender easily to temptations and sins. Puritan women were only supposed to obey and fulfil the will of their husbands.

Nevertheless, along the years of settlement huge differences started to arise, which were not visible until it was impossible to deny with the arrival of the new writers, and described the

will in the heart of people. Individualism, democracy and freedom were the words that defined the new texts, which popularity grew near the Civil War of New England, providing new aims for people and filling them with the confidence they needed to start traveling. Texts like Emerson's *Self-reliance*, Whitman's *Song of Myself* or Melville's *Moby Dick* defined the period and portrayed the changes within society.

Moreover, not only men were inspired by this writings, women were also gaining strength as part of the community, starting to express themselves like Margaret Fuller did as a writer during 1845 with her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, providing forceful arguments with a fresh energy, marking the beginning of the Feminism as a movement, and it is during the 1840's that this ideology was dominant (141), as Bradbury and Ruland says.

Therefore, it was not surprising to find out what Margaret Fuller proposed in the book mentioned, stating that what women needed was not another woman rule above them all, but their nature, intellect and souls to grow and live freely (15). Due to Fuller's discourses about how women should find themselves along their lives, she became an important representative of the feminist ideals that focused in the equality between women and men, being the main reason why Fuller admired Hawthorne deeply, saying that he was the only man able to satisfy a woman with tender understanding of her heart (42), as depicted in the book *American Bloomsbury* by Susan Cheever, leaving no doubts that Hawthorne would represent women correctly in his novels.

Nevertheless, it is not usual for Hawthorne's female characters to be seen as feminists, even though they do reflect the ideals Fuller once stated. It is during modern times that his novel *The Scarlett Letter* is finally recognized as one of the most important novels within feminism. In the text written by Yamin Wang, *A Representative Of The New Female Image—Analyzing Hester Prynne's Feminist Consciousness In The Scarlet Letter Hester*, is portrayed as a feminist

character due to her strong rebellious attitude and her noble actions, which differs from the classic puritan ideal of women. Wang also describes two types of traditional female model: the first prototype depicts a woman who is unequal from men and is always under men's commands, trying to obey their will; and regarding the second stereotype, it is illustrated as woman who is praised due to her work: supporting her husband and raising their children.

As a consequence, Hester's self-reliance is highlighted through the story, only working for herself and for her daughter, and allowing the author of this paper to define her as the new female figure, which follows the feminist image given by Fuller: strong, rebellious, independent. In addition, Wang states that Hester's respect for herself, bring an outstanding strength to the character, with which she bears her punishment. Wang says that Hester defends herself by her thoughts and carry along with her a reckless spirit and fierce mind (894), being this part of Hester's female consciousness.

Hester's rebellious spirit not only defined a strong will, but also affirmed that she defies power and fights against the laws of the community in order to live with her daughter. Those aspects can be appreciated in instances such as when Hester does not allow the governors to taker her daughter away from her, and when she decides not to rely on anyone else but herself, walking directly to what she aims. All the aspects drew by this text are relevant to confirm Hester as a feminist character, written as an empowered woman by Hawthorne, which includes her particular actions, and the signification that the red symbol bare.

In *Woman in The Scarlet Letter*, text written by Sylvia Eeckman, the subchapter "Portrayal of Hester" indicates that Hester has a potent mind and firm spirit, combined to her lady-like appearance and beauty, which results into Hester's internal and external characteristics.

Eeckman suggests that even though she has undergone through affliction, she rejects to be part of an image of a frail woman (24).

The principal idea Eeckman depicts is that Hester's main function inside *The Scarlet Letter* is to support herself and her child through her work, she spreads her art and influence the puritan community, transforming the ethical rules stated by them and making a contrast with male characters, specifically Dimmesdale. Nevertheless, this idea does not mean that Hester erased all the characteristics of an ideal puritan woman, as she kept her kind and sympathetic self, creating a new model of woman as stated before.

Within the subchapter presented, it is explained how Hawthorne merges the characteristics of an ideal puritan woman and a modern empowered woman, making a contradiction due to their different ethic considerations, presenting an ambiguous character that fitted into what Fuller aimed to describe. Hawthorne tries to represent an ideal type of woman that in those times may had not exist, but was a goal that started to settle among women, highlighting their powerful feelings and their fiercely temper for the reader to admire. For these reasons, this text is of aid since it adds Hester's duality within her personality, presenting her not only as an empowered woman, but also depicts her kindness as something powerful and not as weakness, which is how puritans might portray it.

