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Challenging Social Standards: Women's Struggle in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Scarlet Letter*

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to analyze the limited role of women in a male-dominated society. To illustrate this, I will use as examples the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”, published by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892, and the novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Despite being written at different times, both literary works are set in Puritan society. Through the comparison of the female figures, the theme of oppression and women’s struggle is presented, along with other sub-themes such as motherhood and madness, and their consequences. In addition to this, I will examine the authors’ perspective in presenting women’s reality by means of the narrative techniques and the presence of symbols in each work as strategies to give a feminine voice to that fight. Therefore, the combination of all these elements (narration, symbology, themes) will help us to understand the evolving perception of women in a tireless struggle for equality in a sexist world.

Keywords: Puritan Era; Charlotte Perkins Gilman; Nathaniel Hawthorne; Oppression; Women’s Struggle; Voice.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo trata de analizar el limitado papel de la mujer en una sociedad dominada por hombres. Para ilustrarlo, utilizaré como ejemplos “The Yellow Wallpaper”, una historia breve publicada por Charlotte Perkins Gilman en 1892, y *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), de Nathaniel Hawthorne. A pesar de haber sido escritas en diferentes momentos de la historia, ambas obras literarias están ambientadas en la sociedad puritana. A través de la comparación de las figuras femeninas, se presenta el tema de la opresión y la lucha de las mujeres, junto con otros subtemas como son la maternidad y la locura, y sus consecuencias. Además de esto, examinaré la perspectiva de los autores al presentar la realidad de las mujeres mediante las técnicas narrativas y la presencia de símbolos en cada obra como estrategias para dar voz femenina a esa lucha. Por ello, la combinación de todos estos elementos (narración, simbología, temas) nos ayudará a comprender la evolución de la percepción de la mujer en una lucha incansable por la igualdad en un mundo sexista.

Palabras clave: Era puritana; Charlotte Perkins Gilman; Nathaniel Hawthorne; opresión; lucha de las mujeres; voz.

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INTRODUCTION

Puritanism is a religious movement that emerged at the end of the 16th century in England with the aim to purify the Church of England from what they viewed as remnants of Catholicism and various other perceived corruptions. However, it was not until the beginning of the 17th century that Puritanism arrived in North America (Kang, 2009). With the origin of church Reform in England, it was agreed that “men were duty-bound to marry and follow the example of the patriarchs, while women were destined to married, to labor in the household, and to subject themselves to the rule of their husbands” (Westerkamp, 2020, p.14). Later, with the establishment of Puritanism in North America, this notion of inequality also came there. Puritanism was rooted in a patriarchal system that controlled all areas of a woman’s life restricting her ability to develop her intellectual and even spiritual side. In fact, Westerkamp (2020) stated that this religious movement brought the end of the few institutions that fostered women’s autonomy.

In contrast to some aspects of the Puritan movement, Feminism emerged as an evolving movement that challenges traditional gender roles and promotes gender equality. Feminism is defined as an “umbrella term for a number of cultural phenomena related to the ever-deteriorating situation of women under the patriarchal status quo” (Malinowska, 2020, p.1). According to Malinowska (2020), the term Feminism was first coined by Charles Fournier, a radical socialist and philosopher, as a way of designating all those activist mobilizations in favor of women’s suffrage. The main idea was to put an end to the subjugation of women’s roles in both the private and social spheres, and thus reducing the gender gap. Usually, the Feminist movement is categorized into four distinct waves, but it is significant to underline the importance of the first one as it represents the foundation for the liberation movement. The First Wave began to spread across Europe from the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century, but it was in the United States

where it reached its highest point. Feminism was driven by the ideas articulated in works such as John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, 1869 and Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792. The focus of First-Wave Feminism was primarily on achieving legal and political equality for women, including the right to vote, property rights, and access to education and employment opportunities. Therefore, the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage was created. As a result of these first movements, women were able to acquire the right to vote (Malinowska, 2020).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was a very prominent writer, activist, and feminist. She was even considered a role model for future generations because of her lifestyle and all those unorthodox ideas which were far away from what a woman was expected to follow. Her childhood was marked by a painful event: her father abandoned her family. As a result, her mother was unable to take care of the Perkins, so they grew up with the paternal side of the family (Lemert, 2000). In 1884, she married Charles Walter Stetson and suffered from postpartum depression after the birth of her only child, Katherine. Consequently, she was treated by one of the most well-known neurologists of the day, Dr. Weir Mitchell, who specialized in women's mental disorders. She was prescribed "the typical Victorian Period rest cure" (Ozyon, 2020, p.116), a highly controversial treatment that he pioneered. Hence, she had to limit her physical and intellectual activity as much as possible (Ghandeharion and Mazari, 2016). However, after months of following the doctor's instructions, her illness became even worse, and she reached a total mental breakdown. Finally, the marriage divorced. She moved to California where she participated in some feminist organizations such as The Woman's Alliance, The Pacific Coast Woman's Press Association, The Ebell Society and The State Council of Women. In addition to this, she wrote poems, essays, and short stories. She got international acclaim with her main work *Women and Economics* (1898), but another

major work in her literary career is titled “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). This short story was written in 1890 but it was not published until 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. She continued her career as a writer and lecturer of women’s issues, labor, and social reform. On her return to the West, she married her cousin. In the end, at the age of 75, she committed suicide due to the severity of her cancer disease (Horowitz, 2010).

