

Women in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Contents

Introduction	4
1. Hawthorne and Puritanism	6
1.1 The Puritan character	6
1.1.1 Fanaticism and superstition.....	6
1.1.2 Gloomy portrayal of the New England inhabitants	8
1.2 Puritan ideology: In Adam’s fall, we sinn’d all.....	9
1.2.1 Crime and punishment	9
1.2.2 The public life of Hester, Dimmesdale and Puritans: confining the individual.....	11
1.3 Conclusion	13
2. Sexual Politics in <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	14
2.1. The Patriarchal body.....	14
2.1.1 Patriarchy in New England	14
2.1.2 Consequences for the repressed	16
2.2 Role Reversal.....	19
2.2.1 Feminization of Reverend Dimmesdale.....	20
2.2.2 Portrayal of Hester	24
2.3 Feminist Criticism	26
2.3.1 Feminist utopia.....	27
2.3.2 Representing Hester Prynne: influential aspects.....	29
2.3.2.1 <i>Patriarchal binary thought</i>	29
Intellect versus feeling	29
The private versus the public	31
2.3.2.2 <i>The silent woman: a variety of motives</i>	32
3. Maternal ideal.....	36
3.1. Hester and Pearl.....	36
3.1.1 A mutual connection	36
3.1.2 Motherly duties	39
3.2. Mother of all	42
3.3. Conclusion	43
4. The many-sided character of Pearl.....	44
4.1 Sin and salvation: “She is my happiness, she is my torture!”	45

4.2 The wildness in Pearl: “That wild and flighty little elf”	46
4.2.1 Undomesticated nature.....	46
4.2.2 Sensuality.....	48
4.3. Domestication and suppression: “Be quiet Pearl”	49
4.4 Conclusion.....	51
5. The scarlet letter: Hester Prynne and her “mark of shame”	52
5.1 The adulteress in the market-place	53
5.1.1 Objectifying Hester	54
5.1.2. “Being the object of severe and universal observation”: the power of the gaze	56
5.2 “The scarlet letter had not done its office”	58
5.2.1 Purpose and significance.....	58
5.2.2 Reforming Hester?	59
6. Conclusion.....	61

Works Cited

Introduction

Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast, that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real. Yes! – these were her realities, - all else had vanished! (Hawthorne 55)

The Scarlet Letter, first published in 1850, is Nathaniel Hawthorne's first "romance" and is thus far his most renowned and well-received novel. The subject matter is equally well-known. Over the course of twenty-four chapters, Hawthorne portrays the fate of Hester Prynne, a woman who is condemned by Puritan law to wear the letter A on her bosom as a punishment for her adultery. Not only is Hester a central character "of majestic resonance and scope", but over time she has become one of the most intriguing and enigmatic female protagonists in American literature (Baym "Introduction" 7). The story has engendered numerous interpretations, seeing as it has been read as a tale of sin and its consequences, of social isolation, of redemption, of passion and love, of an individual struggling against society's conventions and so much more. The reasons for this variety of readings are manifold, but can undoubtedly be ascribed to the fact that the principles and attitudes of both Hester and her daughter Pearl are at times puzzling and hard to identify. The moral essence of these female protagonists is made up of contradicting characteristics, making it difficult for the reader to come to a straightforward conclusion. On the one hand, Hester, suffering from her social isolation, exhibits a desire to be once more accepted as a full member of the community. At the same time, however, her passionate spirit and her personal, moral laws seem to be directly opposed to the Puritan belief that her sin is truly evil and the docile, submissive attitude that is expected of her. Pearl, the elf-like child, is similarly self-contradicting by representing both rebellion against and acceptance of the authority of the Puritan government. The girl effortlessly combine her wayward and unruly behaviour with her function as Hester's conscience and "the novel's moral centre" (Colacurcio 17). Any assessment of *The Scarlet Letter* should therefore take into account the ambiguity and the still ongoing literary debate concerning the narrative's moral. There does not seem to be one ultimate meaning and no interpretation can be called definitive.

Since two of the central characters of the novel are female and unmistakably confronted with a male-dominated Puritan world, I will try and investigate to what extent gender plays a role in their characterization and experiences. Even though my approach is not an exclusively feminist one, the themes I intend to discuss will for the most part be related to revealing the patriarchal hierarchy of Puritan Boston, as presented by Hawthorne, and analyzing certain techniques by which women in this story are disadvantaged.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will briefly go over the structure of my thesis. In the first chapter, I will look into certain aspects of Puritanism which shape the background of the story. The religious and patriarchic doctrine of the Boston settlers is a powerful authority to which Hester and Pearl have to face up and is certainly worth investigating. The second chapter covers *The Scarlet Letter*'s involvement in Kate Millett's concept of sexual politics. In a first sub-section, I start out with resuming and examining in more detail the subject of Puritan patriarchy and its effect on the inhabitants of the settlement. The following part explores the characterization of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in terms of masculinity and femininity. The third and last subdivision deals with Hester's intellectual contemplations and relates her conduct to certain notions of feminist criticism. Chapter three and four discuss Hester and Pearl's relation, paying special attention to Hester's role as a mother to her child and eventually the entire community. In the fifth and final section, I concentrate on the scarlet letter, the central symbol of the novel, and attempt to reveal whether or not it has "done its office" (Hawthorne 145). However, since the essence and moral make up of both the female protagonists and the letter itself are nearly impossible to determine, the readings that are presented here do not pretend to be final. I merely attempt to explore Hester and Pearl's position in a Puritan and patriarchal society while at the same time respecting the complexity of the characters and the symbol that is at the centre of the novel.