The essay *Plot in the Scarlet Letter*, portrayed by Baym, introduces the idea that the legitimate protagonist of Hawthorne's novel is actually Hester, even though it is stated in general analysis that is Dimmesdale. According to the author, one of the reasons behind this statement could be that some critics' target is on the insistence that she deviates from the conventional place occupied by women (403). Nevertheless, Baym's proposal is that Hester cannot be diminished within the story, being highly important for the development of the plot.

Baym's counterargument is based on the idea of Hester's deeds, her story of adultery, not being a critique towards herself or as an image of crime and sin, offering a new perspective of Hester, one that no longer deals with the inadequacy of her as a woman. Despite Hawthorne being able to write a story following the stereotypes present during the puritan time, portraying women as sinners, he decided to develop a novel about the strength that can be found within women when they are forced to go through hardships (405-406), as Baym depicts.

Hester not only is a character that offers a moral critic to the novel, but also illustrates the different edges we can find inside human beings, highlighting the decisions they make to solve a conflict. This idea will be relevant for this text and bring us a new perspective to work with, helping us to understand profoundly the way in which Hester is portrayed as Baym provides relevant insights regarding her deeds regarding the situation she has gone through.

Margaret Fuller presented the first impression about feminism, while Wang, Eeckman and Baym depict Hester as a model to feminism, following the concepts given in a first instance by Fuller. In addition, the subchapter "THE TWO-FACED MOTHER" from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* shapes a new perception of woman. Kristeva begins defining a type of mother with a double face: the first one dedicates herself to art and beauty, while the second one is the mother that suffers and sacrifices herself for her family's sake. In Kristeva's own words, the second face is "repulsive and fascinating" (158), presenting a dichotomy in the character of a mother, that represents the power that can be found within women, as they decide to give life to another human being.

The author then illustrates women through different instances in which they get out of their comfort zone and act in order to achieve what they want, demonstrating their strong will. Kristeva exemplifies this concept with prostitutes, stating that they preserve the beauty of a

woman and, at the same time, manifest the strength they need to keep working, all this converging into an image of a woman that can be powerful, dangerous and fascinating in whatever position they are in.

Kristeva concludes linking the woman figure to the concept of otherness, mingling the different shapes of women that had been given. The author portrays how these unusual types of feminine figures are despised by society, due to the divergence they present in relation to the stereotype established by the Puritan community. Hard working, determined, strong willed, independent women are not accepted by society, nevertheless, we are able to witness many women working vigorously, even if they are criticized and discriminated. These features are part of their own identity as individuals, which allow them to divide themselves from the all, becoming a stranger, an outsider, belonging to the concept of otherness, rather than to the standards of society.

As Kristeva depicts, the otherness in a woman should be drawn by her force and captivating personality, fitting with what we are going to describe about Hester's actions and decisions through *The Scarlet Letter*, which fits into the shape of feminism already presented, allowing to blend these two ideas inside one character.

The notion of otherness not only brings the perception of something strange and unusual, but also something rejected and even prohibited, completely uncommon for the society during the years of New England. Due to the factor of interdiction present in the deeds of Hester, it is possible to link the concept of taboo to the idea of otherness, as defined by Sigmund Freud in his text *Totem and Taboo*. Within this book, Freud analyses the word 'taboo' and its meaning, determining that it involves a mixture of conditions that a specific source carries as a vehicle,

including terms such its condition of prohibited, sacred, above the ordinary, dangerous, unclean and uncanny (26).

The condition of taboo can be acquired by anything that is considered eerie for society, developing a rule of custom against it, which translates into a tradition and, finally, into a law (28) that whoever transgress must be punished, hence, gaining the tittle of taboo too. Taking this into account, the analysis of the rejection against the character of Hester Prynne is also able to connect her to the notion of taboo, due to the act of adultery committed by her, her story was marked by punishment, and transformed her into a symbol of taboo by herself, despite the letter decorating her clothes.

The text written by Freud provides a new perspective to analyze the reasoning behind the puritan community's decisions, not only focusing on the female empowerment illustrated by Hester Prynne, but also defining why she had to demonstrate that kind of unusual spirit if the feminist movement was already rising.