Nathaniel Hawthorne (Salem, Massachusetts, 1804-1864) was a relevant representative of the US Romance Tradition, and he was also a descendant of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He belonged to a Puritan family, so his works tended to have Puritan traits. He studied at Bowdoin College, and then, he became interested in the literary world. He began writing short stories and articles in newspapers. He published anonymously his first novel *Fanshawe* (1828). However, it did not have the repercussion he expected, so he tried to destroy the copies of that work (Swann, 1991). Throughout his life, he pursued a career in public office since he did not earn enough money from the publication of his works. By 1841, he joined Brook Farm, which was a popular transcendentalist community at the time created by George Ripley. The main aim of this kind of community was to achieve a stronger connection between the individual and nature as well as be able to respect and debate the different points of view (Savory, 2015). Meek (1970) explained that Hawthorne and other transcendentalists were concerned with life in nature, the relationship between appearance and reality, and the necessity of moving on from past cultural and social ideas. The next year, in 1842, Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody. They settled at the Old Manse, where he published *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). He worked as a surveyor at the Custom House of Salem, but finally, he was dismissed from the job due to political reasons —an experience he recounts in *The Scarlet Letter*’s introductory chapter: “The Custom House”. However, while he was still working there, he began to write *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Although all his works put

transcendentalist knowledge into practice, this latest work goes even further. It features an “uncompromisingly self-reliant” (Meek, 1970, p.4) female character and demands a new model for society.

Both *The Scarlet Letter* and “The Yellow Wallpaper” were published in the 19th century, being related to the Puritan period and its features. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the main character, Hester Prynne stands as a symbol of courage. She has been in prison, has raised a daughter in solitary confinement, and is punished for adultery by the town where she lives. Despite this, she follows her own instinct for survival without being manipulated by a man or even by conservative, misogynistic ideals prevalent in Puritan society. On the other hand, the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, an unnamed woman, is portrayed with a lack of agency. Although not much information about her can be found, the secrets of her feelings are kept in her diary. The protagonist suffers from nervous depression, so her husband, who is also a doctor, prescribes her to do nothing, which further aggravates that problem.

This essay aims to explore and compare the roles of these two women in two literary works that reflect the dynamics of a male-dominated society. It will examine how female characters attempt to find a place in society divergent from societal patriarchal norms. In addition to this, it will consider the authors’ perspective in presenting women’s reality as one story is written by a man and the other by a woman. For this purpose, some unique and representative elements from both works will be also elucidated to offer understanding of the evolving perception of women.

EXPLORING FEMALE ROLES: PROTAGONISTS IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER” AND *THE SCARLET LETTER*

This section aims to present and analyze the role played by the two female protagonists in the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, who endure a sexist society characterized by gender inequalities. Key points of both works will be examined, highlighting similarities and differences to provide a deeper understanding of the distinct ways in which the author depicts women’s experiences.

1. “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”

1.1 Voiceless in Society: Exploring the Protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the protagonist is presented as an unnamed woman. She is the image of “female dehumanization, denial of voice and intellect” (Anasiudu, 2022, p.323). This sense of dehumanization is seen through the degrading treatment of the protagonist. She is treated as an object rather than as a person. In addition to this, her welfare and her opinion are not considered by her husband, who behaves like a controller. The female character is also related to the conception known as the “Patriarchal woman” (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016, p.120). This concept is defined as the social norm internalized by society, in which women conform to the conventions of patriarchy, including limitations on pursuing education, accessing careers, and even on their basic rights. Thus, they do not aspire to anything beyond the roles of wives and mothers. All these limitations stem from what are called traditional gender roles. According to Ghandeharion & Mazari (2016), biology is also a cause of these clear differences in genres due to the way masculinity and femininity are determined. The issue of femininity is seen as a weaker aspect in comparison to the masculine to perform any function, or even it is also related to the impossibility of developing oneself in society.

