

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

# **Historical Context and the Role of Women in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter***

Autora

Anastasia Tymkul

Director

Dr. Francisco Collado Rodríguez

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras  
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## ABSTRACT

*The Scarlet Letter*, written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is considered one of the great masterpieces of American literature due to its originality. At first sight, it apparently deals with some historical events, but its quality as a “romance” involves many other themes such as a love story, social isolation and, the most relevant one for this work, prejudice and problems that women suffered in Puritan New England. The issue of women’s role and the influence of the historical context on it are discussed in this work due to the fact that the main character, Hester Prynne, is a Puritan woman who is punished by a patriarchal society for committing a sin. This punishment contributed to Hester’s progressive change as a woman and as a character of the story because she realizes she lives in a society with unfair laws concerning women and wants equality between both genders. The desire to change women’s status and social injustice could be influenced by some feminist movements during Hawthorne’s time. As the novel unfolds, we realize that Hester begins as a 17th-century Puritan woman but at the end, she shows some feminist values of the 19th Century. Hester’s daughter Pearl is also a relevant female character in the novel. She is totally different from her mother and could be the new kind of woman who is independent and passionate as she grew up in a different environment. Although at the close of the novel Pearl shows more human traits than she did earlier in the story, she functions mainly as a symbol. In addition, there are also other two female characters, Anne Hutchinson and Mistress Hibbins, who contribute to the understanding of how unfair and harsh Puritan society was regarding women’s role.

*Key Words:* women, feminism, Margaret Fuller, Patriarchy, Puritan society, Hester Prynne, Pearl, Transcendentalism.

## RESUMEN

*La letra escarlata*, escrita por Nathaniel Hawthorne, está considerada como una de las obras maestras de la literatura norteamericana por su carácter original. Aunque se tratan en ella algunos acontecimientos históricos, destaca más por su calidad como *romance*, lo que implica otros temas como una historia de amor, el aislamiento social y, el más relevante para este proyecto, el prejuicio y los problemas con los que tropezaron las mujeres de Nueva Inglaterra durante la época puritana. La cuestión del papel de la mujer y la influencia del contexto histórico sobre él se evalúan en este trabajo ya que el personaje principal, Hester Prynne, es una mujer puritana castigada por una sociedad patriarcal por cometer un pecado. Este castigo contribuyó al progresivo cambio de Hester como mujer y como protagonista de la novela porque se da cuenta de que vive en una sociedad con leyes injustas con respecto a las mujeres y quiere la igualdad entre ambos sexos. El deseo de cambiar el estatus de las mujeres y la injusticia social podría estar motivado por algunos movimientos feministas que se desarrollaron durante la vida de Hawthorne. A medida que se desarrolla el argumento, nos damos cuenta de que Hester comienza como una mujer puritana del siglo XVII pero, al final, muestra valores feministas del siglo XIX. La hija de Hester, Pearl, es también un personaje femenino muy relevante en la novela. Es totalmente diferente de su madre y podría llegar a ser la nueva clase de la mujer, independiente y apasionada, porque fue criada en un ambiente diferente. Aunque al final de la novela Pearl presenta más rasgos humanos que antes, funciona principalmente como un símbolo. Además, hay otros dos personajes femeninos, Anne Hutchinson y Mistress Hibbins, que contribuyen a la comprensión de lo injusta y dura que fue la sociedad puritana con respecto al papel de las mujeres.

*Palabras claves:* mujeres, feminismo, Margaret Fuller, patriarcado, sociedad puritana, Hester Prynne, Pearl, Trascendentalismo.

## Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne was regarded as one of the most successful writers of the United States of America during his time, which is the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He wrote not only novels, but also short stories and biographies. The style and themes he used in his works were very original as he belonged to the Dark Romanticism (a subdivision of the Romantic Movement). Hawthorne often used New England and the Puritan society as a setting for his novels and the reader may observe it in his most well-known novel *The Scarlet Letter*. This interest for the past could be explained due to the fact that he was born and grown up in Salem, a place which is of great significance for American history. Furthermore, his ancestors, William Hathorne and John Hathorne, were important members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, although the writer wanted to dissociate every relationship with them. He mentions one of his forebears in the novel also: “nearly two centuries [...] the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance [...]” (*The Scarlet Letter* 14)

A first edition of *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850 and it was Hawthorne’s first “romance.” According to Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia, the definition of this term is the following:

The romance novel or romantic novel [...] is the mass-market literary genre. Novels of this type of genre fiction place their primary focus on the relationship and romantic love of two people, and must have an “emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. There are many subgenres of the romance novel including fantasy, historical romance, paranormal fiction, and science fiction.

