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Undergraduate Dissertation

**Collective Hypocrisy and its Gothic Dimension in Nathaniel  
Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque  
of the Red Death"**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1878) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) as examples of Gothic literature, highlighting the oppression and hypocrisy of the society and its contribution to a gloomy atmosphere. Through an analysis of these texts, the study highlights how societal influences shape the psychological and moral struggles central to the Gothic genre, underscoring the importance of the community in driving the narrative and thematic concerns of both authors.

**Key words:** Hypocrisy – Gothic – Oppression – Morality – Nathaniel Hawthorne – Edgar Allan Poe

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo examina la novela de Nathaniel Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter* (1878) y el relato corto de Edgar Allan Poe "The Masque of the Red Death" como ejemplos de literatura gótica, destacando la opresión y la hipocresía de la sociedad y su contribución a una atmósfera sombría. A través de un análisis de estos textos, el estudio resalta cómo las influencias sociales dan forma a las luchas psicológicas y morales centrales del género gótico, destacando la importancia de la comunidad al impulsar la trama y las preocupaciones temáticas de ambos autores.

**Palabras clave:** Hipocresía – Gótico – Opresión – Moralidad – Nathaniel Hawthorne – Edgar Allan Poe



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## 1. Introduction: In the Depths of the American Gothic

*“The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters”* – Francisco de Goya

Gothic literature is deeply rooted in its historical and cultural context, particularly the stringent Puritan society of early America and the intellectual movements of the European Enlightenment and Romanticism. These contexts created a fertile environment for authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe to develop their evocative narratives. Originating in mediaeval Europe, characterized by castles and spectral apparitions, Gothic literature has evolved to delve into profound human fears and emotions. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) was one of the first in this style, and it is considered the cornerstone of the genre, inspiring later authors with its spooky atmospheres (Graham 9). From castles to a town square, from the psychological to classical elements such as apparitions and death, or from the oppression of a harsh society to the guests of a castle whose end is predestined, these Gothic elements define the narrative. So stereotypical are its elements that we speak of a “Gothic formula,” meaning that the works become highly predictable when these elements appear. What provides the mystery and fascination for the content despite this predictability is the psychological intrigue it arouses (Graham 9-13).

The rise of the Gothic genre was preceded by an abundance of myths and fantastic stories about the New World brought by European explorers in the early years of colonial America, including stories of mermaids and monsters. These narratives infused the population with psychological power, instilling an inherent fear and paranoia about conspiracies (Weinstock 15). Colonial Puritanism played a key role in the sociocultural development of the time. Its theocracy, in which church and state were directly related, exerted authoritarian control over the lives of the inhabitants, who were harshly punished if

they departed from the established norms. One of the key moments in the history of Puritanism that explains the paranoid fear of conspiracies and the terror embedded in the psychological were the Salem trials of 1692, where dozens of people were tried for witchcraft, executed, and harshly punished. This demonstrates the moral rigidity and harshness of the Puritan rules, thus serving as evidence of the excess of fanaticism, devotion, and intolerance of the Puritan community.

The Enlightenment, an influential movement within the American historical context during the 18th century, propagated ideologies centered on reason, thereby advancing the secularization of rational thought. Punter (179) claims that the Gothic genre emerged as a response to the rationalism and secularization of the Enlightenment, bringing light to strong unconscious mental processes that dominate society, such as obsession and paranoia. Gothic literature presented a deviation from the rationalist foundations of the Age of Reason's philosophical principles. While Enlightenment ideals were embraced in public conversation, in their private lives, intellectuals, scholars, and enthusiastic readers found comfort in Gothic literature as an escape from the period's rationality. In this way, the Enlightenment movement served to encourage the Gothic genre rather than to curb it (Graham 16).

The Enlightenment continued, and the Romantic movement gave rise to two different currents: light Romanticism, based on the positive and optimistic aspects of human life dealing with vital aspirations, while dark Romanticism focused on the negative aspects of human lives, sin, death and tragedy, and was characterized by its melancholic tone and its interest in the macabre and the supernatural. Works belonging to this second type were based on their dark, murky, gloomy and dreary tone (Harsono and Dukut 289). Two seminal works that originate in the dark Romanticism trend exemplify the Gothic genre are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," both of which intricately explore themes such as sin, guilt, moral dualism, and psychological

complexity. Despite having distinct historical settings, they both take a gloomy, psychological approach to discussing moral dilemmas and the human psyche.