1.2 Exploring Narrative Techniques in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is a short story that was published in 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. It aimed to highlight the patriarchal society of the time and the gender roles through the sense of a woman’s disempowerment and voicelessness within the marriage and in society at large. Although the narrative involves different characters, they are not really developed because the story revolves mainly around the figure of the female protagonist. The story is told by a first-person narrator, who expresses her feelings and simultaneously represses them. This repression was caused by the social pressure and beliefs of the time, as showing emotions could be considered dangerous or inappropriate, moreover, women should be submissive and obey men. This sense of repression is seen when she comments “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (Gilman, 1892, p.647). Thus, she is forced to keep her feelings to herself because she is misunderstood by her husband, and she even considers this situation as something regular within the marriage.

According to Eshghi (2013), the narrator should also be regarded as unreliable. This unreliability may arise from either her mental illness or from the oppression she suffers. Thus, it is difficult to know to what extent the story the woman narrates is true (Simon, n/d). Gilman pretended to immerse the reader into the mind of the nameless woman, and to be able to understand her feelings and the perspective from which she speaks.

As a result of Gilman’s purpose, it can be considered that by giving the readers access to the woman’s feelings, these narrative techniques “make the story credible, and the reader can identify herself with the internal feelings of the narrator” (Simon, n/d, p.165).

1.3 Lack of Everything as a Way of Life

The protagonist is an imaginative and creative woman because of her ability to write — as a form of expression and escape from problems—, but also due to her obsession with the wallpaper —as it allows her to imagine and express her anguish. However, she is the representation of those women who were restrained, by their husbands and male society in general, from developing their intellectual and cultural pursuits; and thus, forced to embody a limited version of themselves. John, who is both her husband and her doctor, diagnoses her as sick with depression, so she is forbidden to work, to read or even to write.

The female narrator, subjected to the demands of patriarchy and the medical counsel of her husband, feels compelled to obey his orders and avoids any type of intellectual activity, even when she feels the urge to do so for the first time in the two weeks they have been there: “There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word.... We have been here two weeks, and I haven’t felt like writing before, since that first day” (Gilman, 1892, p.649). Women did not have any rights, but they possessed talent, and their potential success could pose a threat to men’s intellectual hegemony. Moreover, the act of writing carried the risk that women’s testimonies could be known by the world, potentially leading to an evolution towards equality. However, this issue conflicted with patriarchal ideology.

On the other hand, the lack of communication and understanding between the sexes is what prevents any kind of affection in the couple. On many occasions, men were not aware of women’s needs, but this was not done on purpose. At that time, men were the only ones who worked, and they believed that by giving women all the material things they wanted, everything would be fine. However, they were not aware that the most necessary thing for women was to feel like a regular being with their rights and liberties

in addition to be respected by the male figure. Thus, the protagonist states that “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him”. (Gilman, 1892, p.649). Through her words, she is only asking for empathy and understanding because her husband considers that she has not any reason to suffer. And this lack of understanding makes her suffer even more.

That lack of understanding is also accompanied by her lack of voice. This issue is seen when the protagonist says, “I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away”. (Gilman, 1892, p.652). She, perhaps naively, believes they can come to an understanding by communicating. However, all these words do not generate any kind of reaction from her husband. She continues being locked in the room despite asking John for the need to get out of there. For this reason, women are defined as voiceless objects under male domination, as their voices seem to be non-existent.

1.4 Feminine Resistance: The Evolving Role of the Protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

According to Anasiudu (2022), the female agent, the protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, has been classified into four different facets. Each one corresponds to a different type of women throughout the narrative. Firstly, the unnamed protagonist is a fictionalized version of Charlotte Perkin Gilman, the author. By means of this narration, both her desire to write and Perkin’s subconsciousness were reflected. The repression suffered by Gilman when she wrote—as a consequence of her unorthodox ideas in the pursuit of social reform and equality, which qualified her as controversial and disruptive—is similar to the kind of repression presented by the protagonist. Both the writer and the protagonist of the story feel the need to write as a way of expressing their

feelings. In this way, the author uses writing as a tool in an attempt to fight against patriarchal ideals and to regain women's agency. The second woman exemplifies the role of wife, as the narrator is the wife of John. Although she is not allowed to write, the action of writing is the only way to show resistance and express her desires. Then, it appears another woman, the third one, who is trapped in the wallpaper and is also rescued by the narrator and protagonist. And finally, the figure of the fourth woman represents an extended metaphor associated with all those women previously mentioned. This metaphor acts as a symbol of the enslavement experiences by women, or their collective experiences in general, in the patriarchal system represented by John and Dr. Weir. The aim of this metaphor is to raise a voice against the lack of women's freedoms caused by a patriarchal system and try to denounce that awful reality.