However, Hawthorne had his own definition for this term, which he describes in the

## Introduction of the novel “The Custom-House”:

If the imaginative faculty refused to act at such an hour, it might well be deemed a hopeless case. Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility—is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests [...] Then, at such an hour, and with this scene before him, if a man, sitting all alone, cannot dream strange things, and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances. (56)

If we take into consideration the definitions presented above, we can say that *The Scarlet Letter* is also a psychological romance because it portrays the main characters very deeply, showing their feelings and attitudes towards some situations. Moreover, there is a constant struggle between the individuals and society, and some inner conflicts (what we should do according to the laws vs. what we want to do).

The leading action of this “romance” is set two hundred years ago from the moment of its writing, in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan New England. It tells the story of a woman, called Hester Prynne, who was supposed to be a widow, but one day she gave birth to a child whose father was the Reverend of the community, Arthur Dimmesdale. As nobody in the community knew who the father was, except Hester, she was accused of being adulterous. In Puritan society, adultery was considered to be a very big sin which was punished with death. Moreover, there was also a particular law regarding it: “If any person commits adultery with a married or espoused wife, the Adulterer and Adulteress shall surely be put to death” (*The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts* 128). However, as Hester’s husband was supposedly dead, she was punished in another way, that is wearing the scarlet letter “A” (for adulteress) on her bosom, which represents shame, remorse and isolation from the rest

of the community. As I contend in the following sections of this work, on the one hand, Hester wants to be accepted by the community again because she suffers on account of being rejected. But, at the same time, she observes and sees the life around her from another point of view. She understands that women are treated unfairly and opposes those patriarchal laws which deprive women of many rights. The second most relevant character of the story is Hester's daughter, Pearl. She is mainly described as a symbol because she reminds her mother about her sin but also about her passion, which lead Hester to those feminist values.

As the main character of the story is a woman who suffered from social injustice, in this work I will analyze women's role and femininity in *The Scarlet Letter*. Firstly, I will briefly go over the biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the precise moment of his life when he wrote this novel. Then, I will expose the most relevant events of the 19th Century in terms of the Feminist movements, which influenced the author to write a novel with such "proto-feminist" features. Afterwards, I will advance to the historical context of the story itself, which is the Puritan New England of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century as considered from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century perspective of its narrator. Finally, I will analyze in detail the female characters of the story: Hester Prynne, who is the protagonist; Hester's daughter Pearl; and the other female characters Ms. Hutchinson and Ms. Hibbins, who are the representations of the true Puritan women.

### **Hawthorne's life and the writing of *The Scarlet Letter***

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts into a family with a Puritan past. His ancestors were known as "the Hathornes" and they were involved in some historical events which brought some negative consequences to Hawthorne's life. For this reason, when he grew up, Hawthorne added a "w" to his name in

order to dissociate himself from his ancestors. The first one, William Hathorne, immigrated to America in 1630s and he had not a very good reputation because of his cruel judgements, “He was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a ruler in the Church; he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bitter persecutor; [...]” (15). Then, his son, John Hathorne, was one of the three judges in the Salem witch trials in 1690s: “His son, too, inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him” (16). All these facts influenced probably Hawthorne to place the most important of his works in the Puritan community of Salem.

