

**THE SCARLET LETTER:
HESTER vs COMMUNITY**

**LA LETRA ESCARLATA:
HESTER FRENTE A LA COMUNIDAD**



TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

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RESUMEN: En este proyecto final ponemos en discusión uno de los temas principales de la novela de Hawthorne *La Letra Escarlata*: la relación entre el individuo -Hester- y la comunidad puritana. Su contexto histórico trata de un periodo de posturas radicales, injusticias sociales y castigos severos especialmente para las mujeres puritanas, las cuales eran consideradas inferiores a los hombres y cuyos objetivos para seguir perteneciendo a la comunidad eran cumplir con sus tareas de ama de casa, alejarse de los lujos y servir al marido. A continuación, se analizará el personaje de Hester; una mujer puritana que a pesar de verse rechazada socialmente, su pensamiento progresista, su coraje y su constante lucha por salir adelante le convirtieron en una persona libre de ataduras en un ambiente restrictivo y retrógrado. Para ello, se analizarán algunos fragmentos extraídos de la novela en los que se habla de los pensamientos y las acciones morales de diferentes personajes. Además, se tendrán en cuenta el comportamiento y la evolución de la protagonista hasta llegar a verse ‘reconvertida’ debido a cómo interpretó el significado de la letra bordada. ¿Un símbolo del pecado original, o un símbolo de salvación? Esta decisión después le hará sentirse más fuerte y por la cual ha sido recordada hasta la fecha como una mujer anticipada a su tiempo que cambió a toda una comunidad adherida al sistema patriarcal y dogmático.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sociedad puritana – Redención – Castigo – Disensión femenina

ABSTRACT: In this final Project, it will be discussed one of the main themes of Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*: the relation between the individual –Hester- and the Puritan community. The historical contextualization involves a period full of radical stances, social injustices and stern punishments especially to Puritan women, who were considered inferior to men and whose life goals in order to keep belonging to that community must be the fulfillment of tasks as housewife, getting away from luxuries and serving the husband. It will be later analyzed Hester’s character, a Puritan woman who despite she was socially rejected, her progressive thinking, her courage and her constant struggle to get ahead made her a freed-from-chains woman within a restrictive and conservative environment. In order to do that, some fragments extracted from the novel will be analyzed, in which they talk about moral thoughts and actions of different characters.

Furthermore, it will be taken into account the behavior and the evolution of the protagonist until she found herself 'reconverted' due to how she interpreted the meaning of the embroidered letter. Is it actually a symbol of the original sin, or a symbol of liberation? This decision will later make her a stronger woman, and that is why she is still remembered as an advanced woman who changed a whole community adhered to the patriarchal and dogmatic system.

KEY WORDS: Puritan society – Redemption – Punishment – Female Dissent



ANEXO II

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INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) has become one of the most significant 19th century productions of US romantic literature. The author elaborated this extensive novel which keeps enjoying universal fame, especially among the native English speaking countries. His general aim was to go back 200 years before to try to recreate the Puritan setting as detailed as possible.

Throughout the story, Hawthorne provides readers with certain knowledge about the Puritan beliefs and the new conservative code of laws which was established since the first members of the community arrived from England (among the Puritan beliefs were the righteousness and the sovereignty of God). As the reader of this story knows well, it is set in Boston, New England, in approximately the 17th century, and it involves solid religious and moral matters. For fear of feeling rejected and accustomed to following the social, moral and especially religious rules that the clergy imposed, the society Hawthorne portrays criticized and treated cruelly those who did not: "the Puritan belief that no individual action occurs outside the purview of the theocratic society" (Baskett 322).

Within the plot, Hawthorne consciously develops a female main character, Hester, with the purpose of expressing a social complaint about the way in which women were treated in the Puritan world. She is victimized from the beginning by that oppressive environment for committing adultery. It was regarded then as a serious sin that in the majority of cases implied death. Instead, she is condemned to find herself isolated from society and to wear a flamboyant scarlet A on her dress as a mean to openly exhibit her shame and guilt to the rest of inhabitants.