The explanation is directly linked to religion, as detailed by Freud, it's one of the most frequent reasons behind the taboo rules, where people state that is dangerous for their souls to follow the prohibited actions as these ones are filled with demonic powers (28). In relation to this, the *Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne* written by Richard Millington, explains that during the period *The Scarlet Letter* was published, the pregnancies before marriage were infrequent, thus, considered unacceptable (79). As religion considered sexual intercourse as something sinful, its purpose was only to give birth to children within the walls of approval given by marriage. However, there were some cases in which women got pregnant without being married, as happened to Hester, which was considered as "a product of profound social disequilibrium" (79), as said by Millington.

Women were considered weak and inferior due to their emotional side, meaning that their feelings can be a matter of concern when it comes to taking important decisions, intervening with the most rational options. Gender roles forced women to be submissive and domestic, always at the service of the male figures present in their families, where the majority of married and not married middle-class women should stay at home (80), as described by Millington. Due to this, their actions were considered doubtful and they were considered guilty instead of men when something happened within the community.

To support what Millington points out regarding the society of the period, it is possible to link these ideas with the contemporary writer Judith Butler who explains, in her book *Gender Trouble: feminism and subversion*, that the oppression women felt have a particular way of being present inside the structure of patriarchy, where it was not really considered as oppression. (Butler, 6). Within masculine culture, it is not recognized that men kept women captivated in their own sphere, they strongly believed that it is part of women to obey them, being just what they were born for. Culture established that women were considered just for their body and nature, and not for their mind and way of thinking, as it is with men, says Butler (17). Fuller confirms this idea stating that as little girls, women have to learn the family duties (82), this only to please men in their families and their future husbands, which is what feminism seeks to change. Butler also defines gender throughout her text, where she develops the idea of gender construction and how the idea of women is constructed through culture and biology:

“When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.” (Butler, 12)

Butler declares that women should not define themselves through what other say or based on their bodies, women should shape themselves through what they want for themselves and walk their own path, even politically speaking. She also adds Freud's and Kristeva's theories about the construction of gender, and the melancholy behind it, as it is formulated by the society and not by themselves. Kristeva is mentioned due to her theories about motherhood and how women is constructed through it as a two faced woman, as mentioned before. And is complemented with Freud's notion of the construction of the ego, declaring the repudiation felt towards someone becomes the founding moment of what he calls the "consolidation" of gender (76). This all is clearly witnessed along *The Scarlet Letter* when Hester decides to free herself from society and follow her own path, making her own decisions and building her own ego outside of her domesticity sphere.

These changes started to surface as the period of the Civil War was near, different proposals were offered by citizens and filled their daily routines with claims of individuality and freedom, as explained by Bradbury and Ruland previously and supported by Millington's words, which also wrapped the ideas of liberty and equality for women, provoking a dichotomy of what women were supposed to be during those years and dividing their beliefs between the emotional life and the republic's idea of a nation (79).

Hawthorne lived through the revolutionary changes that middle class was starting to crave in diverse areas of their lives and, as he had a close relationship with Margaret Fuller, he was able to witness the strength women developed without being afraid of the consequences, gaining their liberty due to their bravery. Hawthorne was the vehicle that transported the new themes regarding female thoughts, explaining their inner conflicts transparently and bringing this

historical change closer to the modification of the culture during the period (82) as clarifies Millington.

Hence, due to the understanding evidenced by Hawthorne, it is possible to propose that Hester Prynne's feminist characteristics and taboo image reflect the counter cultural paradox that was present regarding female figures in the period of puritanism, highlighting her importance as one of the first visible female characters that manifested a feminist point of view.

Hester Prynne: a counter cultural feminist

The concept of female empowerment was not fully acknowledged during the seventeenth century, when *The Scarlet Letter* was first published. This term sustains the idea of women being capable of making their own decisions, gaining power by being given opportunities to build a life for their own. As one of the first feminist known, Margaret Fuller, explained, women don't need to rule to fulfill their lives, they need to fully grow, to develop themselves and live freely, without any impediment (15). All in all, feminism seeks equality between men and women, stating that none of them would be absorbed by the other, and both will have the same opportunities.