The protagonist's and the author's agencies are literary and factually limited by the male figures of the protagonist's husband, John, and Dr. Weir—the real-life physician under whose care the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman suffered. The unnamed woman tries to show resistance to male empowerment but finds herself in a position of dehumanization accepted by a patriarchal society. The role of the protagonist changes and evolves as the story progresses. At the beginning, she is shown as the typical Puritan woman who conforms to the expectations of society. She is presented as a “passive and obedient” (Anasiudu, 2022, p.324) woman to her husband's requests but also voiceless because her husband completely ignores her, as if her voice would not exist. However, towards the end of the story, her new awareness and consciousness raise her voice. This voice does not appear literally but through her actions: her rejection to stop writing in her diary—as it is a forbidden action which she continues doing— or to open the door for her husband—as she is totally controlled by John, and in this way, she shows resistance

to him and to society—, or even her fighting against the paper on the wall, which signifies the unusual female struggle against the power of men.

1.5 Symbolic Imagery in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The story also highlights the significance of some symbols that further underscore themes of oppression and male dominance within the narrative. The action transpires in a colonial mansion that symbolizes the Victorian Era. The Victorian Period was characterized by the consideration of women as objects and possession symbols of their husbands (Anasiudu, 2022). In the story, there is a room where the events take place. It is described as a prison, where windows are covered with metal bars and the bed is anchored to the floor. The room adopts the same function that men have in society—it is a symbol of women’s constraints. The bedroom is the physical place from which a woman cannot leave, whereas marriage is the metaphorical place from which a woman cannot escape. Therefore, both ideas are related to men’s perceived superiority over women and the latter’s lack of freedom (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016).

The space of the bedroom is covered with a yellow wallpaper. The wallpaper is closely tied to the mood of the protagonist. It symbolizes her need and desire to be free from the reality of being trapped under the command of her husband. Ford (1985) describes the wallpaper as an element of male discourse whose capacity is to immobilize and contradict women. At first, the protagonist considers the wallpaper as something unattractive or even annoying for her eyes. However, as the story progresses in the room, the wallpaper begins to change: “This wallpaper has a kind of sub pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it. In certain lights, and not clearly then” (Gilman, 1892, p.650). As a consequence of this change in the paper, she is more

and more obsessed. Finally, she believes that she has seen a woman trapped inside the wallpaper, contributing to her increasing paranoia and deterioration.

The protagonist starts to imagine a parallel world behind the wallpaper where the figure of a woman is related to animal's qualities as she is defined "like a woman stooping down, and creeping about behind that pattern" (Gilman, 1892, p.652), or even when she is presented "creeping all around the garden" (Gilman, 1892, p.654), which is an action characteristic of animals. The verb 'creep' refers to the issue of domestic captivity and the struggle to overcome oppression. At this point, the woman —trapped in the room— can be seen as a bird trapped in a cage from which it wants to escape but cannot; but also, as a laboratory mouse, which is being experimented on. Thus, this fact goes hand in hand with the idea of woman as a "monstrous entity" (Yogapriya, 2022, p.19). Additionally, the yellow color of the paper is not a coincidence. In theory, this color is associated with happiness. In fact, that room was a place full of life where children played and laughed. However, this color acts as a paradox. In the story, the yellow color is associated with illness and decay. She intends to relate that color to the decadence of her life and marriage. The way in which the wallpaper is described represents the narrator's mental hysteria. So, the reader is a witness to all the degradation she suffers. At the end of the text, the narrator identifies herself with the woman trapped in the paper and tries to tear the paper apart so that she can get out. This action reflects the intention of fighting to get freedom despite the impossibility of achieving it (Simon, n/d). On the other hand, tearing up the wallpaper is not simply a manifestation of female discourse, but rather an attempt to move away from a male-controlled discourse. The protagonist's act of defiance against John signifies the rejection of his controlled narrative. And this is where the feminist struggle can be seen (Ford, 1985).

The motif of moonlight and daylight also acquire great relevance in relation to the male and female agent. Much of the action takes place at dusk. According to Simon, the sun is related symbolically to the masculine while the moon to the feminine. Daylight, associated with the male, is the dominant light during most of the time in the room, where the character resides. John enters there every hour to give her the medicine, whereas moonlight refers to feminine intuition and sensitivity. It is then at night when the protagonist is carried away by her subconscious. That is when she sees the color of the paper differently, and even when the woman trapped in the paper appears. Thus, it is at night when the protagonist changes from a passive being to someone imaginative in search of liberation. And that liberation can be seen in the way she shreds the paper (Anasiudu, 2022).

Hence, the use of these symbols —bedroom, wallpaper, yellow color, moonlight and daylight— contributes in the story to deal with the theme of oppression, how women are in the hands of men in a patriarchal society, or even the issue of mental insanity. But also, through these elements, the story deals with the process in which the protagonist struggles to be someone, to reveal herself and to put an end to oppression.

