



# JACLR

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"Feminist and Mainstream Comparative Analysis in *The Scarlet Letter*"

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that, although there have been major advances, women of European ancestry in the United States are still subjugated to the same patriarchal society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This parallelism will be made through a comparison between these two societies in regard to women, always within a feminist American-European context of middle-class women. Therefore, this paper is going to be approached both through a mainstream comparative research and a feminist research, being supported by a feminist analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and how this novel can be related to contemporary society. Hence, the analysis of this novel through a feminist perspective will elucidate the fact that, although four centuries have passed, gender inequality is still present nowadays.

**Keywords:** Feminism, *the Scarlet Letter*, gender inequality, puritan society, mainstream comparative research.

## **0. Introduction**

Although *the Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850, the story takes place during the 1640s in the puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, located in New England. Therefore, it is first necessary to explain the situation that the 17<sup>th</sup> century women of European ancestry lived in the Puritan colonies. Puritanism followed the writings of John Calvin, a Protestant reformer who "blames women as inferior creatures with a well-defined and restricted role to play" (Potter 725). For the patriarchal Puritan society of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, marriage was the only manner in which a woman could be realized by performing her role as a mother and as a wife. Moreover, as women were considered to be the weaker sex, their identity was linked to that of their fathers or husbands, who "dominated his wife, children, and other dependents without fear of interference from kin or community" (Norton 596). In addition, a Puritan woman in that era could not have a public literary voice, since they were expected to remain quiet, as it is reflected in the case of Anne Bradstreet, and they had a very limited legal status as well. According to Norton, "Reformation (and especially Puritan) theology, which was aggressively masculine in its orientation, reinforced this secular development" (ibid), so the father or the husband was the "responsible for the spiritual well-being of all members of his household, and they were consequently expected to defer to him in religious as well as secular matters" (ibid). Therefore, Puritan men did not only have the physical and intellectual superior power that the patriarchal society granted them, but also the spiritual one, so women were considered to be inferior to them in all spheres of life. However, Puritan theology also stressed that both male and female believers were spiritually equal before God, so all of them could interpret the scriptures (599).

Nowadays, the situation of women of European ancestry in the United States is very different from that of Puritan women in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although they share some similarities. Despite the fact that women are still sexualized, there have been major advances, such as the right to vote, which is something that Puritan women of the 17<sup>th</sup> century could not even dream of. Although the 21<sup>st</sup>-century society is still patriarchal, gender roles have changed drastically, since women are no longer defined by their husbands' progress, but by their own. Moreover, women have access to education, which grants them an independence that Puritan women did not normally have. However, states like Alabama still pass highly restrictive abortion laws nowadays, even though none of them have been implemented. This suggests that the mentality of some citizens of the United States still regards women's bodies as objects, without letting women decide for themselves, which is something very similar to the Puritan mentality by which womanhood is based on maternity. In addition, the society of the United States still reproduces the idea of the intellectual superiority of men with respect to women, as it can be seen in the gender wage gap. According to the National Partnership for Women and Families, in this year, "women in the United States are paid 82 cents for every dollar paid to men, amounting to an annual gender wage gap of \$10,194" (1). Thus, this shows that, despite having achieved major advances thanks to the feminist movement, it is yet not possible to consider that women of European ancestry are completely equal to men in

the United States.

### **1. Feminist Analysis of *The Scarlet Letter***

In *the Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, it is possible to observe this patriarchal Puritan society in which women are subjected to men. In this novel, Puritan women are represented stereotypically as individuals who enjoy talking about the private lives of others, as it can be seen when, in Hester's public punishment, the narrator is going to state that "the women, of whom there were several in the crowd, appeared to take a peculiar interest in whatever penal infliction may be expected to ensue" (55). Moreover, these Puritan women are the first ones to reproduce this unbalanced relation of power between men and women, since they think that "the worshipful magistrates have awarded" (56) is insufficient, thinking that "[a]t the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead" (Ibid.). Thus, they manifest their discontent with the judicial system not because it is unjust that all the magistrates are male, but because they think that Hester Prynne deserves a stronger punishment, accepting thus the condemnation of women for having sexual desires.