Our main purpose will focus on the discussion of a relevant and controversial topic taken from this novel. It will be based on the conflict between two opposite sides framed within the reform movement called Puritanism: Hester versus community. In other words, the struggle between an individual identity and a socially-determined identity.

This period of conservatism prevented people from thinking freely. Hester as a main character is against these backward ideologies and breaks the barriers; she does not want to belong or keep participating in those conventionalisms. It will cause her a big burden of shame, culpability because of her former sins. Nevertheless, Hester along with the love her daughter gives her, Hester is able to withstand the criticisms of people throughout her life.

Hawthorne also attempts to convey to the reader a deep psychological novel whose main purpose is to ponder and judge the actions and thoughts from different points of view. The main ones to explore will be Hester's and the Puritan community's. In order to analyze the topic of the essay in depth, it would be useful to take into account other characters' moral actions extracted from the novel. There are not only some primary characters such as Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and Pearl but also some secondary ones like the magistrates, witches, etc. This novel shows that each side acts as they think is socially right, taking into account whether their ideologies are conservative or progressive.

In this way, Hawthorne shows that those who do not conform to the prevailing ideology of a specific dominant group would be severely punished without exceptions. Likewise, another issue to discuss that definitely cannot be obviated is the importance of the scarlet letter, its different meanings and how it made Hester a new, freed-from-chains woman in a community suffocated by those strict rules.

OBJECTIVES

- To establish a relation between an individual identity and a socially-determined identity.
- To analyze behaviours, thoughts and moral actions of the different characters in the novel.
- To make the reader aware about the situation and conditions that Puritan women had to endure.

METHODOLOGY

All theoretical sources of the research paper, primary and secondary sources, which have been especially used to write the section “historical contextualization,” have been mainly obtained from print books found in different libraries of Spain (Huelva) and England (York). Information about early colonial America has been also collected from online books, whereas in the section “analysis” Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* was used as a primary source to extract some fragments in order to examine the topic in depth.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

PURITANISM IN NEW ENGLAND. THE PURITAN WOMAN

Before focusing on the novel, the reader should have a general grasp of the historical context in which it is set. Studying the Puritans, as well as their behaviour, customs, laws will be necessary for a better understanding of *The Scarlet Letter*. The author intentionally sets his scenes in the Puritan town of Boston (New England), where he begins to describe what its community was like in detail, apparently, the focus to live in peace and harmony: the Puritan system based on faith. The aim of this point will be then to know what Puritanism stands for and its importance in history. Aside from this, as our project is developed taking into account the point of view of the Puritan woman, the following part will look at female roles of that time and the treatment assigned to them.

Hawthorne seemed to have a vested interest in rewriting the history of the Puritans in New England. For him, writing the novel was an alternative way to look at a past distant from the time when he lived, and to get into a time when prudishness, rebuke and moral punishment, among other aspects, threatened the New World. Hawthorne successfully portrayed a vision of life which he always disagreed with by describing their most distinguishing traits with disdain: stern behaviour and rigidity. Notwithstanding, as he evidences in the Preface, Hawthorne had deep bonds with his predecessors and he even asserted with a sense of shame to have shared some of their features; after all, their blood remained in his veins:

The sentiment is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family has struck into the soil [...] the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust for dust [...] strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine. (Hawthorne, 6, 8)

Thus, for readers, the central axis of his novel turns out to be a critique towards Puritanism, on which the story revolves, since it determined some of the most important aspects in human life: what is moral, ethical or fair.

In our attempt to understand what the novel is intent on criticizing from a historical point of view, it would be necessary to provide a general definition for the term Puritanism. In order to do that, our attention must be focused on its origins and development. It emerged on the basis of ancient Christianity as one of the groups who appealed to the Church for the reformation of certain religious practices. It was known as a radical movement within the English Protestantism of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, Puritanism has increasingly become a difficult term to define since it is a movement which assumes many different forms of expression.