*The Scarlet Letter* (1878) is located in the seventeenth-century Puritan New England society, where the people act as a judgmental and oppressive authority towards anyone who deviates from social conventions. Through the use of symbolism and a cynical Puritan portrayal, Hawthorne reveals his preoccupation with exploring abstractions and general truths about human behaviour (Roper 69). On the other hand, in “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842) Poe narrates a party full of aristocrats in Prince Prospero’s castle where the highborn take refuge from a plague that is ravaging the outside world, dealing with themes such as decadence, the inevitability of death and hypocrisy. Both authors, though employing different narrative formats—novel in the case of Hawthorne and short story in the case of Poe—share a common thematic ground within the Gothic genre. Their works emphasize psychological depth, moral dilemmas, duality, and dark aesthetics, intertwining these elements with their plots. According to Roper, both had in common the belief that fiction should be organic, that is, that each element of the story should contribute to a single, predetermined ending (76). The difference is that Poe sought to achieve a unity of effect, that is, emotional and stylistic cohesion by evoking a particular response in the reader, whereas Hawthorne aimed for a thematic unity that would exemplify his personal vision of the consequences of sin, encompassing issues such as guilt, redemption, and societal judgment.

In sight of all this, the present dissertation seeks to investigate the crucial role of society as a central character within the Gothic genre, specifically in *The Scarlet Letter* and “The Masque of the Red Death.” Through an analysis of the conflict between the individual and society, the moral struggle between good and evil, and the inexorable progression towards death, this study aims to highlight the significance of communal dynamics in the development of the plots in both literary works.

## 2. What the Linearity of the Town Masks

The populace assumes a central role in the progression of the plot and the establishment of the omnipresent Gothic atmosphere that penetrates Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Roper 78). Despite belonging to different social classes—a humble, puritanical society in Hawthorne's work and the aristocracy in Poe's—they are directly connected by an underlying cynicism and lack of evolution, characterizing them as linear characters devoid of psychological development. This linearity is directly influenced by social class and religion.

The Puritan setting of seventeenth-century New England provides a striking backdrop for the influence of social class in *The Scarlet Letter*. The puritan elite imposes its standards and ideals on society, creating inflexible divisions. Hester Prynne's punishment for committing adultery with social exclusion and public humiliation illustrates this, highlighting the severe judgment prevalent in Puritan society. The characters' behaviors are constrained by this rigid social structure, making it difficult for them to depart from the the norm. Puritanism deeply shapes seventeenth-century Boston, as its societal constraints guide the plot and actions of the characters. Religion acts as a mechanism of societal control, providing ethical guidelines and perpetuating the guilt-punishment cycle. The community's adherence to these norms reveals the repressive nature of institutionalized power. This inflexibility is evident in the treatment of Pearl, Hester Prynne's daughter in *The Scarlet Letter*, who, despite her innocence and lively personality, is ostracized due to her illegitimate birth. The society's exclusion of Pearl underscores their strict adherence to the rules established by religious and governmental authorities.

On the other hand, socioeconomic status can be observed in "The Masque of the Red Death" through the magnificence and luxury of aristocratic society. Their sense of superiority and disdain for the underprivileged persists unchanging even in the face of the Red Death's

coming. This stagnation in their behaviour reveals their entrenched conviction of superiority and pursuit of pleasure, which persists throughout the narrative. Despite their privileged position, this group of people is consumed by cynicism and hypocrisy, enjoying the misfortune of others while taking refuge in the luxurious fortress. While the poverty-stricken population is dying from a disease ravaging the area, the aristocrats are safe, enjoying parties and luxuries. Religion, in this case, becomes an empty symbol, eclipsed by the pursuit of pleasure, prioritizing survival, and denying the reality beyond the castle walls. As the Red Death looms over them, social class and religion fade in the face of the inexorable advance of fatality, leaving them alone with their hypocrisy.