1. Hawthorne and Puritanism

It has become nearly impossible to discuss one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary products without looking into the influence of his Puritan heritage. He was a son of Puritans in a quite literal sense. The colonial Hathornes were the "stern administrators of a harsh Puritan justice" (Madsen "Puritans" 515). William Hathorne was a bitter and notorious persecutor of Quakers while his son, Nathaniel's great-great grandfather, John Hathorne, is popularly referred to as "the hanging judge" of the Salem witchcraft trials. In *The Custom House*, Hawthorne expressed his disapproval of these committed atrocities:

I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties [...]. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them [...] may be now henceforth removed (13).

In any case, the dark history of his colonial ancestors doubtlessly affected the way in which he chose to depict the Puritans in his fiction. According to Deborah Madsen "*The Scarlet Letter* embodies Hawthorne's best-known representation of the stern and gloomy Puritans that characterize the colonial New England" ("Puritans" 516). The historical reality of their culture was probably more complex than that, but Hawthorne chooses to emphasize their grim side. The nature of his affiliation with these dark forefathers remains a bit uncertain. Critics cannot seem to agree whether Hawthorne's treatment of Puritan themes should be identified as sympathetic or critical. There are others who believe he is both. I concur with Barrett Mills who points out that even though "he expresses that constant haunting sense of ancestral sin [...] for Hawthorne Puritanism was no longer a way of life but rather a subject for literary art" (79).

1.1 The Puritan character

1.1.1 Fanaticism and superstition

The Scarlet Letter offers the reader a glance of the second generation settlers in New England. Mills notes that Hawthorne "had far less respect for [these] second generation Puritans than for the first" (86). In the novel he describes them as the generation which "wore the blackest shade of Puritanism" [...] and which "had been born to an inheritance of Puritan gloom" in which superstition and a fanatical streak were added to their already stern, gloomy

and intolerant character (202, 200). Hawthorne uses the behaviour of the Puritan children to demonstrate the cruelty resulting from this. Moreover, their activities reflect the essence of Hawthorne's Puritan portrait:

She saw the children of the settlement [...] disporting themselves in such grim fashion as the Puritanic nurture would permit; playing at going to church, perchance; or at scourging Quakers; or taking scalps in a sham-fight with the Indians; or scaring one another with freaks of imitative witchcraft" (84)

The children of the Puritans looked up from their play – or what passed for play with those somber little urchins – and spake gravely to one another: “Behold, there is the woman of the scarlet letter; and of a truth, moreover, there is the likeness of that scarlet letter running along by her side! Come, therefore, and let us fling mud at them!” (91).

Hawthorne offers the reader numerous illustrations of the Puritan superstitions as well. Ordinary natural occurrences were more often than not viewed in a religious or supernatural light:

Nothing was more common in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances, and other natural phenomena, that occurred with less regularity than the rise and set of sun and moon, as so many revelations from a supernatural source. Thus a blazing spear, a sword of flame, a bow, or a sheaf of arrows, seen in the midnight sky, prefigured Indian warfare. Pestilence was known to have been foreboded by a shower of crimson light (135).

John Stubbs offers an additional illustration by arguing that Roger Chillingworth can be considered to be a dark sorcerer. The alchemist's knowledge of herbs and medicine more than once invoke fear in Hester and the townspeople. He is, moreover, associated with the Black Man that haunts the forest and entices people to sell their soul to the devil. In the course of the narrative, the mysterious old physician is not so subtly linked to “black art” and even to Satan (Hawthorne 112). His suggested supernatural connections diminish his humanity and enhance the idea that Chillingworth's function is a mere symbolical one, representing the stereotype of the wronged husband who haunts the sinners with guilt. I will elaborate on this particular aspect later on.

Finally, there is of course the (historical) character of Old Mistress Hibbins. Hawthorne notes that Ann Hibbins was accused of being a witch, condemned and hanged in 1656. Throughout our story, she is seen allied to “fiends and night-hags, with whom she was well-known to make excursions into the forest” (131). On another occasion she invites Hester to join her to

“a merry company in the forest” (103). “This yellow-starched and velveteed old hag” who has chosen the devil for her master already prefigures the witchcraft-hysteria both in fiction as in reality (193).

1.1.2 Gloomy portrayal of the New England inhabitants

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne seems to be inclined to describe Puritans and their way of life in an unpleasant manner. Mainly in the first two chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne confronts the reader with dark images concerning the Puritan townspeople. He depicts them as “bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats” (45). The “grim rigidity” of these “stern-browed men and unkindly visage women” makes them cold and unable of sympathy (47). In commenting on their gloomy and rigid comportment, Schwartz refers to Hawthorne’s “special kind of irony” in describing the Puritan mood during a holiday (202):

The Puritans compressed whatever mirth and public joy they deemed allowable to human infirmity; thereby so far dispelling the customary cloud, that, for the space of a single holiday, they appeared scarcely more grave than most other communities at a period of general affliction (Hawthorne 200).

Among the most necessary practical arrangements of these colonists are a cemetery and a prison “the black flower of civilized society” (45). The latter has drawn the special attention of John Stubbs. In his opinion, the ugly edifice represents “the reasoned restrictions and the severe punishments which civilized society imposes on itself” (1446). It is surrounded by a number of unsightly, coarse weeds such as pig-weed, apple-peru and burdock, giving the building a yet dark aspect. However, on one side of the prison portal grows a wild rose-bush with delicate gems. Stubbs associates it with the beauty of nature and freedom as opposed to (Puritan) law and civilization. In this viewpoint, Hester becomes a victim of “reasoned laws of behaviour that are too harsh” (1446). I do not doubt that Hawthorne intended the reader to compare the fragile beauty of the roses to Hester’s, but above all he offers this flower to the reader, inviting us to interpret the occurrences of the narrative. In the further course of my investigation, I intend to explore what exactly constitutes this “sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track” of Hawthorne’s novel (46).