Some historians such as Wilson (7) and Van Engen (21) recognize how arduous it is sometimes to give an accurate definition for words with wider meaning like this case. Bremer and Webster state in their encyclopedia '*Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and in America*' (2006), that providing a definition of Puritanism was actually a hard task for the contributors and it will continue to be an ongoing debate (13).

Puritanism had historical importance during the period of a century, followed by fifty years of development in New England. Its development started in England during the reign of Elizabeth I. By then, the fight for the continuity within the structure of the national Church unleashed several clashes between Catholics and Protestants. The Puritan Revolution also fiercely defied the Monarchy's decision to retain great part of the doctrinal and liturgical vestiges of Catholic tradition. Later, with James I in the Crown, Puritans were chased, and their only option was to move to New England. There, many Puritans founded a Christian colony (1630), Massachusetts Bay in Boston, with the total guarantee of a free expression of worship (Gorski, 37). From this series of events, Puritanism has become one of the continuous factors and a defining feature of the American ways of life and thought.

In a narrower sense, the Puritans were members of an extremely restrictive community. They played an important role in the settlement of America, where they established a society based on a particular version of Christian religion. These members thought convenient to purge the English Church from the influence of Catholicism.

Catholics were their chief rivals, but they also rejected the religious forms of other groups or denominations such as high Church Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Quakers. In fact, Puritans never allowed these religious groups to worship in Massachusetts Bay until mid-seventeenth century (Sammis, 42).

The word “puritan” may be linked to other words like ‘prudish’, ‘sexually repressed’ or prohibitionist’ (Bremer, 1). In other words, attached exclusively to their very restrictive view of religion, they were known specially for their stern, strictly uncritical adherence to their religious commitments. They thought that Christianity must be the focus of human existence, hence they carried it out to the extreme consequences.

Amongst their several Christian dogmas, the main one was the supreme authority of God above human issues. The Puritans believed that humans’ sins could only be healed only by God’s grace, which He bestows on a few elected as it was ‘predestined’. The belief in predestination and the constant search in oneself for the signs of God’s grace marked Puritan culture (Heimert and Delbanco, 15). Furthermore, they believed in having a covenant with their highest authority, which consists in the rigorous application of the ascetic concept of a proper behaviour in return for divine protection (Conforti, 54). This meant a society in which everyone had to be cautious with their acts and strictly obey all laws imposed by divinity. Puritans thought defiance to rules made God furious, hence it was interpreted as the main reason why colonies suffered hardships such as natural diseases or Indian attacks; they were caused by providential afflictions.

State officials or old magistrates were elected to be in charge of ensuring compliance with that pact with God, by means of adopting a stern justice system to deal with illegal practices or with those who were against their religious practices (dissenters). Throughout Puritan history, the sense of responsibility for the maintenance of prosperity was deeply rooted in the colonies. Puritans in their covenant took seriously the fact of not tolerating anyone that would become strayed from the holy prescripts (Vaughan, 199).

Therefore, they resorted to harsh punishments of all types. For instance, the use of bilbo, a kind of sword well-tempered and flexible blade; the cleft stick or the brand for 'victimless crimes' like cursing cattle; exile such as the ones of the Reverend Roger Williams in 1635 and Anne Hutchinson in 1637; or persecutions and even gallows for women accused of practicing witchcraft, events known as The Salem Witch Trials (1692).¹

Punishment is a theme of particular importance in Hawthorne's writings, apart from *The Scarlet Letter*, which focuses on the psychological effects of punishment levied by committing adultery. For example, some of his works talk about persecutions (*Main Street*, *The Gentle Boy*, *The Maypole of Merrymount* or *Alice Doane's Appeal*), whereas in others the author is interested in the thorough description of stern punishments for various misdemeanors, like the ones described in the lines quoted below from *Endicott and the Red Cross* (Hawthorne, 286-287):

...among the crowd were several, whose punishment would be lifelong; some, whose ears had been cropt, like those of puppy dogs; others, whose cheeks has been branded with the initials of their misdemeanors; one with his nostrils slit and seared; and another, with halter about his neck, which he was forbidden ever to take off, or to conceal beneath his garments.