It is also necessary to explain the double morality present in the Puritan view of adultery. Puritan ideology had a very strict moralistic view towards marriage and sex since family was considered the core of society. Therefore, as adultery violated the order of society, Puritans considered that both extramarital sex and adultery should be penalized by law. In fact, "[t]he Bay Colony's Court of Assistants first made adultery a capital offense in 1631" (Norton 342). This idea is reinforced by the connection between religion and law held by Puritans, as when women think that Hester "has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (Hawthorne 56), since this is written "both in the Scripture and the statute-book" (Ibid.). Moreover, the Puritan ideology understood that "the sin of an individual has consequences for the rest of the religious congregation" (Eeckman 11) because of their belief of the predestination. Nevertheless, this principle is only applied to Hester, since when Arthur Dimmesdale revealed the scarlet letter on his breast, people "denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast" (Hawthorne 198), displaying thus a double morality. Therefore, although "the penalty thereof is death" (Hawthorne 64), Hester Prynne is doomed to "wear a mark of shame upon her bosom" (Ibid.) thanks to the "great mercy and tenderness of heart" (Ibid.) of the magistrates. However, although the male magistrates are presented as merciful towards her, in fact, what they do is taking away her individuality, turning her into "the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion" (75). Therefore, they use her as an instrument to teach "the young and pure" (Ibid.) that a woman must repress her sexual desires. Hence, she is doomed to live a life of ignominy, being humiliated and expelled from the Puritan society, while Dimmesdale will always be considered as a man of high morality even after his confession. In addition, it is important to consider that Hester herself did not know that her husband, Roger Chillingworth, was alive, so this punishment is completely unjustified.

*The Scarlet Letter* also presents a historical character, Anne Hibbins, who was condemned for being a witch in 1656, thirty-six years before the Salem witch trials. Anne Hibbins, being a married woman, was condemned because of a "dispute with a carpenter over

pricing and the quality of his work" (Seven). Hibbins was brought up to church twice, and they accused her of having "usurped authority" (Ibid.) from her husband, so they excommunicated her. After her husband died, she was accused of witchcraft (Ibid.) so Anne Hibbins was considered a witch because she dared to express her opinions in a Puritan society that wanted to silence women's voices. According to Rosen, "[t]he story of Eve, the original sinner, was projected onto women living in the Puritan society. Women were worthy of honor for being wives but deemed witches if they disrupted their functionality in society" (23). Hence, these witch trials were based on gender inequality and violence against women. Considering this, Hawthorne presents Anne Hibbins as "Governor Bellingham's bitter-tempered sister" (Hawthorne 101), who "a few years later, was executed as a witch (Ibid.) She tells Hester and Mr. Dimmesdale that she knows about their sin, but she does not expose them, since she sees them as "his [the Black Man's] own servants" (187), just as her. Taking into account the story of the real Anne Hibbins, she probably does not expose them because she recognizes them (especially Hester, whom she makes several invitations to join her in the forest) as individuals who had broken the social laws, who had succumbed to their sexual instincts, being thus against the Puritan strict morals, just like her. This idea is reinforced by the fact that John Hathorne, one of the ancestors of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author of the novel, was "one of three judges in the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692" ("Nathaniel Hawthorne"), whom he refers to in "The Custom-House" as being "so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him" (Hawthorne 27). Thus, he could have added a w to his last name to avoid the association with his dark past (Klein). Thereby, although Mistress Hibbins is presented in the novel as a "reputed witch-lady" (173) who was "ugly-tempered" (148), Hawthorne could be denouncing the Puritan conception of femininity through her figure.

It is also important to take into account how the two main male characters in this novel display their masculinity, being defined as "a complex construct producing and reproducing a constellation of behaviors and goals, many of them destructive (like performance and conquest) and most of them injurious to women" (Murfin 382). Roger Chillingworth is the epitome of toxic masculinity, as it can be seen when he tells Hester that "[t]hou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me" (Hawthorne 73), considering her as an object to be possessed. Moreover, he claims that he does not want to expose her both to see her suffering and so that he "will not encounter the dishonor that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman" (Ibid.). Hence, he chooses to adopt another identity because he fears to be humiliated, although his humiliation is not comparable to Hester's and thus despising her even though he deliberately did not communicate that he was still alive. Plus, he calls her a "foolish woman" (70), admitting that he took advantage of his experience when he tells her that he "betrayed thy [Hester's] budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay" (72).