I would like to observe that not all of Hawthorne’s Puritans fit the image of stern joyless wretches. Stubbs distinguishes between the “black puritan” and the “fair Puritan”

(1444). They are not necessarily important characters in Hawthorne's fiction, but rather "represent a general attitude in the community". He describes the former as superstitious and narrow minded, with a "sinister and by no means agreeable expression" on the "dark and midnight character" of their faces (1444). The bulk of the Puritan crowd in *The Scarlet Letter* correspond to this characterization. Chillingworth in particular takes on this role, since he comes to represent "the harshest aspect of the Boston townspeople's morality" (1446). The fair Puritan stands opposed to this harshness and severity and is capable of kindness and understanding. Hester seems to be one of the few Puritans with a "warm, loving nature" which consequently leaves her "alienated from, or in conflict with, Puritan severity" (1445).

1.2 Puritan ideology: In Adam's fall, we sinn'd all

In commenting on Hawthorne's Puritans, Joseph Schwartz noted that Hawthorne "was never shy in expressing his gratitude to the Puritans for their early political struggle for liberty" (205). Near the end of *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne makes clear his admiration for the first Puritan rulers:

These primitive statesman [...] who were elevated to power by the early choice of the people, seem to have been not often brilliant, but distinguished by a ponderous sobriety, rather than activity of intellect. They had fortitude and self-reliance, and, in time of difficulty and peril, stood up for the welfare of the state like a line of cliffs against a tempestuous tide (206).

Schwartz then rightfully continues by observing that these early freedom-fighters who "demanded liberty of conscience and freedom from their British rulers, were not willing to extend this same freedom to those who dissented from the Puritan way of life"(207). The sole purpose of their severe rules was to control the behaviour of man at all times, including Hester's.

1.2.1 Crime and punishment

In Puritan society, law and religion were closely entwined and almost identical. "The law itself was severe, and severely was it carried out" (Schwartz 203). Branding the forehead with a hot iron, whipping, displaying the offender on a platform with his head confined in a halter or the death penalty were common measures of punishment, those of which are mentioned in *The Scarlet Letter* alone. One might think that Hester Prynne's sentence, wearing the initial of her sin on her bosom, is a relatively easy one to bear, but "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” (Hawthorne 47).

It has already become clear that *sin* is standing at the very core of Puritan ideology and Hawthorne’s novel. A significant aspect one should be aware of is that the sin of an individual has consequences for the rest of the religious congregation. In order to understand this reasoning, one must take a look into the Puritan belief of predestination. These people were deeply convinced of their own exceptionalism and imagined they were personally elected by God to create a ‘city upon a hill’ and to set an example for the rest of humankind. Such a mission can only be successful when all members of the community work towards this common goal. However, if one person goes astray, he or she will bring everyone down in the process and jeopardize their guaranteed place in Heaven. This could only result in an extremely paranoid society in which everyone is very closely watching their neighbour.

If an individual were to stray from the rules they live by, they are publicly denounced and become the object of severe and universal observation. This is the fate of Hester, who is made a symbol, a “living sermon against sin” (Hawthorne 59). She is stripped of her individuality and is transformed into “the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion” (71). The scaffolds and public penalties, like Hester’s, served the purpose of conveying a clear message to the citizens present. They were discouraged to stray from the right path and making the same mistakes as the evil-doer. Thus, the public display does not only discipline Hester but also the onlookers standing on the market-place. The use of persons as living examples of good and evil consistently bereaves them of their individuality, an aspect which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

1.2.2 The public life of Hester, Dimmesdale and Puritans: confining the individual

One of the main areas of conflict in *The Scarlet Letter* is the private versus the public life. Nina Baym declares that “the very existence of Puritan society calls for the suppression of the private self” and further comments that “civilization itself, is incompatible with privacy so far as they are concerned” (“Introduction” 20, 21). When combined with the already numerous mentioned lack of humanity, Puritan communities either resist or control their private desires, passions or dreams. Ironically, the subtle external pressure of social control

results in a private self-scrutiny and self-discipline, to which both Hester, and more noticeably the reverend, are subjected.

Especially in Dimmesdale, the author has created a character which demonstrates how the strict rules of society and in particular “the rigidity of Puritanism could not fail to cause miserable distortions to the moral nature” (Schwartz 205). The minister is a character for whom it is “essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework” (Hawthorne 108). As a clergyman, he stood at the head of the social system of that day and therefore he is all the more “trammelled by its regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices” (174). Even though his function as a priest inevitably hems him in, he has grown fond of his cage and dreads the disapproval of the community. Therefore he convinces himself it is better to put on a false show and continue to serve his fellow-men than to confess his guilt and take up his shame, like Hester has done. He defends himself and covers up his dread of public exposure in the following manner:

Guilty as they may be [...] they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them; no evil can be redeemed by better service. So, to their own unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow-creatures, looking pure as new-fallen snow; while their hearts are all speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves (Hawthorne 116).

Ironically “by not affirming that the capacity of sin is part of his nature”, Dimmesdale is separating himself from the rest of the congregation (Stubbs 1447). He refuses to acknowledge that he too is a flawed human being. He becomes the ultimate isolated Puritan who is too wrapped up in his heavenly ideals to be of any earthly good. By voluntarily making a symbol out of himself, he separates himself from the rest of humanity and lets his sin imprison him in his own heart.