Indeed, Hawthorne's writing style shows a somber framework about intolerance of that society who treated with inflexible severity those ignoring God's commandments. Those who have read Hawthorne might already have a slight idea about what these inhabitants were like and dressed according to their beliefs.

¹ The Witch Trials were a series of events which took place in Salem (Massachusetts) at the end of the eighteenth century. By then, hundreds of women linked to witchcraft were prosecuted and sharply punished, sometimes without conclusive evidence. Later, the same jury signed a 'confession of error' and pleaded for having condemned so many innocents to death. It was a myth the fact that during the Middle Age witches were burned. In fact, this process was considered slow, thus authorities preferred to hang them, a cheap, fast and more efficient method. They found these punishments helpful, so sinners and lawbreakers, who were considered to be Satan's henchmen, could easily find redemption (see Blumberg for further explanation).

Hawthorne in the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* titled 'The Prison Door' portrays Puritans taking into account their clothing: "a throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and grey steeple-crowned hats" (Hawthorne, 45). This can be understood explaining that their clothing represented somehow their way of life in simplicity and modesty. Their way to dress must imply discretion, sobriety and opposition to anything that brings joys to life.

For some historians too, they were regarded as "a set of somber killjoys whose greatest pleasure was preventing simple folk from enjoying themselves, and whose principal object in life was to repress beauty and inhibit human nature" (Morison, cited in Bremer, 107). Nowadays, people often use the term Puritan to describe someone who is strict about sexual morals, disapproves recreation and wishes to impose these beliefs on others.

Apart from following the Puritan code of laws, in Puritanism, their vision of life consisted in promoting the patriarchal values in the American colonies, subordinating the identity of the woman to that of the husband, who was undoubtedly the head of family. According to the patriarchal outlook, women and men had well-defined roles, and each of them was given a different treatment. The family nucleus was formed by parents, children, grandparents and other relatives, adding sometimes servants and apprentices, all of them under the authority of the father. Only if the married people signed premarital agreements, all the assets the woman contributed to the marriage remained under her control; otherwise, they became the property of the husband. In addition, the father represented his family in all political, economic and religious activities of the community (Maier, 71).

On the other hand, during the North American colonial period, women's main function was to perpetuate the species, a risky task in which between 1 and 1.5% of all births ended with the death of the mother. The figures were maintained during those centuries, and that tendency would not change until the second half of the eighteenth century.

Moreover, women did not enjoy the same rights as men, as they were regarded as second-class citizens and they remained subjected throughout their life to the male figure. First the woman was under the paternal authority and when they were married, she was at the mercy of her husband's will, hence there was always a legal subordination to the head of family on which she depended. Nevertheless, both English and American laws recognized the figure of the 'femme sole', which allowed adult women to preserve their properties and dispose of them, as Foner reflected in the following lines:

Social conditions opened the door to roles women rarely assumed in England. Widows and the few women who never married took advantage of their legal status as 'femme sole'. A woman alone, who enjoyed an independent legal identity denied to married women, to make contracts and conduct business... Some widows were chosen to administer their husband's estates or were willed their husband's property outright, rather than receiving only the one-third 'dower rights' traditional in England. (55)

Women were also damned in terms of religion; as it has mentioned previously, due to the patriarchal model and the power of the Church, Puritans had the belief that witches were always female people. They believed in the identification of the feminine with the devil, and many of them ended being caught, submitted to the cruelest tortures to obtain their confession and finally, executed. Sometimes they were directly executed on the basis of mere suspicions, something that was habitual since in many occasions there was not any type of conclusive evidence. The writer Federici in her book *Caliban and the Witch* highlights this obscure phenomenon occurred in both Europe and colonial America for a better understanding of what actually happened during these last centuries: a policy planned not by ignorant peasants, but by the union of the State and the Church, and that definitely could not be unnoticed before the eyes of hundreds of Puritans.