The influence of social class and religion intertwines with the linearity of the populace in *The Scarlet Letter*, forming a complex network of norms and values that shape the characters' actions and perceptions. In "The Masque of the Red Death," while religion is not a prominent theme, the story explores themes of mortality, decadence, and the inevitability of death within the aristocratic class of the castle guests. Society is deeply committed to maintaining social norms since they find it difficult to sympathize with those who violate them. For example, in *The Scarlet Letter*, the community severely punishes Hester Prynne for her infidelity, sentencing her to social exile and public disgrace, instead of showing her forgiveness or compassion. This lack of empathy shows how committed the community is to preserving standards of conduct, even at the expense of showing sympathy for people who do not fit into their categories. Conversely, luxurious guests inside the castle walls of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" exhibit a similar lack of empathy for the suffering masses beyond. They keep persisting in their self-serving celebration in spite of the Red Death's looming threat, revealing their preference for obeying societal norms above feeling empathy for victims. Similarly, the populace dictates moral standards and acts as judges of those who deviate from societal norms. Despite socioeconomic differences, both

societies in each work share a cynicism and a morbid enjoyment of who challenges or defies established conventions in Hawthorne's novel, and who does not have the luck of belonging to upper social classes in Poe's short story, revealing the dark side of human nature.

### **3. The Symbolic Depths**

*I have always said to my pupils: "Learn as much as you can about symbolism; then forget it when you are analyzing a dream" - Carl Jung*

A close examination of the literary writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne reveals a complex web of symbolism that enriches them with multiple levels of significance. Symbols are useful instruments to express existential concerns, societal norms, and divisions in society. They also provide understanding of the complex aspects of the human experience. According to Shurma, the wider the context is, the more interpretations a symbol gets (113). This emphasizes the idea that symbols have a deep and wide meaning that goes beyond their evident implications. As such, symbols are effective tools that writers employ to communicate complex themes, otherworldly concepts, and deeper levels of meaning in literature.

One of the most important symbols in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" is the attire of characters, that serves as a reflection of their socioeconomic status or adherence to cultural norms. In Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," the opulent costumes of the aristocrats signify their detachment from the external suffering caused by the plague. Conversely, in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne's distinct clothing symbolizes her societal ostracism and defiance against Puritanical conventions. Its interpretation is intricate because it combines several levels of meaning: it is a symbol of Hester's adultery, a mark of humiliation, and a depiction of Puritan society's rigid moral code. Hawthorne effectively highlights this inflexibility in his portrayal of society's

perception of Hester. In addition, this mark captures not just Hester's persona at first but also oppressive attitudes that are prevalent in society as a whole. The following quotation highlights the rigidity of Puritan rules and the pressure from society to publicly humiliate and denounce individuals who stray from morality:

Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast—at her, the child of honourable parents—at her, the mother of a babe, that would hereafter be a woman—at her, who had once been innocent—as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. (Hawthorne 91)

Moreover, as Suleiman (2008) points out, the letter represents art, a talent that Puritan society neglected but the aristocracy appreciated. This points out the disparity between the two social classes—one defined by an aversion to artistic expression and the other by an admiration for it—and makes the scarlet letter a symbol of the social norms that these classes uphold. Because of this, the letter A can also be understood to mean “Aristocrat,” underscoring the pervasiveness of social hierarchy and acting as a reminder of how class differences have become embedded in society conceptions.

In the society portrayed in “The Masque of the Red Death,” excess and luxury are seen as aristocratic qualities. In this story, Prince Prospero, who stands for the aristocracy, throws an elegant masquerade party inside his fortified abbey. This sophisticated occasion serves as a defense against the Red Death's devastating effects, which stands in opposition to the strict and morally repressive culture that Hawthorne portrays. There is a clear contrast between the two social classes as the aristocratic elite enjoys luxury and excess while the Puritan society enforces severe moral standards and public humiliation for infractions. Apart from indicating their social standing, garments serve as more than mere status symbols; they

also function as tools for adhering to societal rules and concealing one's identity, reflecting the concepts of social norm obedience and concealment (Suleiman 98).

Despite variations in dress requirements between social classes, the emphasis on conforming to social conventions underscores the pervasive influence of social class norms on everyday life. As Hester Prynne is shown emerging from jail in *The Scarlet Letter*, those gathered in the crowd are dressed somberly, wearing "gray hats" and "sad-colored garments" (Hawthorne 51). This color palette symbolizes the Puritans' coldness and plain homogeneity, which allow them to blend in with the masses and camouflage their rigorous ideals. In contrast, the guests of the castle in "The Masque of the Red Death" dress in ornate costumes and colorful masks that are referred to as "fine clothes," "strange," and "beautiful" (Poe 5). This establishes a sharp contrast between the society of the aristocracy shown in "The Masque of the Red Death" and that the Puritan society of *The Scarlet Letter*, which are characterized by rigid devotion to traditional customs and antiquated beliefs.