2. *THE SCARLET LETTER*

2.1 **The Genesis (or Origin) of *The Scarlet Letter***

The Scarlet Letter was published in 1850. However, the context is set in Boston, based on the Puritan New England society during the 17th century. The origin of this novel comes from a preface entitled “The Custom House”, which is narrated by a first-person unnamed narrator, closely based on the real-life experiences of the author. This narrator is a textual creation with Hawthorne autobiographical threads, who pretends to narrate

his own experience working as a surveyor of the Custom House of Salem. He describes the moment he found an old manuscript wrapped around a rag of scarlet cloth that outlined the story of a woman named Hester Prynne. It was thought that the alleged author was Jonathan Pue, who was a former surveyor of the Custom House. Nonetheless, the story was not finished, so Hawthorne decided to continue the story by adding more details (Van Deusen, 1966). As a consequence of these events, Hawthorne's masterpiece titled *The Scarlet Letter* was born.

The story narrates the miserable life of a woman called Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl, who are in the prison of the village. An inhabitant of the town recounts that Hester was punished for committing adultery, and she was waiting for her husband to go to America, but he did not arrive (Antivil, 2019). However, it is also worth noting that Hester is who “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” (Antivil, 2019, p.6). The story “reveals women's low status of the seventeenth-century Puritan New England, [. . .] and the cruelty and the prejudice against women of the Puritan society.” (Wang, 2010, p.893).

2.2 Hawthorne's Portrayal of Women: Traditional Values and Feminist Undertones

Hawthorne decided to undertake an evolution of the feminine figure by distancing the protagonist from the conventional idea of being a mother, wife or even a slave, and representing her as a rebel against social norms. To do that, some reasons that could lead him to try to evolve in the portrayal of women were due to his stay at Brook Farm, during which he was in contact with transcendentalists, intellectual romantic thinkers, and the increasing liberalism of the literary culture of New England, as well as the influence of

Margaret Fuller, who stated that “what women needed was not another woman rule above them all, but their nature, intellect and souls to grow and live freely” (Antivil, 2019, p.10). All these aspects also coincided with the death of his mother, whose loss was a terrible event for him. Therefore, he wanted to personify the figure of his mother employing the character of Hester.

He wanted to move away from the puritanical environment in which he grew up, and on which the story is really based. Moreover, everything was run by male agents as they were the ones who had all the power and reason, and the figure of women were classified in two ways: those who were included within the label “discriminated femaleness” (Wang, 2010, p.893) and those who were under the classification of “praiseworthy femaleness” (Wang, 2010, p.893). According to Wang (2010), discriminated femaleness is defined as the state in which individuals are characterized by their emotional rather than intellectual aspect. Additionally, Wang suggests that they are also associated with nurturing whereas men are associated with leadership, intelligence, and superiority. In addition to this, these roles differentiation are carried out by God. On the other hand, there is “praiseworthy femaleness” (Wang, 2010, p.893). This kind of woman represents a little step in society. Women are no longer attacked by their husbands, but they are praised for their important work —having a sense of self-sacrifice, taking care of the children, and supporting their husbands (Wang, 2010). Nevertheless, both labels still present women’s submissive roles.

As a result of Hawthorne’s apparent personal evolution in relation to the way he perceives women’s image, he presents a new version of a woman: Hester Prynne. Hester is the figure who breaks with the pre-established classification of women and with all those standards imposed by society. Hester’s rebelliousness, mental strength and self-confidence are what prevent the shame of her public disgrace from destroying her. She

considers her actions as something respectable that she has done with her heart. In addition to this, the fact that she dares to fight against the unjust norms adopted by society and to challenge established patriarchal Puritan powers is also related to the figure of the new woman (Wang, 2010) as well as to be able to come back and continue wearing the letter A on her chest makes Hester a model of perseverance (Baym, 2004). All these points are related to Fuller's definition of a rebellious, strong and independent woman, where her sense of self-reliance leads her to the sole task of taking care of her daughter and herself according to her own ideals (Antivil, 2019).

However, some critics claimed that Hawthorne's new vision was not intended to give a more liberal image of women, but rather followed a conservative view where women threatened masculinity as well as being described as servants of bourgeois capitalism, where they were persuaded to become part of the domestic sphere. In this line, Jean Fagan Yellin says that *The Scarlet Letter* "considers the new feminist definitions of womanhood and, rejecting them, replicated traditional imagery and endorses patriarchal notions" (Baym, 2004, p.38).

But despite all these surmises, the author tries to intervene on the feminist side. He decided to present women as far from perfection with a lack of understanding by society, but they were activists to get what they wanted (Baym, 2004). Thus, Hester would shed light on the fact of being able to follow one's ambitions despite the difficulties along the way (Baym, 2004).