For more than two centuries, in several European countries, *hundreds of thousands of women* were tried, tortured, burned alive or hanged, accused of having sold body and soul to the devil and, by magical means, murdered scores of children, sucked

their blood, made potions with their flesh, caused the death of their neighbors, destroyed cattle and crops, raised storms, and performed many other abominations (169)

She also reveals that such bloody executions were not intended to punish witches, but to show the consequences of any type of disobedience to the authorities. In particular, their aim was to terrorize women to accept “a new patriarchal order where women’s bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources” (170). Federici emphasizes that until the sixteenth century, even living in a sexist society, women had the right to retain a substantial economic independence in relation to the man who disappeared in capitalism, where genders were more differentiated.

The Witch Trials initiated a period in which women were forced to become what she called “servants of the male work-force” (115) and thus excluded from earning a wage. They were held in the free care of the minors, elderly and sick, in the feeding of their husbands and the maintenance of the home. In Federici’s words, that was the female domestic seclusion, the imposition of the second-class status in which women were subjected to men’s wages. (27)

Despite the hard situation that women endured in the colonies of North America, mainly because their fundamental rights were denied, there were some women who rebelled against the role of the male control over women. Even they could stand out on their own merits and defend their own ideas and beliefs in a hostile world of men. Among a small number of women who have been protagonists of history of those times, in this essay we will mention Anne Hutchinson and Hawthorne’s main character from *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester.

Anne Hutchinson is indeed mentioned twice in his novel, considered as a heroine “foundress of a religious sect” (Hawthorne, 155), from whom Hester could have learned and followed her steps to defy women’s injustices. Hutchinson was undoubtedly a notorious woman because of her virtues and ideals in terms of religion.

Unfortunately, her doctrines were not the ones Puritans professed, who were alarmed by the proselytism she achieved. Anne questioned the authority and theological knowledge of some of the most respectable ecclesiastics of the colony as a justification for spreading her own ideas, which were known as ‘Antinomianism’. The Puritans defined it as something that was against human governmental laws (Martin, 56). Her ideas were based more on divine inspiration than on the Bible or the clergy. Therefore, they were not based directly on the Holy Scriptures. The governor Winthrop thought Hutchinson’s ideas called for civil and religious anarchy (Divine, 29). Hutchinson was finally accused of being heretic and seditious, and they banished her to Massachusetts with many of her supporters after having been in prison for a long time.

Hutchinson and her followers moved to Rhode Island, as it was recorded in Frost-Knappman and Collen-DuPont (1997) and LaPlante (2004)’s studies. She left a great mark on the religious culture of the colony, as a large number of her followers started to share Quaker’s beliefs. Anne helped establish the community of Portsmouth in the region that had previously been founded as the Royal Colony of New Hampshire (Morison, 28). After her husband’s death, William Hutchinson, she went to New Amsterdam where she and her children died because of the Indians. Three centuries later, a statue was erected in her honor in the city of Boston. Nowadays, she is still remembered as a firm and convinced advocate of religious freedom and women’s rights.

Together with other women and our fictional protagonist Hester, Hutchinson fought for equality in the North American colonial society, in order to freely express their ideas and religious beliefs. Although they were first misunderstood and punished with harsh punishments such as exile or even death for their audacity, many of them are still remembered for demonstrating their bravery and claiming an equation of rights between men and women.

ANALYSIS

Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* explores the severe consequences of the Puritan system on the individual and how the individual can eventually face up to these consequences. To start with, Hester is considered in *The Scarlet Letter* as a single mother who tries to carry her life along with her baby as best as possible in one of the most austere moments in America's history. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator attempts to give us an idea of how the townspeople were like during that time: "A throng of beard men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded" (45).

In the initial chapters, both the protagonist and the reader will frequently run into this type of people with certain features which differentiate them from other social groups; that is, severe, austere and unfriendly. Hester is also accurately portrayed but this time as one of the victims of the Puritan system. The author created a main character who, like him, was given a Puritan education which she accepted for her beliefs. Nonetheless, both grew up with access to free thinking and thought in a more progressive way; in his case due to his relationship with intellectuals, whereas in Hester's case because of having lived previously in England, which the author idealized. Because of that, they never stopped finding that time stifling, in which women were subordinate to men and whose main objective in life was to serve God.