On the other hand, one of the most relevant symbols in the texts is the environment, that encapsulates the manner in which societal detachment is manifested in the settings and their underlying connotations. A dichotomy between external and internal domains is evident. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the jail symbolizes the internal imprisonment, while the scaffold epitomizes the external manifestation of societal judgment. The prison acts as a metaphor of the Puritan community's larger social confinement, reflecting the strict moral standards and punishing measures of their culture. People locked inside its walls are reduced to be representations of the sinful approach of society, being deprived of their humanity, and exposed to severe social criticism. The Puritan public often gathers around the prison grounds, watching freed inmates and shouting their condemnations of immorality. Regardless of the harsh measures imposed by the authorities, the prevailing oppressive mindset of the

people itself functions as a kind of punishment, influencing the story's course as well as the variety of characters it portrays. In the same way, the scaffold reinforces Puritan authority and the community's dedication to ideal conduct by operating as a public location for punishment and humiliation. The structures collectively illustrate the coercive force of Puritan society, constraining individuals both physically and ideologically by moral standards and societal expectations.

Conversely, in "The Masque of the Red Death," the castle serves as a refuge for the aristocratic elite, shielding them from the Red Death. Unlike the prison in *The Scarlet Letter*, symbolizing societal confinement and moral oppression, the castle represents privilege and elitism. However, it also confines the upper class as they seek refuge from impending death, contrasting sharply with the severe consequences endured by the lower social strata. The castle becomes emblematic of social division, emphasizing the stark contrast between the privileged and the suffering. Although the aristocrats are unaware of this at first, the castle can be thought of as a kind of prison where the inhabitants are inevitably doomed by the spirit of death. The festive mood emerges when one witnesses the following: "There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the Red Death" (Poe 3). The chambers within this structure are distinguished by distinct colors, commencing with somber shades and culminating in vivid hues and before descending into darkness, this progress is exemplified in this reference:

The first room had blue cloth hangings on the walls — and blue were its windows. The second room had wall hangings of that blue-red known as purple, and here the windows were purple. The third was green, and so was the glass of the windows. The fourth had hangings and windows of yellow —the fifth of white— the sixth of violet. But the

seventh room had hangings on the walls made of a rich soft cloth which was black, black as night. (Poe 2)

According to Batista-Duarte, this chromatic progression evokes parallels with the cycles of dawn and life itself (7). Starting with the night depicted in blue, the appearance of the first sunlight with bluish-red hues, the onset of dawn with violet colours, green, yellow, and white representing an illuminated and sunny landscape, and again the sun descending down to purple and ultimately to black, symbolizing the end of the chambers and simultaneously the end of the guests' lives, though they are not yet aware. It is an imprisonment that ends up being eternal, not because of a sin as in *The Scarlet Letter*, but similar to the Puritan society, due to selfishness towards those who do not belong to your same social class or ideals.

Moreover, in *The Scarlet Letter*, the scaffold symbolizes the harshness of Puritan society, where people gather to witness punishments and sermons, serving as a constant reminder of societal cruelty and oppression. This location highlights the considerable influence that Puritanism exerts, even in the absence of the populace. This is exemplified when four key characters—Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl—encounter each other at this juncture following a strange and supernatural phenomenon illuminating the sky. While the populace may be absent, the enduring impact of Puritanism is evident, arising from years of witnessing numerous deaths and punishments, thereby serving as a continual reminder of moral constraints even in their lack of presence. Furthermore, one of the most significant contrasts to the scaffold is the forest. The forest is an oasis where people who desire to be free from constraints can escape. Nature is described by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* as wild and sympathetic, untouched by higher truth or human law: “Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth—with the bliss of these two spirits!” (Hawthorne 250). Poe, on the other hand, depicts the outside world as risky, whereas the castle provides an illusory

perception of security: “Here they could forget the sickness, the Red Death. The outside world would be left to take care of itself” (Poe 2). Even though it might help them survive, the visitors’ lack of empathy keeps them inside and makes their vain attempts to escape a deadly disease.