In the case of Dimmesdale, he is certainly a coward, due to the fact that, although he was as responsible as her, he does nothing to help Hester with her punishment, despite supposedly loving her. Moreover, he is a negligent father, since he does not help economically neither Hester nor Pearl, and he was not even capable of visiting his own daughter for fear of being judged by the Puritan society. He even tells Pearl that he will take her hand "at the great judgement day" (126), saying that "the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting" (127).

Therefore, he prefers to keep the image of a merciful and eloquent reverend before the society rather than showing affection to his own daughter. For this reason, it is possible to infer that he thinks that having a child should be the responsibility of the woman, as he deliberately distances himself from her, refusing to act as a parental figure for Pearl.

In order to analyze Hester Prynne through a feminist perspective, it is also important to state that *The Scarlet Letter* was published two years after the Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848. According to Herbert, "the character of Hester Prynne is modeled on Margaret Fuller, whom Hawthorne knew well" (100). Taking into account that Margaret Fuller was a feminist writer and a women's rights activist, it is possible to say that Hester Prynne also displays some characteristics of the type of women that Fuller described in her work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which was "a tract on feminism that was both a demand for political equality and an ardent plea for the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual fulfillment of women" ("Margaret Fuller"). That way, Hester Prynne is described as an unconventional woman, being "tall" (Hawthorne 57) and having "a 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 impassiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes" (Ibid.). Hence, through her physical appearance, she is described as a "fallen" woman, as a dark and sexual woman, an erotic artifact that has lost her value as a woman because she has committed adultery unconsciously. Moreover, she presents a defiant attitude towards the society that condemned her, since her face remained serene when she walked to the scaffold to be publicly humiliated. She is also described as a woman that has "natural dignity and force of character" (Ibid.) with free-will (Ibid.) being of an "impulsive and passionate nature" (60). However, "she was lady-like, too" (57), so she combines the traditional Puritan lady-like behavior with a rebellious character. Although she wears the scarlet letter, which is a mark of her fallen of grace as a woman, she wears it as an adornment, being beautifully embroidered and making "a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped" (58), which opposes to the austere Puritan attire.

Furthermore, she vehemently refuses to reveal the name of her daughter's father, showing a force of character and a determination that Dimmesdale himself lacks. She accepts the strict punishment, following the Puritan law, and this is something that consumes her vitality, affecting both her mind and her physical appearance, since her hair was "completely hidden by a cap" (133). With all those changes, she is described as a woman that has "ceased to be so" (134), since her femininity and sexuality were repressed by the Puritan society. However, once she stripped the scarlet letter from her bosom, she felt liberated, recovering "her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty" (160), since she was freed from the bonds of the conservative society, embracing her femininity. However, although she wears it again, this time she wears it because she wants to, so it ceased to be "a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness" (201), and thus, thanks to Hester, the oppressive original meaning of the symbol disappears. Moreover, she expresses herself as a sexual woman when she exclaims "[l]et men tremble to win the hand of a woman, unless they win along with it the utmost passion of her heart" (142), since she wanted a touch that "awakened all her sensibilities" (Ibid.).

In addition, the narrator states that if Hester had not had Pearl, she "might have come

down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect" (134), and she would have "suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment" (Ibid.) Ann Hutchinson was a spiritual leader who "challenged male authority—and, indirectly, acceptable gender roles—by preaching to both women and men and by questioning Puritan teachings about salvation" (Michals). Therefore, as Ann Hutchinson, Hester Prynne rebels against the strict Puritan morality by assuring other women that "a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (Hawthorne 201), since "the angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman" (201), displaying thus traits of a free-thinking woman and distancing herself from the archetype of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan and conservative woman in the United States.

## **2. *The Scarlet Letter* and Contemporary Society**

Although Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the 1640s in the United States, there are still some traces of those Puritan values that remain latent in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century United States. The most noticeable aspect is the double morality: while women like Hester are judged for being sexual beings, men like Arthur Dimmesdale are deprived of any judgment, being even idolized.