Women's lives in the puritan society were expected and restrained to being a caring mother and a submissive wife. In order to be successful, women needed to follow men's orders, and also raise their children considering the ethics established their religion. For this reason, many women's priority was to find a husband with enough money to sustain a family, and as men worked, women stood behind them. Fuller details this situation in the following quote:

“Did marriage give her a sure home and protector; were she never liable to remain a widow, or, if so, sure of finding immediate protection from a brother or new husband, so that she might never be forced to stand alone one moment; and were her mind given for this world only, with no faculties capable of eternal growth and infinite improvement” (Fuller, 82)

In relation to *The Scarlet letter*, the domestic sphere in which women are trapped is clearly reflected, however, the main focus of this novel is the female empowerment image depicted throughout the story in different instances, referring to how women's willpower can

lead them to be free as individuals. Initiating the text, Hester walks among the crowd present to witness her punishment. Most of them were at strongly criticizing her by her deeds, nevertheless, as she walks outside the prison door we are able to perceive a change in the atmosphere: “Her attire, which indeed, she had wrought for the occasion in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity.”(Hawthorne, 82)

Even though Hester should feel ashamed walking to where she will be receiving a punishment, she keeps walking courageously in front of the spectators, accepting the sanction and ignoring the gossips surrounding her. People stopped talking about her, and found themselves being amazed by her proud attitude. Baym discusses that Hester’s behavior relates to the ideals of passion, self-expression, freedom and individualism (403), which are extremely related to the proposal of feminist figure done by Fuller. This idea is supported by the following extract, where Hawthorne depicts Hester with the same words used by Baym: “of an impulsive and passionate nature, she had fortified herself to encounter the stings and venomous stabs of public contumely” (87), shaping the image that amazed the citizens around her.

Considering the period in which this story is developed, it is almost impossible not to perceive Hester’s actions as something unconventional, but filled with a strength never seen before. Hester’s empowered self demonstrates to be an important matter for the puritan community, especially for women. Women were completely overshadowed by men, however, Hester was able to step out the frame established by society and stay in the spotlight due to her passion. Hester’s passionate personality is scarce, but at the same time, is something gripping. She decides to walk among the spectators not with shame but with a fierce spirit. Being this the main reason why in this fragment people seem astonished: it is inevitable to not stare at Hester and

what comes from her rebellious actions, the beauty and fierceness intertwined with a figure full of pride, which also motivates her female neighbors into observe their own situation as women.

Forward into the story, it is possible to recognize Hester's own decisions and will when she encounters Roger Chillingworth. He asks Hester the name of her daughter's father, she decides to keep it to herself and not reveal the name of her lover: "Ask me not? replied Hester Prynne, looking firmly in his face. 'That thou shalt never know!'" (Hawthorne, 113). In this extract, Hester's determination is portrayed, she is not following a man's orders how she is supposed to, demonstrating that she is independent from any man. Moreover, she will not desist on keeping her daughter's father name as a secret, even if this means that her sentence will not be reduced, and illustrating her strong will in this way.

As Eeckman indicates, Hester outstands among her peers, her actions being consistently marked with dignity and with a strong sense of her character (24). Hence, Hester creates a new image of woman within society: an empowered and independent woman. Her convictions gives her the power she needs to speak up for her own sake, without taking into account her position inside society. Moreover, it is exactly her position, an adulterous woman being punished, what makes her braver.

As the story unfolds, it is illustrated that her needlework is very appreciated, even though every citizen knew about Hester's crime, people still demanded more of her work as it is demonstrated in the next fragment:

"By degrees, not very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion. . . .[I]t is certain that she had ready and fairly equited employment for as many hours as she saw fit to occupy with her needle." (Hawthorne, 123).

In this quote, it can be appreciated the fact that, with her needlework, Hester is capable of sustaining herself and her daughter. Hester is never seen asking for any kind of help, furthermore, she is the one helping her neighbors with her work, even if they once criticized her. As Wang states, Hester obtains her self-reliance in economy without asking for God's help doubtlessly. She does not ask help neither from Dimmesdale nor her husband Chillingworth, who are both responsible for her punishment at some extent (896). She finds herself being economically independent instead, and surprisingly kind towards others.