#### **4. The Darkness of Hypocrisy**

*“Monsters are real, and ghosts are real, too. They live inside us, and sometimes they win”* - Stephen King.

The works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe are distinguished by their deep exploration of Gothic elements and their ability to create oppressive and suffocating atmospheres that immerse the reader in a world of darkness and mystery. In *The Scarlet Letter* and “The Masque of the Red Death,” both authors unravel the darkest aspects of human nature through their portrayals of society and individual psyche. This chapter aims to examine how Gothic elements shape the characterization of the populace in both works, revealing the deepest fears and collective anxieties of their respective communities. According to Weinstock, “both Hawthorne and Poe are committed to endowing the Gothic with literary artistry through a complexity of characterization that includes explorations of aberrational psychology” (37). Velella further notes that Hawthorne and Poe viewed humanity as inherently flawed, marked by sin and morbidity (1). Their works critique hypocrisy and oppression while delving into themes of death and the human psyche. Through detailed analysis, this chapter illuminates universal themes of oppression and salvation in Gothic literature, examining how these elements resonate within the depicted populations.

Hawthorne considered that every person is made up of three faculties: the heart, the mind, and the soul, as Roper explains (73). Different elements are stressed in both of the stories: *The Scarlet Letter* concentrates on the soul, while “The Masque of the Red Death”

emphasizes the mind. The overarching goal of both projects, regardless of their differences, is salvation. Poe's aristocratic people employ reason and logic to avoid death inside Prince Prospero's residence in an attempt to find earthly salvation, as proposed in this quotation from the beginning of the short story: "But Prospero, the ruler of that land, was happy and strong and wise. When half the people of his land had died, he called to him a thousand healthy, happy friends, and with them went far away to live in one of his palaces" (Poe 2). On the other hand, the Puritan community in Hawthorne's work pursues salvation based on their religious ideologies, promising happiness and prosperity beyond the earthly realm and death. This Puritan thought is reflected in the following quote, where Dimmesdale tries to convince Hester to confess Chillingworth's name so that both can free themselves from the sin that haunts them: "Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee, and the sorrow without" (Hawthorne 94). These communities endanger others in their pursuit of salvation. People such as Hester and Pearl face a life full of suffering and horror as a result of the Puritans' severe condemnation and punishment in Hawthorne's book. When he writes, "Let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart" (Hawthorne 75), the author exemplifies this distance and critical mentality. On the other hand, when the elite in Poe's narrative say: "They would leave the outside world to care for itself" (Poe 2), they are demonstrating a lack of empathy and ensuring their own survival.

The gloomy and oppressive atmosphere in both works is essential to create a mysterious experience for the reader. Colors are key and meaningful, as the use of a palette of dark and mysterious colors emphasizes this murky and gothic atmosphere. Hawthorne and Poe's fascination with the unknown and the supernatural is reflected in the suffocating feeling of their works, where dim and diffuse light highlights ambiguity and mystery. Hawthorne employs the technique of "chiaroscuro" to blur the boundaries between light and darkness,

emphasizing the ambivalence and duality of Puritan society (Graham, 27). This technique is used in descriptions of the population's attire and in the ambiance of relevant scenes, such as in this fragment related to the description of the jail: "Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front" (Hawthorne 52). Velella suggests that Hawthorne and Poe delve into the darker aspects of human nature, portraying the murderous, abusive, and guilt-ridden sides of mankind (9-11). Their exploration reveals a pessimistic view of human nature, suggesting little reason for optimism. This aligns with the mentioned oppressive attitudes of the townsfolk in both works that collaborate as a main factor in adding layers of terror and a sense of mystery. In "The Masque of the Red Death," darkness is present as night approaches, despite the colourful castle's rooms. The narrative conveys an increasing sense of fear: "But into the seventh room the dancers do not go, for the red light coming through the windows, and the blackness of the wall hangings, make them afraid — and he who enters hears more deeply the striking of the great black clock" (Poe 3). The difference between both works is that the Puritan society maintains a gray, cold, and muted color scheme throughout the entire narrative, emphasizing the coldness of their Puritan behavior, while in Poe's aristocratic population, darkness is occasional as night approaches and death looms.