When he was four years old, his father died at sea and his family went through some financial problems. That is why they moved to live with his mother’s brothers, who helped him to enter the Bowdoin College later. After his graduation, he wrote his first novel, *Fanshawe*, although it was not very successful. Then, he wrote two of his most famous short stories “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and “Roger Malvin’s Burial”, which received a lot of criticism. In any case, his writings did not bring him a great income, so he began to work at the Boston Custom House. In 1830s, he met Sophia Peabody who was a transcendentalist and their relationship led him to know Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. Although he did not share the same opinion regarding transcendentalism, he spent some time with them in the famous Brook Farm in order to save some money for his marriage. Afterwards, in 1842, being already married, the couple moved to Concord, Massachusetts, when their first child was born. As the family was growing (he had two more children), Hawthorne was looking for another job to maintain his family. He was appointed as a surveyor of the Salem Custom House in 1846 due to his political connections. But in 1848, he lost this job because Zachary Taylor (The Whig) was elected as a president and the writer disappointed him due to different political views. However, it was a blessing for Hawthorne because after that moment his life changed. He began to



write a novel, which lately became his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*. The book was widely distributed throughout America and that made Hawthorne very famous. Moreover, his experience working at the Salem Custom House, is somehow described in the introduction of the book which is also called "The Custom House." But the reader should be aware of the fact that the narrator of the book is not the author and that it is not an autobiography.

The following years were very prolific for the author as he wrote more novels such as *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) which was based on his experience living in Brook Farm, and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853). These three novels were completed while Hawthorne was living in Lenox, Massachusetts, because he wanted to keep his family away from that Puritan environment. In addition, he met Herman Melville there, who dedicated some words to Hawthorne in his well-known novel *Moby Dick*.

During the elections in 1852, Hawthorne wrote a campaign biography for Franklin Pierce, who was his friend since their college years (both of them attended Bowdoin College). After being elected President, Pierce appointed Hawthorne as consul at Liverpool, England. The following years, while living in England, he wrote two more novels: *Our Old Home* (1863) and his last one, *The Marble Faun* (1860).

The same year he finished his last novel, he returned to the United States with his family. After living abroad for seven years, he finally stayed at The Wayside in Concord, Massachusetts. His health got worse and worse, but he refused any medical treatment. He died on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, New Hampshire and was buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord.

After his death, he left some unfinished works which were published posthumously as *The Dolliver Romance*. Though the amount of works he wrote is not so large compared to some writers, Hawthorne will be always a key figure of American literature due to his

stories involving history, especially Puritanism. Herman Melville wrote in his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850) the following lines to describe his fellow writer:

And now, my countrymen, as an excellent author, of your own flesh and blood,  
- an unimitating, and perhaps, in his way, an inimitable man - whom better can I  
commend to you, in the first place, than Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is one of the new,  
and far better generation of your writer. (Melville 1850: 9)

### **19th-century Feminism and its Influence on *The Scarlet Letter***

Some feminist ideas and beliefs did exist before the 19th Century in the United States and Europe, but they had not proven to be successful. Men and women belonged to different social spheres: the former ones were associated with public life and the latter ones, with the private. While men were working on factories and socializing in public places, women were tied to their domestic duties like cooking, cleaning and taking care of their children. Furthermore, due to these cultural stereotypes, women had not the same opportunities as men had to achieve the education they wished. Only very few of them could afford to break down these boundaries and when it happened, it was seen as something seditious that affected the normal social order. Women were not allowed to participate in politics nor to vote. There were some exceptions throughout history, such as the cases of a few English female monarchs (Elizabeth I, Mary II, Queen Ann, and Queen Victoria), but it was always due to the incapacity to find a male heir to the throne.

The roots of feminism can be found in the period of early colonialism. The first American poetess, Anne Bradstreet, immigrated to the English colonies in America with Winthrop's fleet in 1630 and she became the first American woman who published a book. Her most important poems are “The Prologue” and “To My Dear and Loving Husband.”

She could be considered the “grandmother” of feminist values because her poems deal with issues such as private vs public life, the struggle of a Puritan wife in the New England colony and the male underestimating of women’s intelligence. Yet, although she could express her concerns about women’s status, she could not do anything to change it.