If we take into account the Puritan period, for a woman to be having all the options to sustain a life without the aid of men is tremendously unusual. The puritan society described through the novel does not put up with it in any manner, as Millington depicted the "True Womanhood," is considered a submissive and domestic femininity (80). Nevertheless, Hester still reveals her courage and bravery to sustain her family, and grow as a woman, validating her uniqueness.

Through the following scenes, we witness how the minister declares that Pearl should be removed from the custody of her mother, as an effect of Hester's attitude. The minister strongly believes that Hester will not teach Pearl the puritan's ideals properly. Yet, Hester insisted that she will not give her daughter away, considering herself qualified and a competent mother: "I can teach my little Pearl what I have learned from this!" answered Hester Prynne, laying her finger on the red token" (Hawthorne, 165). Hester defies their suggestion fiercely and stands without any hesitation, appealing at the fact that she is learning from her sentence more than suffering from it. Hester demonstrates once more that her strong will shapes her life, and guides her through the difficulties she has to endure, not asking for someone to rely on and representing the life feminism portrayed.

For this reason, Hester points at the scarlet letter as something material that goes beyond punishment or sin. Furthermore, she portrays the embroidery as something concrete that constantly teaches her and reminds her the best way to live her life, guiding herself through a new path not designed by society. Aside, she sticks to the idea of raising Pearl by herself, against all odds. Being this a clear representation of the concepts that define the new feminine role given by Fuller. As previously said, it was not common for a woman to be economically independent, hence, it was completely unusual for a mother like Hester to raise her children by her own, revealing against puritan's ideal of a passive woman.

As the novel develops, we are able to see diverse instances in which Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale, the young minister of the town, interact with each other. Dimmesdale was considered a strong and intellectual man, and everybody in town respected him. Nevertheless, the doctor Chillingworth started to suspect, the situation seemed rather confusing for him as Hester stood alone the whole time, and suddenly Dimmesdale tried to help her to keep her daughter Pearl, even though Hester was able to solve the situation by herself and keeping distance from the minister. We confirm Chillingworth's suspicions when the identity of Dimmesdale as Hester's lover is revealed. However, it is not until further into the story that we can really observe the true characterization of the couple, when they meet in the forest secretly:

“The very contiguity of his enemy, beneath whatever mask the latter might conceal himself, was enough to disturb the magnetic sphere of a being so sensitive as Arthur Dimmesdale.”(Hawthorne, 290)

Firstly, Dimmesdale is described in this extract as a very sensitive man, corroborated through the story with his heart condition that seems to be worse when Chillingworth learns that he is Pearl's father. Even though the minister depicts a successful man, he also shows a very

emotional side that goes against the stereotypical masculine figure. He is very stressed by the situation and lets the emotions get him, which evolves into a severe heart disease. Secondly, we have Hester's description:

“There had been a period when Hester was less alive to this consideration; or, perhaps, in the misanthropy of her own trouble, she left the minister to bear what she might picture to herself as a more tolerable doom.” (Hawthorne, 290)

Hester thinks of herself as a strong person, able to endure the inner battle that Dimmesdale is having in a better way, while Dimmesdale is struggling hardly. She scolds herself for letting a sensitive man like the minister experience that kind of suffering being she able to help him. He relies on her, and not the other way around that is how is supposed to be following puritan's rules. They demonstrate that a man can rely on a woman and should not be considered weak for doing so, and a woman can help a man and should not be considered a rebel for her deeds. They both are allowed to be independent individuals and encounter their own lives the way they feel right.

Taking this situation into account, Fuller affirms that men and women are both important components of a radical dualism, and even though they seem to be complete opposites, they connect with each other in several edges. Finally declaring that there is not a man completely masculine, nor a woman completely feminine (44). This statement can be applied to the description given previously of Hester and Dimmesdale, where she is illustrated as the strong part whereas the minister is the sensitive side. Just like in Fuller's own words: “fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid.” (44), men and women are intertwined.

Reaching the end of the novel, we encounter the conclusion and final scenes. The villagers certainly looked perplexed and surprised after the events: the young minister confessing being Pearl's father and dying moments later. However, the following quote states:

“But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too.” (Hawthorne, 392).