In both stories, the pervasiveness of moral and physical illness acts as a Gothic element, affecting not just the residents of the town but also those outside. This ill-luck ultimately affects both the local populace and highlights the Gothic literary canon's central theme: death. In the case of the Puritan society, this illness manifests in their own hypocrisy and moral rigidity, which leads them to live enclosed in a world of inflexible social norms, this becoming their daily poison, living enclosed in established norms. As Graham points out, Gothic literature, especially in the hand of Hawthorne, does not lie too much on the surface,

but on the human psyche (22). Moreover, Weinstock affirms that Poe follows a pattern of enclosure, constriction and victimization in the content of his works since he believed that the great horror is the human failure to understand the world in front of us, making reference to moral decisions or attitudes as an element of horror and darkness (35).

This moral illness is reflected in the oppressive attitude of the townsfolk towards those who do not conform to their standards, as shown in this quotation: “Let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart” (Hawthorne 75), where the scarlet letter symbolizes the moral illness infecting Puritan society. In the case of “The Masque of the Red Death,” physical illness manifests as the plague that lurks outside its walls, while the hypocrisy and moral indifference of the aristocrats make them victims of their own sickness. The obsession with survival at the expense of others reveals the moral decay infecting the aristocratic town. This moral and physical duality, where the disease is both internal and external, adds a layer of terror and mystery, highlighting the fragility and corruption of the human condition. However, this fascination with a past through an aristocratic and decadent lens was “counterbalanced by accounts of criminal underworlds, incarceration and individual corruption” (Lloyd-Smith 7). Thus, the aristocracy became a recurring feature of Gothic fiction, yet it was usually portrayed in a dark manner where characters were often used as tropes for villains or malicious intentions.

Indeed, the presence of a supernatural aura surrounding the character of the town makes them an essential figure in these Gothic novels. The townspeople are clearly present even in situations where they do not participate. The characters are plagued by more than just their physical presence; they also live in perpetual anxiety of being judged harshly for breaking social rules and of being severely oppressed by Puritan ideals. This fear is depicted in Hawthorne’s words: “Not to thee! But if it be the soul’s disease, then do I commit myself to the one Physician of the soul! He, if it stand with his good pleasure, can cure; or he can

kill! Let him do with me as, in his justice and wisdom, he shall see good” (182). In this quote, Dimmesdale refuses to be attended by Chillingworth as his doctor, considering that his only salvation is to heal his soul. This thought of a Puritan clergyman reflects the harshness of the ideologies even for someone directly belonging to the church and the dissemination of such oppressive ideals. The aristocratic community is clearly present in “The Masque of the Red Death,” both in the celebratory confinement that is meant to shield them from the disease that is apparently destroying everything outside and throughout their stay inside Prince Prospero’s palace: “Nevertheless, it was a happy and beautiful masquerade. And you may be sure that the clothes the dancers chose to wear, their costumes, were strange and wonderful” (Poe 3). On the other hand, the personification of the ghost, who appears as a guest and serves as a reminder that death can strike anybody at any time, also represents the lower-class community that is dying outside the building. Death is simultaneously present everywhere and nowhere. This spectral presence demonstrates the inevitability of death, whether you belong to a high class or not: “He was tall and very thin, and covered from head to foot like a dead man prepared for the grave. The mask which covered his face — or was it really a mask? — the mask which covered his face was so much like the face of a dead man that the nearest eye could not see the difference” (Poe 4). This eerie figure personifies death, and the reddish-black color scheme fits well with the ghostly look that ultimately drives out the hypocritical and wealthy people residing in the castle: “Now they knew that it was the Red Death itself that had come in the night. One by one the dancers fell, and each died as he fell. And the fires died. And the clock stopped. And darkness and decay and the Red Death ruled forever over all” (Poe 5).