For example, as Erin Jensen observes, the actor Johnny Depp was accused of abusing his ex-wife, Amber Heard, and not only he is still being hired as an actor, but he has also been nominated for multiple awards. Another case is that of the dead singer XXXTentacion, who was accused by his ex-girlfriend of domestic abuse when she was pregnant (Henderson). Nevertheless, as Spencer Kornhaber states, after his death, he has been glorified, being considered a legend, so his fans prefer to condemn the woman saying that she lied, perpetuating thus the violence against women. Moreover, it has been confirmed that the singer Rihanna was abused in 2009 by Chris Brown. Plus, Chris Brown was accused of raping an anonymous woman in Paris, but he has been released without charges (Breedon). However, his career as a singer has not suffered any negative effects, since he won a Grammy in 2012, being nominated more than ten times after the assault (Vulpo). In addition, the famous football player Cristiano Ronaldo was accused by an American model of raping her in 2009, but the case was dismissed. In 2018, "Cristiano Ronaldo's DNA was found in samples collected from his rape accuser" (Pagones), and leaked messages have been found in which Cristiano Ronaldo confessed it. Despite all these proofs, the football player has not faced charges, and his popularity has not decreased, since his fans refuse to believe in a woman's word.

In the case of women, thanks to the spread of the #metoo hashtag, there has been a growth of the "me too" movement, which is based on supporting survivors of sexual violence. The #metoo movement appeared because Harvey Weinstein, a Hollywood producer, was accused of sexually harassing multiple women, such as Lena Dunham, Brie Larson, Angelina Jolie, and Gwyneth Paltrow ("How the Harvey Weinstein Scandal Unfolded"). These women decided to share their experiences after seeing that other women were brave enough to share them, so they did not feel that it was their fault. Thus, like Hester Prynne, these women are

victims of the patriarchal society, since Hester married Chillingworth without sexually desiring him just because he took advantage of her innocence and then she had to remain silent about the identity of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. In parallel, these actresses decided to share their stories after years of silence because men like Harvey Weinstein could ruin their professional careers. Hence, the influence that a powerful man can have on women to make them have unwanted sexual intercourse is present both in a fictional novel that takes place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century society.

Regarding the character of Mistress Hibbins in the novel, it is also important to take into account that an Anglo-European feminist movement has appropriated the figure of the witch, to the extent that one of the most well-known quotes used in feminism is "we are the granddaughters of the witches you could not burn". Thus, instead of being demonized, witches are nowadays represented as intelligent, powerful and independent women, as it can be seen in the characters of Hermione Granger, from J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter*, or in Sabrina Spellman, from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*.

In media, *The Scarlet Letter* has been present in *Game of Thrones*, *Easy A* and *Pretty Little Liars*. For example, in the tenth episode of the fifth season of *Game of Thrones*, there is a parallelism between Cersei Lannister and Hester Prynne. Cersei was condemned by a religious group to walk naked while a woman repeatedly shouted "Shame!" before the eyes of the population for confessing her sin, which consisted of committing adultery with her cousin. Consequently, both Cersei and Hester are condemned by religion for committing adultery by humiliating themselves and by having a latent reminder of their sin: while Hester wears the letter A in her bosom, Cersei's long hair is cut short.

Moreover, in the movie *Easy A*, which is a modern interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter*, Olive Penderghast lies about losing her virginity and she is insulted for her promiscuity, while her friend, Brandon, is praised for the same reason. Therefore, both the movie and the novel highlight the double standards and the hypocrisy of society. Also, in the television series *Pretty Little Liars*, after the disappearance of one of their friends, four teenage girls receive messages from an anonymous person named "A" who threatens to reveal their secrets. Accordingly, Hester and these four girls are punished for their actions by the letter "A".

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current situation of women of European ancestry in the United States shares many similarities with that of 17<sup>th</sup>-century women. As in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, women are still subjected to judgment for their sexual liberation, while men are praised for doing the same thing. This behavior reproduces the Puritan sexual repression of women seen in *The Scarlet Letter* through the characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, which is displayed in the feminist analysis of the novel. Additionally, the values depicted in this novel can also be found in contemporary society, as it can be seen in the media, in the "me too" movement and in how male celebrities who have abused women are not held responsible for their actions. Thereby, through the analysis of the society and the characters of the novel, the feminist approach of *The Scarlet Letter* evinces the gender inequality of both the society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and that of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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