2.3 Narrative Perspectives in *The Scarlet Letter*

The story is narrated by rendering "multiple narrative perspectives of the omniscient narrative and character's narrative" (Pan, 2021, p.98). The narration is carried out by an

omniscient third-person narrator, who describes the environment of the story, the plot, but also the thoughts and feelings of the main characters. Besides, the figure of the narrator has a deep knowledge of all the facts he talks about (Pan, 2021). In terms of the feelings and thoughts of the characters, it is worth noting Pearl's curiosity, which is seen through her own words: "But in good earnest now, mother dear, what does this scarlet letter mean?" (Hawthorne, 1850, p.220), but also through the way Hester copes with the penitence of the letter. Instead of resigning herself to what wearing it means, she confronts it: "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (Hawthorne, 1850, p.246). It was considered an opportunity as wearing it is seen as a powerful act of resistance. The word region refers to different situations. The letter A gives her the inner strength and freedom she needs to live her life according to her beliefs. Therefore, through the letter, she can experience challenging situations which other women do not dare, and thus free herself from all restrictions imposed by society.

On the other hand, the issue of adopting different characters' perspectives allows readers to think and see as characters do. In this sense, the reader can introduce himself to the atmosphere of the novel. So, the distance between the reader and the characters is closer. To do this, the narrator focalizes on a character. That character will present another person from his or her own perspective. In this way, the fact that different people focus on the same thing or person gives rise to different perspectives —so the reader can interpret the one he or she considers most accurate (Pan, 2021). This idea can be seen in the description of Pearl. According to the eyes of the town-people, she has "odd attributes, had given put that poor little Pearl was a demon offspring" (Hawthorne, 1850, p.117), which is something totally negative, whereas Hester sees Pearl as a gift brought by God, whose intelligence stands out. The same happens with Hester's figure. From the perspective of the inhabitants, she is labelled as a "malefactress" (Hawthorne, 1850, p.56)

and “hussy” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.60) while if someone follows the story through Hester’s perspective, she is not seen like that. Instead, she is considered a fighter in search of a better life.

Therefore, the fact that characters show different perspectives on the same thing offers the reader different versions; but equally, the omniscient mode will always be necessary so that the reader can understand the psychological side of characters, and thus, understand the pain and displeasure they suffer.

2.4 Attractiveness VS. Unsightliness in Women

Hawthorne tried to make visible not only the inner representation of women in society but also their external side by means of the issue of the appearance and beauty of the characters. He took into account women’s “mentality, background and their role in society” (Kovačević, 2016, p.34) to recreate the characters of the novel. The key contrast is the way in which Hester and Pearl, her daughter, are physically portrayed in comparison to the rest of Puritan women. Pearl is described as a “rich and luxuriant beauty; a beauty that shone with deep and vivid tints; a bright complexion, eyes possessing intensity both of depth and glow, and hair already of a deep, glossy brown” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.120). Hester’s attractiveness is also relevant due to the way Hawthorne depicted her in the novel:

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was lady-like (Hawthorne, 1850, p.59).

Nonetheless, these previous descriptions, which praise the features of these two protagonists, differ from the physical traits used to describe other women in society, who have “broad shoulders and well-developed busts” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.56). The fact that Hester and her daughter are depicted as beautiful, while the rest of the women are not, can be interpreted in the following way: although Hester is marked by sin, Hawthorne always tries to highlight her courage and virtue, as with Pearl. And the best way to stand out from the rest would be through her beautiful physical qualities. In addition to this, using such differentiated physical qualities between the protagonists and the rest of the women is linked to their actions as well. The beauty of Hester and Pearl tries to highlight their individuality and autonomy, but also their resistance against oppression, in contrast to the passivity and conformity of the Puritan women.

Consequently, the author intends to highlight not only Hester’s attitude but her appearance as well. She departs from all social norms, and therefore, she also moves away from the behavior of women and the lack of care for themselves, where instead of being united by their situation, they are signed out for being different.

2.5 Symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*: Redefining Tradition and Oppression

The use of symbols in *The Scarlet Letter* within the context of Puritan society, is also notable. Symbols, which Aşkaroğlu (2024) categorized as “social and religious covenants”, are deeply intertwined with Puritan life, the relationship with God and the church, and the identity of the individual. Some symbols are used to narrate the story of Hester and her role as a woman within the Puritan belief system.