It had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison [...] Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from the inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader.

It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow. (46)

This fragment belongs to the first chapter of the novel. It ends with the narrator offering one of the plucks of the rosebush not only to guide the reader's understanding and moral learning, but also to try to make disappear that bitter sensation that the story might produce in the reader.

The rosebush has various interpretations linked to the protagonist. Among them, one possible one would be that Hester has never followed the tenets of the Puritan community, being the one fictional woman who did not agree with them and which she considered outdated. The colour of the rosebush might be compared with the one of the letter to symbolize the passion and bravery to face the punishment the Puritans had chosen for her. It also may show us that these qualities can grow in the coldest climates; it means in the harsh situation in which the story was developed. On the other hand, the narrator also mentions Anne Hutchinson formerly, an outcast woman persecuted for believing in other religious doctrines. The narrator suggests that the case of our main character is similar to that of Hutchinson, for she could have followed Hutchinson's footsteps when being in prison.

The novel starts telling her story from the prison. Hester exposes her shame and sin in two settings; firstly, in a closed place as an old jail, and secondly in public, in front of all the Puritan inhabitants. At that moment, the magistrates of the colony had already decided the appropriate punishment for her. On the scaffold with her baby, she is surprisingly shown in proud and obstinate attitude, refusing to reveal the name of her partner in crime, whilst the rest of the citizens, especially women, criticize her as is evidenced in the following lines:

“Goodwives,” said a hard-featured dame of fifty, “I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof if we women, being of mature age and churchmembers in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not.”

“What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown or the flesh of her forehead?” cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die; Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the Statute book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray.” (48, 49)

Hawthorne tries to depict the Puritan women as rancorous and vengeful; not merciful people who conformed to the laws imposed by the elderly people of the colony. They just adjusted to certain laws about the conception of an immovable life, repudiating everything that was against their rules. That is why they reject and turn their back on her after having committing adultery. Today, any reader would interpret this in the same way the author did: there is no worst sin than that of the Puritan people criticizing her.

“The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch, -that is a truth [...] at the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead” (49).

Hester’s sin could have been paid with death; however, the magistrates imposed on her the punishment of embroidering the scarlet letter on her dress as it was not a ‘usual case of adultery. This differentiates her from these women, who do not pity her at any moment, although the punishment the magistrates oblige her to fulfil will be a penalty equally terrible. The reader may have understood Hester’s ‘sin’ not like an act of meanness or lack of care, but like an unwise impulse of love. It is the only slip she has committed in her whole life; to maintain a relationship with the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, result of which will be her pregnancy and the birth of Pearl.

[...] “wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took her baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours.” (50)

As a result of her punishment, Hester will find herself in a world which completely rejects her and settles down in a cottage in the forest, alienating her from the social activity. Nonetheless, from the first moment she will decide not to succumb to the Puritan laws and start facing them, showing with pride at the scaffold what at first sight would be the punishment she must fulfil: the scarlet letter. From now on, that letter would become a sign of self-respect and a way to escape from the hardships of life: “It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself.” (51) In this way, she deals with it by sewing the letter the most stylish possible, with golden thread on a red base, so as to become her sign of identity. However, this scarlet letter will have a different meaning for the Puritan community; instead of symbolizing truth, it rather conceals it, where they place their highest fears and worst thoughts.

Thus two facts could be considered linked to this last idea: the story of a tortured woman, and the torture of the rest of the town as a consequence of her punishment. The scarlet letter may mean a token of shame, for her individuality is portrayed as disgraceful. It is only when she changes her perspective of life and become penitent and a recognized public figure.

For the author, the Puritan congregation does seem shameful and he is explicit about Hester’s punishment: “There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature, - whatever be the delinquencies of the individual, -no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do” (53).