I have already uttered the possibility of Chillingworth representing the guilt with which the two former lovers are haunted. This idea is supported by Hawthorne’s description of Dimmesdale’s and Chillingworth’s shared dwelling-place:

The wall were hung round with tapestry said to be from Gobelin looms, and, at all events, representing the Scriptural story of David and Bathsheba, and Nathan the Prophet, in colors still unfaded, but which made the fair woman of the scene almost as grimly picturesque as the woe-denouncing seer. (Hawthorne 111)

The fact that the minister chooses to take his residence in exactly this room, stresses the fact that he will not be able to escape his guilty conscience, no matter how many virtuous, religious books and scriptures he piles up. As a man of learning, he will spend the bulk of his time there and consequently he will be constantly confronted with the image of a sinful King David who has been tempted by a sensuous married woman. Chillingworth takes up the role of the Prophet Nathan, pointing out to the once virtuous man that he is no longer following the will of God. He acts as a reminder that Dimmesdale is deceiving not only the crowd but himself as well. Thus, the physician's main function is embodying the power of surveillance, a role which cannot be fulfilled by society due to the minister's secrecy and cowardice.

Unlike Dimmesdale, Hester is directly subjected to the control and gaze of the Puritans. Later on I will examine in more detail how Hester's body is encoded with the scarlet letter in order to make her crime transparent for all mankind. It is slightly ambiguous that this punishment and mechanism of control includes exclusion, which would normally grant her the freedom to do as she wishes. Hester and her child have been able to benefit from the isolation and gain a degree of independence and freedom which would never have been possible in the centre of Puritanic life. As an outsider, moreover, she has viewed the system from an objective and critical point of view. However, the freedom she may have found in her inner thoughts and ideas evaporates when Hester once again joins the "sombre-hued community" (Hawthorne 227).

I have long wondered why Hawthorne does not grant his most famous female character the freedom and individuality she deserves. One plausible explanation that comes to mind is the author's position towards Emerson's concept of self-reliance. This philosophy of individualism states that man needs to trust his deepest instincts and most basic beliefs. Being self-reliant implied valuing your own inner truths instead of books, doctrines and the opinions of others. Even though Hawthorne did not sustain the Puritan idea that all rights came from God, he did remain deeply sceptical towards Emerson's optimism about human nature. He observes that 'trusting oneself' could have its drawbacks, since it allowed a person to follow the devil within instead of the inward light. "The kingdom of God is within you', but also the kingdom of the Devil" (Mills 90). Thus, Hawthorne emphasizes the possible dangers and the fact leaving a person to take care of his own moral guidance could be soul-destructing.

1.3 Conclusion

There is nothing to show that the author's personal opinions were as morbid as his ancestors', but the morals in his fiction reflect a certain sympathy towards Puritan values, even though he himself was not one of them. In *The Scarlet Letter*, he seems to condemn and admire Puritanism at the same time. As I already mentioned, the way in which he depicts the New England community is one in which the confining aspect of the religion prevails. He condemned the cruelties of his ancestors and did not appreciate the Puritan hard-heartedness. On the other hand, Hawthorne admired to a certain degree their governing capacities, possessed a profound awareness of (original) sin and inherited some of his ancestors' scepticism, which is clearly reflected in *The Scarlet Letter*. In general, however, I must conclude that the unfavourable aspects of the Puritan character colour the minds of Hawthorne, and hence his readers, the most. Therefore it is all the more astounding that he chooses to integrate Hester into this community at the end of his tale. A twentieth century reader might have hoped or expected a celebration of individuality and Hester's triumph over society's restrictions. To those, it undoubtedly is a bitter disappointment to observe how our heroine after her "toilsome, thoughtful and self-devoted years" that made up her life, resumes the symbol of her sin out of free will. At that point, her self-denial reaches its highpoint by returning to New England without Pearl. She remains true to Puritan values by "leaving a grown daughter [...] who could give her love and warmth and by refusing "to accept reward from an illicit love" (Hoffman, 31).

To conclude, Madsen observes that "subversives are always defeated by the overwhelming forces of orthodoxy", which seems to be the case here as well ("Puritans" 510). The disciplining powers of society have been able to weaken the will of the individual, in this case the strong-headed character of Hester. Throughout the novel, Hester's outward submissive demeanour might have concealed an inner rebellion of some sort. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the novel those deviant thoughts and "dark questions" that often arose in her mind have disappeared and she has been transformed into a disciplined woman, capable of "gentle happiness" (Hawthorne 226). Naturally, I am not the first to reach this conclusion. Myra Jehlen already indicated that Hawthorne gave "rebellion its strongest case by embodying it in his most compelling character", but ultimately deemed her an "immediate threat to social order" (138, 133). Therefore, like Pearl, Hester's rich nature has to be subdued and moulded into an ideal of womanhood (see below, chapter 4).

2. Sexual Politics in *The Scarlet Letter*

In the following chapter, I would like to look into the relationship between the men and women in *The Scarlet Letter*. I will pay special attention to particular aspects of gender i.e. “the social construction of the concept of masculinity and femininity” in the New England cultural context and the way in which it affects one’s social behaviour (Eagleton 158). My object is to lay bear underlying assumptions and expectations concerning women (and to a certain degree men) in the novel and examine the consequences for these characters.

2.1. The Patriarchal body

In considering, whether or not *The Scarlet Letter* reflects patriarchal values, I have used Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* as a framework. In recent years, her analysis of patriarchy may have been challenged by feminist critics like Cora Kaplan and Toril Moi for being too simplistic, but in this context I believe it to be a suitable starting point. Millett starts off by explaining that the term “sexual politics” refers to “power-structured relationships [...] whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (23). Consequently she conceives of patriarchy as the political institution by which the female is subjected to the male.