Although the red color traditionally signifies love, revolt and revolution, it also acts as a symbol of the Puritan belief system related to women’s stigmatization. This color

is related to the issue of danger and attention —those who see it can be aware of the danger of breaking the rules of society— but also to the issue of contradictions of society. The contradiction is present in that people associate red color with shame and social stigma. For this, she is regarded in the eyes of villagers as “the figure, the body, the reality of sin” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.91). Although at first, this symbol makes her feel ashamed and unable to escape from her past, as it is seen in this example: “The scarlet letter burned on Hester Prynne’s bosom” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.206), she decides to transform that feeling by means of hard work and redemption, which is related to the passion and strength that defines this red color. As a result, it is proved that through her perseverance and fight, the red letter had “ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness and became a type of something [. . .] looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.321). Consequently, the text states that “The scarlet letter had not done its office” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.201). Hester does not allow the red letter to set the pace of her life. Thus, punishment is seen as an opportunity for change by Hester, which contradicts the meaning of the red color by the rest of the Puritan community who understand it as a mark of sin.

Further, the red color also symbolizes the sense of oppression, related to the impossibility of women to make their own decisions and exercise their own rights. This oppression is presented through these words: “She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.249). This quote means that Hester does not realize the oppression she suffers until she feels free. Once she overcomes the feeling of guilt and shame, that is when she is totally aware of her lack of rights in society, but she is now truly free. On the other hand, the red letter takes Hester away from all these social rules, and she will follow her own. Therefore, it is considered that “The world’s law was no law for her mind” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.199).

As a result, this symbol can be summarized as a life-style contradiction motivated by “oppression, nothingness, love, danger and peace” (Aşkaroğlu, 2024, p.258) combining the general oppression of women versus the freedom pursued by Hester.

Another relevant symbol is the letter A, which is embroidered on the cloth of the protagonist. According to Aşkaroğlu (2024), wearing embroidered clothing in ancient times was considered a symbol of elegance and attractiveness. However, that idea is far from what it pretends to symbolize in the novel. Letter A is defined as an “abbreviation of adultery, is the manifest symbol of the neglect of women’s rights, the struggle for survival and the oppression by society” (Aşkaroğlu, 2024, p.259). In other words, it is related to the concept of crime, immorality and shyness, representing the feeling of sin and shame experienced by Hester every time someone looked at that letter. However, the role of the letter changes completely throughout the story. It becomes Hester’s guide in addition to changing its definition into a symbol of being “able, angel and admirable” (Zheng, 2017, p.379). The evolution in her perceived meaning of the letter can be seen in this quote: “she encountered [. . .] it freely and voluntarily, in order to convert what had so long been agony into a kind of triumph” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.278). It means that the letter is no longer solely related to shame or sin, but to Hester’s ability to construct her life with her own values rather than the social expectations surrounding society. Despite being singled out and judged for wearing the letter, she has been able to stand up to them. And this has made her a success because she has become who she wanted to be, without having to follow the usual conventions of society.

Pearl, the name of the main character’s daughter, is significant as well. This name is symbolically related to the issue of truth and purity, and can be also interpreted as “the union of souls, the union of love and the destruction of the rules” (Aşkaroğlu, 2024, p.260). Hester talks about Pearl’s “remarkable precocity and acuteness, [. . .] the steadfast

principles of an unflinching courage, —an uncontrollable will —a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect” (Hawthorne, 1850, p.220). Using these words, Hester tries to admire Pearl’s values; all that intelligence she has been able to develop in a world where women cannot think, and where she is also being able to create her own self, just like Hester does. In this way, Pearl can be seen as a positive outcome of Hester’s feminist struggle.

COMPARING FEMALE PROTAGONISTS: “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER” VS. *THE SCARLET LETTER*

The first and foremost thing that “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Scarlet Letter* have in common is the fact that they feature a woman as the main character. The whole action of these two works revolves around the figures of two women highlighting their inferior role in a patriarchal society full of prejudices. The background of both stories is related to the Puritan Era due to the way women were portrayed in a male-dominated society. That period was characterized by an even stronger patriarchal system than what exists today. Then, women were seen as objects without rights and reason, and whose duty was to raise children and serve their husbands. Moreover, they were also depicted with lack of identity, as can be seen in the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, who does not even have a name. Further, if they did not follow these standards, they would suffer negative consequences. In the first novel, the unnamed character is considered mentally unfit to do her duties of serving as a wife and mother, so she must be locked in a room where she can do nothing. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, the protagonist, is forced to wear the letter A on her breast as a sign of shame because of having a daughter with a man and not revealing the name. As a result, both protagonists suffer visible punishment for not conforming to established patriarchal norms.