The 19th Century was a turning point in the history of feminism. Some women were not happy with the social divisions existing between the two genders and began to protest against their traditional roles. The women’s rights movements were led mainly by low and middle class women who were disconcerted with their husbands’ way of life. The first formal women’s right movement was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott and it was held in 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York. More than 300 people attended the Seneca Falls meeting and during three days they discussed the ways in which they should spread out the movement principles across the country and how to reach obvious social changes. The main right they requested was that women should be treated equally as men. Later on, other meetings were carried out which demanded the abolition of the social boundaries that limited women’s rights. In 1850, Stanton met Susan B. Anthony, a teacher of Massachusetts; both of them are now considered to be early women’s rights activists. They created the first National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869, whose main goal was to gain the right to vote for women.

In the second half of the 19th Century, the preceding meetings achieved good results. In 1869, the state of Wyoming granted women the right to vote. One year later, one woman called Ellen Richards was accepted into the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Later on, the most important result came with the election of Jeannette Rankin for Congress in 1916.

Taking a look at literary history, women have been portrayed in many works from different perspectives. Some of them have a secondary role which is to please and to

support their husbands, but others have a primary role because they are the protagonists of their stories. In one way or another, women are an important part of every story because their femininity brings some emotions and sensations to the reader and makes an emphasis on some relevant social issues. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne gives Hester Prynne the main role to challenge the Puritan values and turn against the patriarchal system. For this reason, the writer was strongly criticized during his time because this novel was too “proto-feminist” and also because the qualities he applies to Hester were unusual at the time. Moreover, there are other female characters in the novel which represent the stereotypical role of women. When describing Hester, the writer uses positive adjectives and a soft tone, “[...] her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, departed, like fading sunshine; and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her” (317). In contrast, other women of the community are attributed negative qualities, and some are even regarded as witches: “It might be, too, that a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows” (76)

The “proto-feminist” view of Hawthorne would be inspired by his friendship with Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), as both of them were members of the Transcendentalist group. She was very active in feminist movements during the 19th Century and had a great influence not only on American literature but also on reform movements. In 1845, her major work *Woman in the 19th Century* was published. This book affected the first women’s right movement which, as mentioned above, took place at Seneca Falls, New York. Fuller challenged the meaning of the terms “male” and “female” on which 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture was based, stating that every individual possesses both these characteristics. She wanted to change the women’s place in the society and believed that women can receive the same education as men. She also believed that women could achieve any job they wish, not only the “feminine” ones. However, she disliked female writers because she considered that women were not prepared for arts and literature yet.

Fuller insisted on the idea that women have to stop being housewives, should be independent from their husbands and follow their dreams. The same kind of thoughts Hester Prynne upheld in her story that took place in the 17th Century. That is why some critics remark the similarities between Margaret Fuller (a real historical figure) and Hester Prynne (a fictional character) because, both represent a similar personality and attitude towards the women's role in the society they live (Jones 2003). The type of life that the historical Margaret Fuller carried out was the type of life that fictional Hester wanted to live. Unfortunately, she was repressed by the strict Puritan society in which she lived and had to accept those injustices.

### **17<sup>th</sup>-century New England and Puritanism**

Although the book was written and published in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it tells the story of events which took place between 1642 and 1649 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Therefore, we should pay attention to this period, characterized by American colonialism and Puritanism, in order to understand the story and Hester's worries about women's place in that society.

At the beginning of the 17th Century, the Church of England was the site of two different factions of believers who questioned its traditions and rituals: the Separatists, who saw themselves as radically different from the official Church, and the non-Separatists, who believed they could change the Anglican Church from inside. In 1620, the Separatists (afterwards called Pilgrims) left England and travelled to America on the Mayflower as the land was offered to them by the Virginia Company of London. They founded there the Plymouth Plantation Colony and had to face harsh issues as diseases and starvation. On the other hand, the non-Separatists or Puritans stayed in England and had to suffer from the religious persecutions of the new English King (James I, the Catholic King of Scotland).

So, in the following decades, some of them also immigrated to America and established the Massachusetts Bay Colony there, which was much larger than the Plymouth Plantation. Between 1630 and 1640, “The Great Migration” took place when more than 20,000 Puritans moved to the new American lands. The leader of this colony was an English well-known lawyer and Puritan, John Winthrop, who was appointed to serve as the first governor by the Massachusetts Bay Colony and who is mentioned several times in *The Scarlet Letter*: “Governor Winthrop.”