2.1.1 Patriarchy in New England

I will commence by taking a closer look at the possible patriarchal aspect of the historical New England community, as presented in the novel. It is obvious from the start that the political structure of the Massachusetts colony is patriarchal one. Those who assume authority may have been elected, but these “fathers and founders of the commonwealth – the statesman, the priest, and the soldier” are essentially male (Hawthorne 201). The female sex remains entirely unrepresented and the powerful hold of patriarchy is maintained by the exclusively male government. Furthermore, Hawthorne implies that the female sex would not necessarily benefit from the opposite state of affairs:

“Goodwives,” said a hard-featured dame of fifty, “I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgement before us five, that are now in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I think not!” (48).

The men who are effectively leading the New England society are possibly more merciful, but certainly not more benevolent as they look down on Hester from their superior “position of rigid righteousness” and point out her sin for all to see (Schwartz, 1999). The mere presence of the Governor and his counsellors is sufficient to create a leaden, solemn atmosphere, as they witness the scene from their elevated positions on the balcony.

The influence of the magistrates in charge is further strengthened by the fact that their laws are derived from both the statute-book and Scripture. I have already established that religion and law strongly coincide in the Puritan theocracy. Therefore, the office of the leaders is a sacred one, making resistance even more problematical. Elizabeth Hoffman traces this conception back to the Puritan belief that the community “holds a covenant with God” and “therefore the laws that govern them hold a relation with the law”(17). Hawthorne himself describes these eminent characters as belonging to a “period when the forms of authority were felt to possess the sacredness of divine institutions” (59). But even though the leaders and their trusting community are convinced of their divinely inspired authority, Hawthorne seems to undermine their solid position:

“They were doubtless, good men, just and sage. But out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgement on an erring woman’s heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil, than the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester Prynne now turned her face.” (60)

The man who pass judgement on Hester do not seem to know what they are talking about. Even John Wilson, the eldest clergyman of Boston and a great scholar is referred to as unaccustomed to real life and incompetent to perform his task.

There he stood [...] while his gray eyes accustomed to the shaded light of his study, were winking, like those of Hester’s infant, in the unadulterated sunshine. He looked like the darkly engraved portraits which we see prefixed to old volumes of sermons; and had no more right than one of those portraits would have, to step forth, as he now did, and meddle with a question of human guilt, passion and anguish” (Hawthorne 60).

Hester apparently refuses to be intimidated by the frowning looks of both eminent and ordinary Puritans, but she does not remain completely unaffected because, “as she lifted her eyes towards the balcony, the unhappy woman grew pale and trembled” (60). The fact that her secret partner in crime is one of the esteemed community members surrounding the Governor

certainly influences her anguish, but it seems clear that the knowledge that she must not expect any warmth or sympathy from her male judges causes her the most fear.

It is definitely ironic that Hester's secret accomplice is a minister, one of the leading members of the community, whom others came to for moral support.

His was the profession, at that era, in which intellectual ability displayed itself far more than in political life [...] it offered inducements powerful enough, in the almost worshipping respect of the community, to win the most aspiring ambition into its service. Even political power [...] was within the grasp of a successful priest (207).

Hawthorne subtly criticizes the Puritan system by undermining Dimmesdale's credibility and moral authority. In displaying the hypocrisy of his moral standards, the implied author ensures that the self-deluding minister loses all respect and sympathy on the part of the reader. However, this does not automatically lessen the presence or influence of patriarchy in *The Scarlet Letter*. To be more precise, Hawthorne's disapproval focuses rather on the cruel severity of the founding fathers, not on their male supremacy, which is treated as a natural situation.

2.1.2 Consequences for the repressed

Thus far, I have essentially focussed on how patriarchy manifests itself in the narrative, but I have left its possible effects untouched. With respect to the latter, Kate Millett's observations are especially useful. She elaborates on the psychological effects of the female in patriarchal societies, in which the often unsuspecting victim undergoes "ego damage":

When in any group of persons the ego is subjected to such invidious versions of itself through social beliefs, ideology and tradition, the effect is bound to be pernicious. This, coupled with the persistent though subtle denigration women encounter daily through personal contacts [...], should make it no special cause for surprise that women develop group characteristics common to those who suffer [...] a marginal existence (Millett 55).

I believe the circumstances of Hester mirror the abovementioned subtle, daily denigration:

Continually, and in a thousand other ways, did she feel the innumerable throbs of anguish that had been so cunningly contrived for her by the undying, ever-active sentence of the Puritan tribunal. Clergymen paused in the street to address words of

exhortation, that brought a crowd, with its mingled grin and frown, around the poor, sinful woman.

If she entered a church, trusting to share the Sabbath smile of the Universal Father, it was often her mishap to find herself the text of discourse. She grew to have a dread of children; for they had imbibed from their parents a vague idea of something horrible in this dreary woman [...] They pursued her at a distance with shrill cries and the utterance of a word that [...] was none the less terrible to her [...].

(Hawthorne 77)

As is to be expected, the assumptions that are made about the nature of her person leave an imprint on her self-image. “Her position, although she understood it well, and was in little danger of forgetting it, was often brought before her self-perception, like a new anguish, by the rudest touch upon the tenderest spot” (76). She accommodates to the public’s expectations by acting the part. Because she is thought to be a sinful outcast, she has to appear to be one. Miller further stresses that these women are supposed to have a “contentment with their own lot”, a characteristic which can be ascribed to Hester as well (57). She “never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it, in requital for what she suffered” (Hawthorne 140).