A relevant point that differs between these works is the gender of the author who has written each story. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a female writer, whereas *The Scarlet Letter* is written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a male author. The fact that one story is written by a woman, and the other by a man, makes the perspective from which they show facts totally different. Although both authors take the Puritan society and the position of women as key points, the experiences recounted in such detail by the female author together with the use of the personal pronoun “I”, imply that it is considered an autobiographical narrative based on the life of Perkins. However, this point contrasts with the perspective from which Hawthorne presents the events, as he could only see them but not live them in his own being. That is why he uses a third person narrator who knows everything. However, there is no doubt that despite the use of different narratological levels, both authors try to give protagonists a voice and the strength to fight for equality in a Puritan society.

The use of some representative symbols, which are directly related to the position of women in society and how women are willing to change the situation and be able to deal with a difficult change, is also present in both works. Both symbols, the wallpaper and the letter A, are so central to their respective narratives that they lend their names to the titles of the stories. They both evoke the topic of entrapment. The theme of being trapped is seen in a literal way in her enforced confinement in the room, while metaphorically, that sense appears in a marriage or in a society that does not allow protagonists to be themselves. In relation to the letter, Hester is trapped by always carrying the letter A which, in theory, defines herself. The protagonists are those who have turned something negative in their lives, such as the confinement in the room and the A for adultery, into something positive. That positivity is seen in the strength they have

achieved to fight against oppression where these objects act as weapons in favor. Thus, women's shift towards a more empowered being is seen through these objects.

Some major themes such as the issue of inequality, male domination, female oppression, and incomprehension are also highlighted in both masterpieces by the way they attempt to give visibility to the female figure. They present the issue of male subordination in marriage and society, but also the way protagonists try to cope with patriarchy through self-expression. The nameless protagonist expresses her feelings through writing in her diary. Despite being forbidden to do so, she follows her own identity as a way to listen to herself, and at the same time, to find herself as a woman, not as a wife or mother. In Hester's case, she is an adulteress in the public eye. However, her self-expression leads her to follow her own instinct, so that she determines her own identity and not the rest. She achieves this reverse by changing the meaning of letter A of adulteress into 'able', as she is able to fight for the change through her unstoppable effort to be a free woman in the face of a patriarchal society. All these topics —inequality, male domination, oppression— revolve around the main theme, which is the struggle for women's independence. However, the process of struggle causes different consequences for each woman. The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" suffers from mental deterioration during this process because of her loneliness, isolation and alienation. All the situation can be explained by the reasons of the lack of care towards women and beliefs in their superiority and wisdom. In contrast to this, Hester, the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* is related to the concept of redemption. Redemption is defined as the action of deliverance or salvation upon something. Hester tries to break all the norms of society by releasing herself from them. Therefore, she is considered a "Feminist Angel" (Wang, 2010, p.893) because she is brave enough to face the pain in the search for gender equality,

and she will not let society define who she is and shape her future. She will create her own self and be the master of her future.

CONCLUSION

“The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Scarlet Letter* are two works that can be used to explore and compare in a deep way the feminist struggle. Despite being written at different periods, it has been seen that they are inspired by the Puritan society. Social norms and oppression are several facts that have always been present in both works, so my main objective throughout this dissertation has been to analyze the female characters as agents in search of freedom and equality in a world that does not allow any of these things.

First, I focused on the general figure of women presented in both literary works. The female protagonists defy the social norms of that time and try to resist the oppression and injustice they suffer from a patriarchal society. However, through the portrayal of female characters such as the nameless protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*, the authors Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Nathaniel Hawthorne show us the devastating impact that isolation and repression have on women’s identity and freedom, as the unnamed protagonist suffers from mental degradation, and Hester, at first, has a sense of shame and an inability to move on from her past.

Secondly, and in relation to the previously mentioned situation, I have analyzed the narratological levels and the way in which these problems are presented. Gilman tries to present her own experiences through the nameless character; thus, making it an autobiographical based narrative. Although the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* is a third person omniscient voice, it is also worth noting that Hawthorne tries to present the knowledge and experiences from his childhood, as he was raised in a Puritan community

at the last peak of the Puritan Era. Therefore, presenting events from different perspectives helps us to gain a broader understanding of the situation.

And finally, I have carried out the analysis of some symbological elements which have been relevant in the study of the female figure. These protagonists struggle to reclaim their own voices and agencies in a world that tries to silence and control them. For this, the whole issue is seen through some key symbols—which give them the strength to continue struggling—such as the act of writing and the yellow wallpaper in the case of the first work or wearing the letter A with pride rather than shame, as it is seen in the novel. The protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” does so through the pursuit of personal freedom, whereas the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, does that by means of political resistance.

On the basis of the above, it can be concluded that “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Scarlet Letter* act as complaints about the severe situation of inequality suffered by women during the Puritan Era. These two female protagonists embody the powerful feminist message and the tireless battle for equality and freedom in a macho world. So, we, as readers but also as citizens, should internalize the importance of continuing to challenge gender injustices and work towards a more equitable world for all people, regardless their gender.

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