Even though Hester, after being exposed in public for hours and having decided to dress with somber colours, she cannot have strength enough to bare her individual tough situation. The only strength she acquires is because of her entire devotion to her daughter Pearl’s care, despite what they think of her. In this sense, Hester appears as a protective mother rather than a guilty lover; and she is not only the mother of her daughter, but also of a whole society whom she defies with her integrity. For Hester, Pearl is together with the scarlet letter a great pride. That is why, as well as the ‘gorgeously’ wrought letter, Pearl is dressed with the best and most extravagant fabrics.

Readers may specially observe the duality of the main character. She only suffers in silence due to her social rejection, not because of having committed adultery. As it is said above, what actually makes her go ahead with her life is the strong love she feels for her baby Pearl; love is the strength which mitigates the pain. Nevertheless, there is another part in Hester that recognizes she really needs to pay her debt to God. That is why our protagonist returned to New England at the end of the story, to mediate, practice penitence and to be a counsellor especially for women. She wanted to help anyone who could benefit from her experience:

And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. 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.

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. (249)

Hester feels sinful in the eyes of God and she would be able to do anything He ordered her. According to what Hester thinks, the scarlet letter embroidered on her dress is mainly a symbol of remorse but also it helps her escape from the emotional tortures. In fact, Hester Prynne’s condition is related somehow to the delicate situation of her mother (she got married before giving birth and had to cope with many critiques).

But that humiliation and contempt Hester received since the arrival of the baby, along with her sign of shame never prevented her from being a soft-hearted woman. Hester became aware that in penancing diligently, it means to make the decision of sharing

everything she had with the poorest, she and the Puritan community could re-interpret the meaning of the scarlet letter. Thus Hester, as an attempt to heal her soul, makes a living of penitence through needlework, and also sewing for the poorest people, although they still look down on her:

In this manner, Hester came to have a part to perform in the world [...] however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of the human kind. (79, 80)

She thought her good intentions could protect her from the dark feelings and restored her to people's respect, but as it is observed, it was not as she expected. Hester perfectly knows that if she shows her principles to the citizens of Boston, she will be object of higher rejection than the fact of committing adultery. In the following statement extracted from the chapter titled 'Another View of Hester', Hawthorne tells us as follows:

It is remarkable that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. Yet, had little Pearl never come to her from the spiritual world, it might have been far otherwise.

Then she might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect. She might, in one of her phases, have been a prophetess. (155)

The narrator here wants to make the reader think of what could have happened if Hester had manifested her ideals in public, wishing everybody to listen to what she really states. Hester believes she should not be judged for what she does in her life. The fragment indicates she had likely followed the steps of the said Anne Hutchinson.

It should also be borne in mind if she had not had a baby. For Hester, Pearl is both her joy and her sorrow, the origin of the derision.

Sometimes Hester reckons that Pearl is the punishment God imposed over her, and the weirdest is that it seems as if her daughter knows all this very well in spite of her ignorance. At the same time, Hester understands that if she educates Pearl well, both will be sent to Heaven together with her lover the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl's father. But there are also pessimistic moments in which she does not convince herself of having the right of a second chance, and desires to die with the Reverend so as to be in the place that corresponds to them.

The town pleads for another possibility: that Hester is separated from Pearl for their sake so the girl could be educated according to the Puritan religious ideology. This time, Hester had the courage to avoid this: "My poor woman", said the not unkind old minister, "the child shall be well cared for –far better than thou canst do for it. 'God gave her into my keeping!' repeated Hester Prynne, raising her voice almost to a shriek. 'I will not give her up!'" (106,107) Like her mother, Pearl was born in an unfavourable and hostile environment. From the first moment people see her, she becomes the theme of the day for many inhabitants: as she is an illegitimate daughter, is she a child of God or a child of the Devil? Even Hester herself wonders the same. Despite this, her mother never gave up fighting for her child as Pearl is her only support; besides, the reader can observe at the end of the chapter titled 'the Elf-Child and the Minister' that Pearl could have saved her mother from Satan's claws. In fact, what we can examine from this chapter is how pure love between a child and a mother can keep evil things away, as it is evidenced the moment when Hester did not want to abandon Pearl, and later when Pearl unconsciously prevented her mother from going on the dark witchcraft side:

As they descended the steps, it is averred that the lattice of a chamber-window was thrown open, and forth into the sunny day was thrust the face of Mistress Hibbins, Governor Bellingham's bitter-tempered sister, and the same who, a few years later, was executed as a witch.