An additional psychological side effect Millett goes into is “the self-hatred and contempt” of an oppressed individual. In her discussion of *Jude the Obscure*, she remarks that this sentiment results from the belief that “sex is female and evil” (131). So even though a male culprit might be equally penalized, the sexual guilt shifts almost entirely to the side of the woman who is forced to take up responsibility for her “evil doings” (Hawthorne 57). This is most obviously illustrated by the fact that Hester is made the universal emblem of sin. Although the scarlet letter might have been taken off her breast, if only she were willing to repent and confess the name of the child’s father, she refuses to speak and prefers to bear the burden of both ‘sinners’:

“Never!” replied Hester Prynne, looking, not at Mr. Wilson, but into the deep and troubled eyes of the younger clergyman. “It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony as well as mine!” (63).

As a result, the female character becomes a victim of masochism. We find Hester frequently stressing that her deed has been evil and punishing herself by rejecting all joys, such as her needlework, as a sin. What is more, every action or good deed of hers tends to be motivated to a certain degree by guilt and is carried out in an attempt to achieve atonement.

“Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works?” (167)

Much of the time, which she might readily have applied to the better efforts of her art, she employed in making coarse garments for the poor. It is probable that there was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation, and that she offered a real sacrifice of enjoyment, in devoting so many hours to such rude handiwork (75).

None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty [...].
None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town (140).

If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on [...] Society was inclined to show its former victim a more benign countenance than she cared to be favoured with, or perchance, than she deserved” (140-141).

Even though Hester’s conduct throughout the tale can only be described as passive and even submissive in relation to the Puritan laws, it would be incorrect to characterize her solely as a weak, dependent, subordinate female creature. Up to this point I have not yet given her the credit she deserves. There are two significant instants, in which she challenges, in words, the decisions of the Puritan, patriarchal law:

“God gave me this child!” cried she. “He gave her, in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me” [...]

“God gave her into my keeping,” repeated Hester Prynne, raising her voice almost to a shriek. “I will not give her up”. And here, by a sudden impulse, she turned to the young clergyman, Mr. Dimmesdale [...]. “Speak thou for me!” cried she. “Thou wast my pastor [...]. I will not lose the child! Speak for me!” (Hawthorne 100).

At this point she still needed the assistance of a male in a superior social position. Nevertheless, the situation is entirely different in the forest-scene where she, unbothered by worldly pretences, is able to appeal intelligently to common sense. During that episode, Hester is the strongest party and has the upper hand.

“Heaven would show mercy,” rejoined Hester, “hadst thou but the strength to take advantage of it.”

“Be thou strong for me,” answered he. “Advise me what to do.”

“Is the world then so narrow?” exclaimed Hester Prynne [...]. “Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest-track? Backward to the settlement, thou sayest! Yes; but onward too! [...]. There thou art free! [...].

Leave this wreck and ruin here where it happened! Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew! (Hawthorne 172).

She pleads with her one time lover to leave his sin behind him and to accept the penitence derived from good works. In these moments she embodies two essential principles of self-reliance, namely to trust oneself and to live in the present. Emerson articulated these notions in his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance”:

“Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world.” [...] “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature”.

“But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory? [...]”

“But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eyes laments the past.” (Cain 535, 538, 542)

Instead of conforming to ideas that do not belong to her, Hester lets her own beliefs be her guide. In her seclusion from society, she does not measure her ideals of right and wrong by an standard external to herself. She cannot genuinely accept the harsh judgement of her sin and believes that their error had “a consecration of its own” (Hawthorne, 170). She might not respond openly to the “quiet malice” of the townspeople but she “forbore to pray for her *enemies*; lest, in spite of her forgiving aspirations, the words of blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse”, which echo an inner resistance to the torments that are daily inflicted on her. (77, emphasis added).

Nonetheless, regardless of the defiance Hester has demonstrated on some occasions, she is made to comply with patriarchy and a certain ideal model of womanhood at the end, a subject which I will examine in more detail later.

2.2 Role Reversal

Judging by the outcome of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne seemed to be more comfortable with a feminine domestic philosophy. An innocent remark he made in *The Custom House* about “womankind’s “tools of magic, the broom and mop”, could bring about a mass of indignant reactions in this day and age (11). Certain other passages in the novel indicate that the narrator was less than thrilled when women transgress the domestic domain and voice their opinions :

The women had not so much refinement, that any sense of impropriety restrained the wearers of petticoat and farthingale from stepping forth into public ways, and wedging

their not unsubstantial persons, if occasion were, into the thong nearest to the scaffold at an execution [...]. There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons, as most of them seemed to be, that would startle us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone (Hawthorne 48).

Despite their coarseness, however, Hawthorne was able to appreciate another aspect of their being. He marvels at their “broad shoulders and well-developed busts”, their “round and ruddy cheeks” that had not yet grown paler in the atmosphere of New England. The following generations possessed “a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty” and a “slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity” (48). The distinction made between these unrefined wives and their more delicate and fragile descendants could be more relevant than one may think at first glance.

Erika Kreger has analyzed the characters of Hester Prynne and Reverend Dimmesdale and compared them to certain stereotypes in seduction stories and the “newer” domestic fiction in Hawthorne’s era. She concludes that “Dimmesdale exemplifies the socially unacceptable qualities associated with the earlier narratives, while Hester embodies the cultural ideal developed in later ones” (310). I believe that Kreger’s findings are especially valuable in this context, because they offer a credible account of the way in which Hester is portrayed and develops throughout the story.

2.2.1 Feminization of Reverend Dimmesdale

She clarifies her viewpoint by exploring the conventions of the 18th century seduction novels and the 19th century domestic novels. The first is rather melodramatic in tone and depicts the female protagonists as weak, gullible victims and associates these ‘heroines’ with “negative notions of selfishness and moral laxity”. These vulnerable creatures, in constant need of male protection, are “tricked by a cruel seducer and then abandoned to suffer, repent and die”. In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is surprisingly not the woman who undergoes this tragic series of events, but the highly feminized character of Dimmesdale.