The new Puritan society was based on a number of beliefs aimed at the creation of “the city upon the hill,” beliefs that were also reflected in *The Scarlet Letter*. They believed that all that happens around them is a plan created by God and that he is the unique way of personal salvation (Aboukhadijeh 2012). All the religious practices related to the Roman Catholic Church should be left behind and, only the rituals that are described in the Old Testament must be carried out in their new churches. The Bible was the guide for puritan life because the Puritans were convinced that God will reward the community, if they will be good servants. The church was the way of teaching the Bible and of being connected with God. Besides, it was not subordinated to any authority, that is, it was an autonomous institution. The political and religious leaders were usually connected for the reason that the new community wanted to maintain their society pure from any kind of sin, “[...] people among whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful” (76). Rights such as freedom of expression or privacy did not exist given that these concepts were related to the individual and had no place in that community. The society was considered as a whole in which all the “citizens” had to follow the laws and religious beliefs. In addition, every sin committed by the Puritans had its punishment and the most common was the capital punishment, “[...] a penalty which, in our days, would infer a degree of mocking infamy and ridicule, might then be invested

with almost as stern a dignity as the punishment of death itself" (76).

With respect to women's place in the Puritan community, it was a Patriarchal system in which "the female is subjected to the male" (Eeckman 2008: 14). They were kept out from any public events, meetings or decisions made in the church. They were also considered to be a weaker gender. Married women were not allowed to possess any kind of property or earn money by her own, only widows, who did not marry again, could. The way of dressing was also very strict, that is, covering their heads and arms. As the Puritan families were very large, the most important role assigned to women was to take care of their children.

### **Hester Prynne as a representation of both old and new female images**

In terms of traditional literary terminology, Hester Prynne is a round character because she experiences a kind of transformation throughout the story. She realizes that not all the Puritan laws and beliefs are the correct ones and she becomes especially concerned with the place of women within the patriarchal society: "Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position" (249). In other words, she questions the difference between two genders because it was established by the course of history rather than by natural order. Women have accepted their domestic role as mothers and wives repressing their passions, their feelings, and the desire to be independent and explore the world outside. However, although Hester goes in part against the system, she is not precisely a feminist who fights for equality between both genders, as she only represents some feminist values which finally surfaced during the 19th Century.

Until Hester's punishment, the narrator gives very little information about her prior

life. She was married to Roger Chillingworth, who was much older than her, but their marriage was not based on love. The narrator does not give any explanations why Hester married Chillingworth, only one sentence resumes their relationship: “And it seemed a fouler offence committed by Roger Chillingworth than any which had since been done him, that, in the time when her heart knew no better, he had persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side” (264). When the Puritans left England to look for the New World, he sent Hester with them. Chillingworth had to arrive some time later, but he was lost at sea and Hester was considered a widow. This period of her life when being married could be related to the traditional or old image of woman as she totally depended on her husband. Becoming a widow would be the first turning point in her life because she obtained freedom, she could own property and have business. These facts maybe contributed to her posterior questioning of social values.

After falling in love and having sexual relationships with the Reverend of the community, Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester gives birth to an illegitimate child. She is marked as an adulterer and a sinner and is exposed to the “public shame” (93). Instead of criticizing, the narrator elevates her stature, describing Hester in a very positive way as a very beautiful woman: “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 [...]” (81). Hawthorne was perhaps inspired by his wife, Sophia Peabody, when creating the physical appearance of Hester (Eaton & Pennell 2016).

What makes Hester differ from other female characters in the fiction written at the time is probably her “strength of character” (Wang 2010). After being publicly humiliated and isolated by the community, she carries her punishment with dignity. She is forced to wear a scarlet letter “A” for adulteress on her bosom. However, nearly the end of the book, she manages to change the meaning of the letter to “able.” As the time passes by, people begin to see Hester as a woman who is able to survive and become an independent and a



promising woman. She becomes a functional member of society and is able to maintain her daughter and herself with the needlework. This transformation in Hester's personality brings her closer to the feminist values of Hawthorne's contemporary women, that is, in the 19th Century.