Here, it is portrayed that after Dimmesdale's death the citizens' point of view changes. The critics that flowed regarding Hester's crime and attitude started to vanish as the time passed by, and her neighbors realized how kind she was even though they directed hard words towards her. They found out that Hester was a humble and strong woman, just taking care of her family in the best way she could. In addition, her honest work brought many customers, which realized that there was beauty within her needlework, besides the crime Hester committed and was punished for.

Due to the confidence and conviction Hester showed throughout the novel, she gained the villagers' trust and admiration. They asked Hester for advice on how to solve their own problems, specifically women:

“Women, more especially—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counselled them, as best she might.” (393, Hawthorne)

Even though Hester's life can be considered as a tragedy, it is important to state that she is also free because of the result brought by the events in her life, which made her brave. In an ensemble of this characteristics, we can clearly elucidate Hester's empowerment, and her change into a clear representation of feminism. However, it was not only Hester the one who decided to change her lifestyle for her own sake, women realized the position they were in, how unfair the society of the period was with them, leaving them locked between the walls of their homes and with no opportunities to grow as individuals. As the quote affirms, they felt unvalued and wretched, and they yearned for a change within themselves and inside the rules established by puritanism. Women carried with them the weight of the new American society in which, as Bradbury and Ruland affirm, was a desire to express independence and democracy, not only in their daily lives but also within literature (9). Women started to empower themselves and sought the equality feminism could bring them, stepping out of the stereotype of the passive female figure just like Hester did inside *The Scarlet Letter*.

Rejection of Hester: otherness and taboo

As it was previously explained, the puritan society followed the values detailed within the Bible, thus, puritanism is based on Christian ideals. It was believed that every person has a mission to fulfill in this world, and if they behaved correctly, faith would guide them through the rough paths of life. Bradbury and Ruland detail these beliefs in their book *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*: “Christian faith in mission, patriotic ideas of settlement, moral notions of the value of plantation, cultivation and honest toil. (28). Their lives were already determined by their religion, giving no chance to decide by themselves what they really wanted to achieve.

Within *The Scarlet Letter*, these prohibitions are clearly evidenced, throughout the novel the reader has several glimpses of the laws the citizens should adhere to, and the boundaries they should keep. All this in order to live under puritan’s faith and to not being punished. As it is illustrated in the following quote:

“As befitted a people among whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful.” (76, Hawthorne)

In the fragment above is portrayed that “religion and law were almost identical”, corroborating that both of them were strongly intertwined. Villagers were not able to differentiate where law and religion started or finished, and they were obliged to comply with any of them. They were pushed to keep themselves carefully sealed within themselves, and obeying the rules established in fear of being publicly disciplined. Freud calls this prohibitions “taboo”, which meaning can oscillate between “sacred” and “dangerous” depending on the culture, as defined in the text *Totem and Taboo*. However, the most acknowledged meaning is

related to the danger, forbidden and uncleanness of the prohibited deeds. Freud also illustrates that who commits these prohibited actions and infringes these laws, also acquires the characteristic of prohibited, as if the forbidden characteristic was transferred to this person, gaining the title of taboo for themselves (25-26).

This case was even more severe when it came to women's position. The female figure was full with passive and submissive stereotypes, which were claimed to be the ideal for a good mother and wife. Margaret Fuller explained that:

“Her youth is to be passed partly in learning to keep house and the use of the needle, partly in the social circle, where her manners may be formed, ornamental accomplishments perfected and displayed, and the husband found who shall give her the domestic sphere for which she is exclusively to be prepared.”(82, Fuller)

Women were taught to obey men and take care of their children, keep their houses tidy and be quiet, stepping out of this domestic sphere meant to break the rules. Doing something prohibited not only meant a public punishment, but also being a taboo and endure public shame and critics. Hence, this is the story *The Scarlet Letter* narrates. People out of the stereotype, women out of the domestic sphere, were considered taboo. Hester Prynne was never depicted as a female figure who fitted the shape of a good wife portrayed by puritans, since the very beginning she demonstrated to be fierce and empowered. Thus, Hester breaking the stereotypes in addition to the crime she committed, made her a taboo. In Freud words: ‘The violation of a taboo makes the offender himself taboo. . . .’ (24). This being corroborated when Hester walks through the crowd at beginning of the story, and people state that: ‘This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die; (78, Hawthorne). They talked about Hester not only bringing disgrace to herself, but also to all the villagers, as they were her neighbors and were

connected to her in some way. Also, they affirm that Hester should die due to her deeds, this in order to not contaminate or persuade other people to commit the same actions, keeping the town safe and clean from sin.