In passing, I would like to remark that this is reminiscent of how Hester is made responsible for the sexual guilt in the tale. Not only has she led a virtuous individual astray, but she proceeds to abandon him to the mercy of a secret enemy, i.e. Chillingworth. Hester is described as “the bane and ruin” of “this pale, weak, and sorrow-stricken man” and feels responsible for “allowing the minister to be thrown into a position where so much evil was to be foreboded” (Hawthorne 151, 170, 145). Even though the reverend has only himself to

blame, he still points the finger at Hester for exposing his guilty heart to a knowing eye: “Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!”(169).

Kreger observes that “from the moment he is introduced, Dimmesdale is depicted in feminine terms”, both physically and psychologically (318).

He was a person of very striking aspect, with a white lofty, and impending brow, large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which, unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint.

[...] There was an air about this young minister [...] as of a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own. (61)

By 19th century standards his physical aspect certainly lacks “the ruddy cheek” and “the frank blue-eyed gaze” which indicate masculinity (Kreger 319). Furthermore, he does not only share his “specific physical markings” with “the seduced heroine”, but like the latter, he lacks mental strength and a certain force of character to endure the torments of his hypocritical life (321). Subsequent to his moral fall, he wastes away like a pitiable victim.

The health of Mr. Dimmesdale had evidently begun to fail. [...] His form grew emaciated; his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it; he was often observed, on any slight alarm or other sudden accident, to put his hand over his heart, with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain (Hawthorne 106).

At a later point in the novel, it is once more painfully obvious how easily the minister gives in to feelings of despair and hopelessness:

He looked haggard and feeble, and betrayed a nervous despondency in his air, which had never so remarkably characterized him in his walks about the settlement, nor in any other situation where he deemed himself liable to notice. [...] There was a listlessness in his gait; as if he saw no reason for taking one step farther, nor felt any desire to do so, but would have been glad, could he be glad of any thing, to fling himself down at the root of the nearest tree, and lie there passive for evermore. (Hawthorne 164)

Shall I lie down again on these withered leaves, where I cast myself down when thou didst tell me what he was? Must I sink down there and die at once? (171)

His extreme sensibility might have aroused sympathy or compassion in the heart of the reader, if only he had used his empathy and his understanding of sin to assist others, instead of indulging in navel-gazing. This “self-absorbed emotional excess” makes him as “contemptible as the overwrought seduced heroine” (Kreger 322). His profound introspection and the resulting egotism begins to resemble megalomania, when his distorting imagination interprets the gleam of comets as a symbol of his guilt:

A man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul’s history and fate. We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld the appearance of an immense letter, - the letter A, - marked out in lines of dull, red light. (136).

During the scene in the forest, he takes no notice, or is simply not that interested, in Hester’s seven years of misery. His main focus remains on himself, on his own darkened and confused mind, on his own misfortunes and on his dread that his features are partly repeated in Pearl’s face “so strikingly that the world might see them” (Hawthorne 180). Sadly, in spite of his excessive introspection, the priest’s mental unsteadiness goes hand in hand with utter confusion and a tragic misconception of his own character. In the following sentences, the narrator expresses his disapproval of the self-deluding priest in a very explicit manner:

We have had, and may still have, worse things to say of him; but none, we apprehend, so pitiably weak; no evidence, at once so slight and irrefragable, of a subtle disease, that had long since begun to eat into the real substance of his character. No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true (Hawthorne 188).

The next stage of decline Kreger describes is madness. Similar to the faint, 19th century female protagonists, Dimmesdale’s mental instability weakens him further. Following his memorable night on the platform, even Hester has doubts concerning the sanity of “this feeble and most sensitive of spirits” (Hawthorne 130). “She saw that he stood on the verge of lunacy, if he had not already stepped across it” (145). Subsequent to that other noteworthy episode, the scene in the forest, where Hester attempted to modify his views on the world and the possibilities it offers, it becomes evident that the minister might not be capable of dealing with significant changes in his “interior kingdom” (190). As he leaves the free atmosphere of the forest, he is plagued by an “importunately obtrusive sense of change” and a “revolution in

the sphere of thought and feeling”, which incites him to do “some strange, wild, wicked thing or other” (190). It causes “this lost and desperate man” to question himself and his sanity, while striking his hand against his forehead and exclaiming “Am I mad?” in the middle of the street (191,192). Regrettably, after once more confronting the regulations and inhabitants of his little town, his newly-found energy and excitement turns out to be short-lived. The following lines illustrate his old frame of mind, which is tainted by religion and an ominous sense of human sin:

Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin. And the infectious poison of sin had been thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system. It had stupefied all blessed impulses, and awakened into vivid life the whole brotherhood of bad ones (194).

Yet again, Dimmesdale wishes to stand apart from “the world of perverted spirits” and “wicked mortals” that inhabit this earth, by delivering his ‘stately thoughts’ in a sermon that would enthral each attending person (194, 207). Once more, he is preoccupied with his own mind, remote in his own sphere and beyond the reach of common people, such as Hester.

In accordance with his role as ‘suffering heroine’, the Reverend “crumbles and dies at the end of the novel”, in the arms of Hester Prynne (Kreger 335). After seven years of “long and exquisite suffering”, the faint and miserable minister at last breaks down (Hawthorne 175).

It was hardly a man with life in him, that tottered on his path so nervelessly, yet tottered, and did not fall.

They beheld the minister, leaning on Hester’s shoulder and supported by her arm around him, approach the scaffold, and ascend its steps [...] Then, down he sank on the scaffold! Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom.