Another characteristic that ascribes Hester to the new female image is her role as mother. It is known that puritan families were very large because abortion was forbidden. They were very strict parents as they believed that their children's will should be broken from their childhood due to the evil human nature. Still Hester had only one daughter, Pearl; in that sense, she had not followed the typical patterns of the Puritan family with many children. Moreover, she was a compassionate mother and was not very harsh with Pearl due to her prior life experience. She knew that being like the Puritan parents would lead her to lose her daughter. On the other side, Hester behaves like a mother for the rest of the community, although they judged her sharply. She helped the poorest ones, giving them food and clothing: "None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty, even though the bitter-hearted pauper threw back a gibe in requital of the food brought regularly to his door, or the garments wrought for him by the fingers that could have embroidered a monarch's robe" (241).

Some similarities could be determined between Hester and the biblical character Eve because both of them were subjects of exile. As we know from the Bible, Eve committed the sin of eating the forbidden fruit and for that, she was exiled from Eden. Similarly, after committing adultery, Hester was judged and forced to live in shame and exiled from the rest of the Puritan community. In addition, the Puritans believed that Eve's original sin represented women's weakness. In their view, women were more susceptible to passion and emotions and could commit some sin easier than men.

## **Pearl as symbol**

Pearl is the second most relevant female character in the story, but she is described or discussed only in four chapters of the book. She is the illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. In the novel, she acts mainly as a symbol, but at the end, she is attributed some humanity. Hester raised Pearl alone and she does not force her daughter to adopt the Puritan beliefs concerning her secondary role as female. She wants her daughter to become a different kind of woman who is independent and has an opportunity of choice, the opposite qualities of a traditional Puritan woman: "Then she might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect. She might, in one of her phases, have been a prophetess. She might [...] undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment" (248). As Pearl grew up away from the Puritan laws, she adopted her own personality. At first sight, she seems to be only a link between her parents, but indeed, Pearl is the embodiment of many other issues that are exposed below.

On the one hand, Pearl is the symbol of the sin committed by her parents. Hester says that she was "the scarlet letter in another form: the scarlet letter endowed with life!" (152), as her presence sometimes brought to Hester's mind memories about those days when she was publicly punished and ashamed. On the other hand, she is the connection between Hester and Arthur because she is the product or reminder of their true love and passion. Actually, Pearl would be the personification of their adulterous act.

Moreover, Pearl is related to supernatural elements. In spite of her age, she is a very smart, imaginative, and sometimes stubborn girl who makes many questions about everything. Very often she is interested in the scarlet letter her mother wears on her bosom or in some gestures the minister produces. Her mood changes drastically from one moment to another because sometimes she may be laughing as soon as she is very quiet.

Her behavior is so unusual, that sometimes she is regarded as an “elf-child” and some people of the community call her “demon offspring” (147). Sometimes, Hester blames herself wondering whereas Pearl’s behavior is associated with the way she was conceived and given birth.

One more aspect that links Pearl to the supernatural is her intuition. Every time she saw Dimmesdale in the town, she felt some connection with him, although she did not know he was her father: “Pearl, that wild and flighty little elf stole softly towards him, and taking his hand in the grasp of both her own, laid her cheek against it” (173). Her intuition and capacity to recognize the truth would be influenced by the constant contact with nature, as they lived on the outskirts of the town and near the forest. The strict Puritan laws and social injustices and lies have not deteriorated the child’s pure soul yet.

The clothes Pearl wears also have a symbolic significance as they connect her with Hester’s passion and sin and with the scarlet letter itself. In opposition to the Puritan dressing code, Hester dresses her daughter with bright colors, especially red and gold. Even in the introduction “The Custom-House,” the narrator mentions these two colors: “a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded. There were traces about it of gold embroidery [...]” (49). Consequently, the narrator gives the reader more clues in order to highlight the close relation between Pearl and the scarlet letter as both of them symbolize sin, adultery, and passion.