Society limits the possible analysis that people would be able to make if they had the correct knowledge and freedom, configuring the gender tasks. Butler confirms this statement declaring that: “the limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. (13)”. Hester represents a disgrace for the town as she does not follow the patterns traced by society, and the only manner in which the civilians could judge her was with a negative point of view, as they were taught to do so. Their culture limits the analysis by calling it a taboo and rejecting it, not giving any chance to further changes.

However, Freud also considered that the prohibitions made through the word taboo aimed to cut the liberty and enjoyment, against the freedom and the communication between persons (25). Implicating that Hester breaking out from the sphere of domesticity meant that she gained freedom, and not shame. Her liberty was not recognized as such until the end of the book, were women went to her cottage looking for advice as previously illustrated. Hester’s neighbors demanded to know why they were so wretched (393, Hawthorne), their hard words demonstrating the pain they felt while sinking within the domestic sphere, and the urge to be free that raised in their heart. Resulting in the omission of Hester’s state of taboo with a negative connotation.

Along with the concept of taboo, another notion emerged regarding the rejection directed towards Hester. The theory brought by Julia Kristeva is known as otherness, which is identified as the status of peculiarity and oddity that can be found in a person, which implicates the

rejection that might be felt against them. This definition is relevant to Hester's case because of the quality of uniqueness she carries, and the isolation she is pushed to endure. Hence, both concepts, taboo and otherness, can be linked through the negative perception citizens had regarding Hester's strength.

As Kristeva defines otherness, she links this notion with two strong female figures: "Gioconda and Henrouille, in brief, are shown as the two facets of an otherness that cannot be sublimated" (169), where she corroborates the idea that female empowerment can be understood as something that leaves a huge mark inside society, as Fuller affirmed, and that this feminist's ideals are actually defined as something even more stronger than what we are able to illustrate. As no one is able to soothe the huge impression this otherness left in them, leaving them breathless and amazed. Nevertheless, female empowerment is not accepted in the puritan society as explained with anteriority. Women were not supposed to create a life for themselves, neither for their own sake, as breaking out of the domestic sphere for them was strictly prohibited. When Hester and Dimmesdale have a meeting on the forest, it is described briefly what Hester has been through:

"The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her Passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss." (Hawthorne, 300).

In this fragment, it is clear that Hawthorne shapes a new female figure with Hester, she constructs an image of her own thanks to her conviction and what she had to endure due to her punishment. Evidently, she is not part of the stereotypical puritan ideal of woman. It is sad that "Shame, despair, solitude" were her teachers, which is an allusion to the image of how taboo

affected Hester. In addition, these hard words can be also related to the rejection felt against Hester's characterization, hence, a reference of otherness. The phrase "they had made her strong", corroborates how the negative events in her life taught her how to stay strong and endure the situations surrounding her.

Nevertheless, the interpretations that only considers the negative aspects regarding taboo and otherness, and work with it to critic Hester. In a deeper analysis of this quote, we are able to witness that it is affirmed that Hester is a woman who fights against all odds, this in order to find herself, and trace her own path for her and her daughter. And, with this notion, a paradox within Hester's new female role is conformed.

Hester's actions and the consequences she faced for it, cannot be seen just as the way in which puritan society imposed their principles. Instead, it should be unveiled that the meaning actually is "her passport into regions where no other woman dared not tread", as explained in previous quote. Hester's crime leads her to empowerment, and her empowerment is seen as something odd within puritan society. She was alien to what common women were supposed to do, to the domestic sphere proposed by Fuller. It is from this notion of a weird behavior and misplaced characteristics that the term otherness rises regarding her character, and is strongly linked to the term of taboo.

Millington explained that women not only knew the importance of taking care of their families, they were also aware of the importance of "self-reliance, hard work, orderliness, and practical skills" (80), which could lead them to better opportunities in case they needed it, to achieve a better life and happiness. The domesticity and passiveness only brought them disgrace, being repressed and feeling wretched were something they wanted to truly avoid in order to fulfil

themselves. The terms of otherness and taboo were the lines they were not prepared to transgress, leaving them incomplete.