“Hist, hist!” said she, while her ill-omened physiognomy seemed to cast a shadow over the cheerful newness of the house. “Wilt thou go with us to-night? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I wellnigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one.”

“Make my excuse to him, so please you!” answered Hester, with a triumphant smile. “I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man’s book too, and that with mine own blood!” (110)

Pearl could be considered as a ‘mini-Hester’ because like her mother, she is different from the rest; she can recognize the dishonest and capture the fear and the deception, she does not want to be like the other children but to escape from the harsh reality with her mother. To Pearl, the knowledge and understanding of her mother are completely connected to the scarlet letter; she saw her wearing on her dress and suffered every day. It seems that Pearl had esteem and inclination for her mother’s punishment. The narrator depicts Pearl as ‘*the living hieroglyphic*’ who joins her parents and reveals ‘*the secret they so darkly sought to hide*’ (196).

“*But, in truth, Pearl was the one, as well as the other; and only in consequence of that identity had Hester contrived so perfectly to represent the scarlet letter in her appearance.*” (96). Pearl is also related to the scarlet letter in the sense that both represent a sin. She always insists on people telling the truth, especially Dimmesdale. Apart from Roger Chillingworth, she is the only character in the novel who instinctively recognizes and punishes the hypocrisy of her real father, refusing to kiss him. She is also the person who has mercy on him and forgives him when he finally confesses his sin. In the end, Pearl returns to New England where, similarly to her mother, people already switched their perspectives on Hester and her, and she is welcomed with luxurious gifts and displays of affection.

The story closes with Hester coming back to Boston, where she continues wearing until he died. The final words of *The Scarlet Letter* explain the legend has now concluded;

“so sombre is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow: - ‘ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES’,” (250)

The letter A is a symbol of the original sin, from which nobody can ever break free. All mortals somehow commit sin, which may mean ‘the worst thing you have done’, and many of them never overcome it and end up committing suicide, as happened to Dimmesdale after having confessed at the scaffold. However, Hester is admired because she could recover from the consequences, and the letter A, the environment of sin, paradoxically took her to hope and redemption, but especially to open the citizens’ eyes. The scarlet letter became an *ever-glowing point of light* over a sable field, the atmosphere of Puritanism.

CONCLUSION

The Scarlet Letter is considered a masterpiece whose author manages to show an oppressive and even fiendish atmosphere, result of townspeople for which religion and law were almost the same, as the beginning of the novel expresses. In the last sections it is seen how Hester's punishment goes beyond the mere ostentation of the letter she has to wear: its real agony to live with people constantly judging her without questioning the reason for her behaviour.

The story displays the sternness and rigidity by both Puritan leaders and inhabitants, which help emphasize the moral determinism by which they were guided, blind to any behaviour or interpretation that was against the rules. It has mainly observed Hester's character in terms of her behaviour and what she means to us throughout the novel. It must be pointed out her firm, strong attitude which is maintained in front of the contempt of her neighbours, with fortitude worthy of praise.

She is regarded as the most human character of all who appear, and not in vain stands in a lighthouse in the middle of a dark land, both for her beliefs and for her judgments. The final chapter somehow modifies in a subtle way the image the citizens had of her in mind: to them, Hester swifts from being an unrepentant sinner whom they punish without evidence at first, to become a referent for all, a beacon that illuminates the ways of people who are blind by a faith they profess and that are lost.

There is no doubt Hawthorne created a strong, stubborn and coherent character out of common ideology of that time. Capable of confronting injustice and standing firm in every adversity, a proud woman who did not feel daunted in any moment during her undeserving condemnation and that conveyed to others the need for that pride to face life. Together with other Puritan women like Anne Hutchinson, she is a brave woman who did not give up fighting for their rights and thanks to them, women today in many countries enjoy an important freedom.

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