This deterioration is also related to the physical condition of Dimmesdale as a result of his anxiety and dread of Puritan judgment. An example of this somatization is clear in the following quotation: “His voice had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay; he was often

observed... to put his hand over his heart, with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain” (Hawthorne 145). This physical representation of oppression in society exemplifies the Gothic emphasis on mental suffering even for someone belonging to the religious class. Another example of repression is the scarlet letter itself, which serves to mark and condemn Hester until the end with the aim of reminding her of the consequences of deviating from the established Puritan norms in society at the time:

Man had marked this woman’s sin by a scarlet letter, which had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, save it were sinful like herself. God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child, whose place was on that same dishonoured bosom, to connect her parent forever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven! (Hawthorne 105)

The dark nature of the letter A and Dimmesdale’s somatization as a result of defying Puritan rules illustrate how cruel individuals can be, especially when they act in unison and lose all sense of what they really are.

Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne explore the dark sides of human nature and society in Gothic literature. Hawthorne exposes the hypocrisy of Puritan culture and American religious leaders through the Gothic (Graham 29). Through complex storytelling, both authors examine illness, mortality, and societal injustice while illustrating human struggles. Their vibrant surroundings act as a metaphor for moral decay and human frailties as well as a backdrop for the protagonists' inner battles. These works mirror our inner demons and deepest anxieties, forcing readers to confront their own darkness.

## 5. The Eyes of Death and the Danger on the Inside

*“When an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived. When, however, it forms its judgment, as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound and so unerring, as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed”*

— Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

The depiction of societal dynamics amid darkness and mystery in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* reveals deep dichotomies that influence human conduct. These pieces explore issues of individuality versus community, chaos versus order, and the entwined perspectives on life and death. This tension manifests in scenarios where characters prioritize their own survival over the suffering of others, thereby compromising their moral integrity, or alternatively, maintain their moral integrity by addressing the needs of others, even at great personal risk. This is evident in the compassionate attitude of Dimmesdale towards Hester and Pearl, as he risks being judged by others.

The first dichotomy, seen in *The Scarlet Letter*, equates order with adherence to established rules, while defiance leads to punishment, as is the case of Hester:

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. (Hawthorne 57)

Hester is forced to accept her punishment for having an affair with another man different from her husband on top of the scaffold as she is being released from prison. In this instance, Hester is seen as representing chaos, whereas the Puritan society that observes other people's tragedies is seen as order since they adhere to social norms. In "The Masque of the Red Death," order reflects the apparently safe aristocratic enclave in the castle, while chaos depicts the less fortunate social classes outside. At the end of the novel, chaos overthrows the aristocratic order, highlighting mortality and human fragility: "And darkness and decay and the Red Death ruled forever over all" (Poe 5). The themes of societal self-delusion and pessimistic attitudes that keep people from looking past their comforts and salvation are present in both works.

This idea is directly related to the following dichotomy: the individual versus the community. The Puritan society depicted in *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates a propensity for group judgment as it develops into a society in which everyone must follow the rules and dismiss any hint of personal judgment. Hester Prynne, who challenges Puritan authority with her detached behaviour, serves as an illustration of what occurs when you stop following the herd:

Now, good Sir, our Massachusetts magistracy, bethinking themselves that this woman is youthful and fair, and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall, —and that, moreover, as is most likely, her husband may be at the bottom of the sea, —they have not been bold to put in force the extremity of our righteous law against her. The penalty thereof is death. But in their great mercy and tenderness of heart, they have doomed Mistress Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom. (Hawthorne 71)

In this fragment, it is explained that Hester has committed adultery with an unknown man. Adultery is considered a sin in the eyes of Puritan society, so the punishment would be death if the man's whereabouts were known, but as this is not the case, she must remain on the scaffold for hours with the baby on her breast and the scarlet letter as a mark of eternal penance. Hester's adultery and subsequent punishment for it by Puritan society are detailed, showcasing her defiance as an individual and the harshness of societal constraints. Similar to Hawthorne's writing, "The Masque of the Red Death" exhibits a contradiction that draws attention to the differences between members of lower socioeconomic classes and the aristocracy. Prospero, the prince and the owner of the fortification, seals the gates shut to protect only his privileged guests, demonstrating how the privileged upper class cruelly observes the suffering of the people outside the fortress gates: "The gentlemen, after they had entered, brought fire to heat the iron of the gates to make them close so firmly that nobody could open them" (Poe 2). This behaviour demonstrates a lack of sympathy for people who are considered as lower socioeconomic class. Both pieces examine the conflict between social conformity and individual rebellion, such as Hester's rejection of society standards, highlighting the differences between individual and community.