Fuller proposed to “be wise, and not impede the soul. Let her work as she will. Let us have one creative energy, one incessant revelation. Let it take what form it will, and let us not bind it by the past to man or woman, black or white (44). Women should not be sealed within their own houses, under their husband’s glance, even less due to self-repression. They should work hard to achieve their own goals and live their lives at their fullest, not minding where they come from or their skin color. Women, as feminism affirms, should live as free individuals, finding equality in any person.

Conclusion

The concepts of feminism, taboo and otherness are presented throughout *The Scarlet Letter* extensively and are represented in several manners, as it is illustrated. From the moment Hester left the prison to face her punishment at the beginning of the novel, to the instance when Hester was in the forest with Dimmesdale, even until the very end we are able to witness the diverse ranges of empowerment, from Hester's side, and rejection towards her. Within the story, it is possible to grasp that Hester's fierceness leads her to be a taboo, hence, being part of the theory of otherness too, taking into consideration the link between both terms regarding the society in which the story unfolds.

It is important not to interpret Hester's actions as a mere symbol of her punishment, shame or guilt. On the contrary, it is important to analyze a bit further what consequences those features leave within Hester's life. It is relevant to appreciate that thanks to her adulterous acts and penalty, Hester grows as an independent woman who breaks patterns inside the reality of the text. Her character and story cannot be reduced to the otherness and taboo reflected through the citizens' eyes, as it is portrayed in the following quote:

“She assured them, too, of her firm belief that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.” (Hawthorne, 393)

Here, women from town went to ask Hester for advice on how to endure the hardness of being isolated as female figures. She complies and gives them a shoulder to cry on, assuring them that things would change, and that there would be a time where man and woman would be

equals. Hester demonstrates her value as the first feminist taking the steps needed to break the cycle of domesticity, bringing with her other women that started to admire her for the strength she demonstrating at doing so. Without taking into account the punishment she would have to face, and only thinking about her own choices, she broke apart from the puritan ideals.

It is relevant to highlight the positive effect the crime Hester commits entails within her life, and the puritan society. Even though the hard critics were not absent, and she indeed was considered a subject of taboo and otherness, both of these concepts are strongly intertwined with the new notion of feminism. Without the rejection and disgust felt towards Hester, helped her to become stronger and endure what was happening around her, even support Dimmesdale and take care of her daughter Pearl. This idea brings us the notion of paradox, as it is possible to affirm that opposite effects are coexisting inside Hester.

The new image Hester portrays throughout *The Scarlet Letter* can be not only seen as a new image of feminism, but it also can be defined as a counter cultural paradox of acceptance of human nature. Humans have strengths and flaws, and Hester demonstrated that women are part of that humanity, and that female figures have to reflect humanity, and not passiveness. This brought a revelation that Millington discussed saying:

“Despite appearances of coherence and authority, ideologies always contain the seeds of contradiction, dissension, and change; middle-class womanhood, turned another way, revealed radical potential.” (Millington, 80)

In this fragment, Millington states that everything is made of a positive and a negative side, and that paradoxes are continuant in our existence. Our way of thinking will always have a void that will need to be filled in some manner, and that is actually part of our nature as rational animals. In the case of women, this contradiction revealed to have a huge potential, as women

demonstrated to be able to work in different things by their own and without any kind of help. As Butler says, this formulates a new account of gender as a complex construction, not only based in the biology of female figures (47), which was considered a huge develop for humanity.

Through the analysis and interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter*, it was possible to discover the different approaches this wonderful novel could have regarding the different views. It is mesmerizing the manner in which it is possible to compare Hester's life to diverse situations we witness nowadays regarding feminism. In addition, it is possible to affirm that what happened during the puritan period helped us to get to the point in which we stand right now, where women can work and develop themselves freely, without the pressure of society and the isolation Hester had to endure. It is possible for us to establish a convergence between the taboo and otherness, and the feminism, which is linked through the female image and conforms the natural paradox that we are still struggling to accept as human beings.

The Scarlet Letter could be appreciated as a text that works with concepts that were ahead of its time. Therefore, Hawthorne's most recognized work will continue to be an interesting object of study for many scholars to come, as the themes granted by the story represent an infinite source of new approaches, consequently more examination of the varied topics are greatly encouraged, and hopefully it will help us understand the nature of freedom.

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