This little girl symbolizes also the conscience of many people in the story. On the one hand, she is the conscience of the community because in the same way these people point their fingers at Hester when they observe her around the town, so does Pearl. She always reminds Hester she should wear the scarlet letter (the symbol of shame, adultery and sin) because it is her punishment. On the other hand, she is a symbol of Dimmesdale’s conscience and hypocrisy. He is a member of the church, a man allegedly in touch with God, but he does not admit his sin in front of the community and carries no punishment as

Hester. This sense of guilt torments him from the inside in the same way as Pearl torments others with her laugh and delight.

At the end of the novel, the narrator describes Pearl more as a feeling being. Arthur Dimmesdale admits that he had committed a sin some years ago and that revelation somehow changes Pearl, probably because she symbolized his conscience. As he has freed himself and his conscience is finally clean, Pearl no longer functions as a symbol in the novel. Her human feelings are shown when she kisses her father before his death and her tears fall upon him.

### **Other female characters of the story**

Apart from Hester Prynne and Pearl, there are other female characters who appear all over the story. They would represent mainly the traditional female image as they are secondary characters. However, Hawthorne put these women in the novel not by chance because in fact Anne Hutchinson and Anne Hibbins were real women who suffered a terrible destiny.

Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) was an important figure of early colonial period and a religious dissident, but Hawthorne describes her from a different point of view. She was born in England, and after converting into Puritanism, she travelled to the New Land with the first wave of emigrants. Hutchinson expressed her thoughts in relation to the Puritan norms, which was very dangerous in colonial Massachusetts, especially for women (Boivin, n.d.). She headed a religious sect, claiming that the believer merges with the Holy Spirit without the mediation of the Church and priests. Besides, in her meetings for women, they discussed and questioned the role of women in the Puritan society, which is an unusual fact during the 17th Century. The leaders of the community could not allow the expansion of these ideas and took some measures on the matter. In 1630, she was excommunicated and banished by the Puritans from Boston to Rhode Island, and later she

was killed by the Indians.

Mistress Hibbins was based also on the real historical figure of Ann Hibbins. The name of this woman is connected to the Salem witch trials of 1692 and her appearance in the story is possibly influenced by the fact that Hawthorne's ancestor, John Hathorne, was one of the judges during this historical event. She was accused of witchcraft in Boston in 1656 because she held a different point of view which was unforgivable for women in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Salem. In the novel, the narrator portrays her as a witch who is trying to "recruit" Hester Prynne. On the charge of witchcraft, 19 people were hanged, one man was crushed by stones, and from 175 to 200 people were sent to jail.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude this project, it should be recalled that Hawthorne's romance *The Scarlet Letter* contains some ambiguities. On the one hand, the writer is influenced by two historical contexts, that is, 19<sup>th</sup>-century feminism and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan New England. Due to the spread of women's rights movements across the United States, he ascribes the protagonist Hester Prynne some feminist values that were exhibited during the time the novel was written. Before her punishment, Hester represents some aspects of the old traditional image as she is a good Puritan woman and wife, but as the story unfolds, she begins to question the stereotypical women's role and the patriarchal system and acquires her new feminist values. If she had lived in a different time, she would have changed things. However, it was not possible. On the other hand, when creating the protagonist, Hawthorne was inspired by two important women in his life: Hester's personality (her strength of character) was adopted from Margaret Fuller (one of the feminist leaders), and her physical appearance was conditioned by his wife, Sophia Peabody.

The second most relevant female character is Pearl. She symbolizes many things in

the novel such as Hester's sin, adultery, true love and passion, and the conscience of both the community and her father. In spite of the fact that she is born in a Puritan society, she is raised in different environment and adopts a strange behavior which clashes with the Puritan morality. At the end of the novel, she grows in humanity because the secret is revealed and she is no longer the embodiment of her parents' sin.

The last two female characters, Anne Hutchinson and Mistress Hibbins, are used by Hawthorne in the novel in order to make the reader to become aware of the harsh role women were allotted during the colonial period. In fact, these characters were the real historical figures. Both of them were judged unfairly only because they expressed their own opinions and ideas which did collide with the patriarchal system. Moreover, the Puritans were not allowed to have individual rights (as the freedom of expression) and breaking the rule carried a punishment.

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