The third dichotomy explores perspectives on life and death. In Hawthorne's work, Puritan society revels in death, finding pleasure in the suffering of others:

Of an impulsive and passionate nature, she had fortified herself to encounter the stings and venomous stabs of public contumely, wreaking itself in every variety of insult; but there was a quality so much more terrible in the solemn mood of the popular mind, that she longed rather to behold all those rigid countenances contorted with scornful merriment, and herself the object. (Hawthorne 63)

This shows how people enjoy insulting, verbally assaulting and taking pleasure in the suffering of others who are different from themselves. In this way, they attract death, as long as it is not their own.

In contrast, in Poe's work, the people seek the opposite: to ward off death through their own survival while preferring the death of others. The vital need for the guests of the fortification is escaping their own deaths, which highlights their indifference to external deaths as long as they can avoid their own demise. They seek to forget that death lurks, though ultimately, it is inevitable. This desire is reflected in their effort to remain ignorant of external events, as in this quotation: "Here they could forget the sickness, the Red Death" (Poe 2). This cynicism about preferring and enjoying the suffering of others creates a murky, dark atmosphere behind these attitudes that guides the plot and the reader into a gothic world full of darkness. This incites and awakens a terror towards life and not so much towards death. We find ourselves facing a sense of fear of life, of the shabby and carefree attitudes of the people. The terror is not only present in death, but also in life and in the selfish attitudes of the society. This behavior is terrifying and makes one wonder about the limits of human potential.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is society that looks down on Hester, Pearl and all those who are not connected to the established and the morally correct: "Accordingly, the crowd was sombre and grave. The unhappy culprit sustained herself as best a woman might, under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom. It was almost intolerable to be borne" (Hawthorne 63). In Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," death observes society from the shadowy nook where the clock strikes the chimes. Poe portrays this eerie presence in dramatic detail:

And yet all this might have been acceptable — but the masquerader whom nobody knew had made himself look like the Red Death itself! His clothes were spotted with blood. And the mask over his face was covered with the terrible red spots...or perhaps it was indeed his face! (Poe 4)

In “The Masque of the Red Death,” death observes life, and in *The Scarlet Letter*, life observes death, thus demonstrating that they are not so separate or distant, in fact they continually cross each other with complicit glances. In both, danger is thought to be outside, but is always to be found within. Danger remains inside the inflexible mentality of the people, inside the castle in the ghostly representation and in the attempt to defy death, inside society, and not outside the castle in Poe’s work or in the forest in Hawthorne’s work. Danger lurks in the oppressive attitudes of both societies.

Hawthorne and Poe revealed the fundamental dangers of societal rigidity and the human tendency towards self-delusion through their narratives. These pieces ultimately operate as a reminder of the vulnerability of society’s structures as well as the conflict between chaos and order, individuality and community, and life and death. As the characters navigate these dichotomies, they confront the unsettling reality that danger often lies not in external threats, but within the issues of societal expectations and human nature itself.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study of the role of the people as the main character and a factor of a gothic environment in *The Scarlet Letter* and “The Masque of the Red Death” reveals the importance of the role of the community in the configuration and development of the plot. Society is not secondary in either work, but plays a dynamic and key role in the development of the content by acting as a social agent driving the narrative action. The society of the two works functions as a mirror of the internal struggles of the characters —oppressed by the puritan community, or by

their own hypocrisy— which brings complexity, mystery and terror to the narratives. The dichotomies between the individual and society, the moral dualities between right and wrong, what is marked by society and what one feels are pivotal aspects, closely related to the recurring themes of oppression and social hypocrisy, which shape the gothic atmosphere by exploring the tensions of the human condition. The compositions are also influenced by the inexorable aspect of fate and death, adding fatality and despair to the works, thus emphasizing the fragility of human existence.

The dominance of society is evident in each relentless oppression turning the community into a powerful entity that controls the lives of others at its pleasure and whim. This evidence emphasizes the fundamental notion that a person is inextricably tied to their social environment by demonstrating how social rules and conventions affect both the conduct of the individual and others around them. By analyzing Hawthorne's novel and Poe's short story, it becomes clear how the Gothic genre provides a framework for exploring themes such as morality, death, and community tensions. It also serves as a reflection of the oppressive societies' excessive power and control, whose cynicism both highlights and defines the Gothic condition present in both works.

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