“Hester,” said the clergyman, “farewell!” [...] That final word came forth with the minister’s expiring breath.

(Hawthorne 217, 219, 221, 222)

Finally, in his dying hours, where he stands “on the very proudest eminence of superiority”, he has chosen to blacken his “reputation of whitest sanctity” by taking his shame upon him

(216). He does so, however, by means of a vague confession, of which I will speak more later on. As a result, his “death of triumphant ignominy before the people” does not diminish the congregation’s reverence for him (222). Even though the minister is exposed as a “false and sin-stained creature of dust”, his death-scene is turned into a melodramatic spectacle; a parable about sin with the purpose of upholding the holiness of his character (224).

Nevertheless, in the eyes of the reader, Dimmesdale has long ago lost his appeal. By portraying the character as he did, Hawthorne persuades the reader once more to condemn the minister by linking him to the “physically drooping” and “ethically weak” seduced heroines of a literary genre that had fallen out of grace. (Kreger 311).

2.2.2 Portrayal of Hester

In spite of the torments and agony she undergoes, Hester Prynne has, to a certain degree, always possessed the fortitude and mental power which the minister lacks. Several illustrations of these attributes have already been revealed in the chapter about patriarchy, but I have not yet elaborated on her appearance and the way in which she is generally depicted. Hester’s actions are always marked with dignity and a force of character. She is “tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale”. Her countenance possesses a beauty “from regularity of feature and richness of complexion” and “the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes”. Hawthorne describes her as lady-like as well, but employs a time-bound interpretation of the term.

“She was lady-like too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace, which is now recognized as its indication” (50).

In spite of her ill repute, this woman “possesses the strength, selflessness, and positive influence attributed to the heroines of domestic novels” (Kreger 310). The latter was a genre which contrasts the “overemotional, helpless heroines” with “competent protagonists” who are capable of surviving “in a difficult world” (316). Hester might be a woman in distress, but she refuses to accommodate to the image of the frail, fainting lady:

She had borne, that morning, all that nature could endure; and as *her temperament was not of the order that escapes from too intense suffering by a swoon*, her spirit could only shelter herself beneath a stony crust of insensibility, while the faculties of animal life remained entire (Hawthorne 63, emphasis added).

In spite of her vigour, the domestic heroine is not supposed to be rebellious or disobedient to the conventions of the community she belongs to. On the contrary, the ideal of femininity encourages these women to fulfil a practical function in society. “Such usefulness brings contentment”, even if the female protagonist is suffering from a great deal of hardship and misery (Kreger 330).

Hester’s practical activities are limited to one specific discipline: she is able to support herself and her child with her art, “almost the only one within a woman’s grasp”, of needlework. Although the Puritan land and taste “afforded relatively little scope for its exercise”, her work extends its influence over the town leaders, who make use of Hester’s skill to give a certain majesty to their appearance. Contrary to Dimmesdale, Hester succeeds in being a functional member of society:

There was a frequent and characteristic demand for such labor as Hester Prynne could supply (74). [...]

Hester really filled a gap which must otherwise have remained vacant; it is certain that she had ready and fairly requited employment for as many hours as she saw fit to occupy with her needle (75).

Kreger observes that Hester develops into “the model of womanhood that antebellum conduct books and women’s fiction put forth [...]”. The ideal female becomes “kind, wise, consolatory” and “sympathetic” (326). The admirable qualities she was expected to acquire are “faith and self-discipline” and “obedience and usefulness” (327).

This “fully reformed Hester” connects Hawthorne to the values of his contemporaries and makes the manner in which this woman is represented highly ambiguous, especially according to modern-day standards (Kreger 333). However powerful and defiant Hester’s character has been during her trials, at the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter* she abides by values that might have been praiseworthy over two centuries ago, but are less enviable to contemporary women. On the one hand she embodies a welcome contrast to the miserable minister by demonstrating a strong disposition and a certain dignity while carrying her burden. Nina Baym, whose viewpoint seems to be more merciful, draws attention to the protagonist’s struggle with the community that condemns her” and entitles Hester “the first and arguably still the greatest heroine in American literature (“Introduction” 7). On the other hand, the new feminine ideal of the 19th century Hester conforms to, is not necessarily a change for the better. Radical thoughts, emotions or passions ought to be subdued and selfish desires banned, since she is supposed to devote herself to altruistically helping others. She

represents a domestic ideal, a woman who may not exist in real life, but from which other women can take example. Therefore, I concur with Kreger, who comments that the narrative underscores the conventional “lesson about the need for self-denial and social responsibility” (309). The story’s overall moral is a conservative one, emphasizing the dangers of social rebellion and “destructive consequences of allowing personal desire to overrule community law” (312).

Once again, the general conclusion of this chapter seems to be rather glum. Hester’s powerful feelings and temper have to be contained and transformed into proper emotions and behaviour, so that she can be a useful member of society. Every trace of selfishness and individualism has been sucked out of her personality. Hawthorne may have “succeeded in convincing mid-century readers [...] of Hester’s worthiness”, but at the same time he has disappointed many present-day readers by letting her ‘rise above’ the rebellious sentiments she encounters.

However, it is possible to end on a positive note. The strong-minded Hester we have encountered in the course of the story offers the reader at the same time an illustration of (temporary) resistance to society’s expectations and demands, and a delightfully contrasting image to that of the annoying, spineless priest. Thus, Hawthorne may have condemned Hester Prynne and her adultery and reduced her role in the end to a fairly conservative and ‘feminine’ one, he did not destroy the reader’s capacity to admire the force she displayed during her trials.

2.3 Feminist Criticism

In the past decades a substantial amount of materials with reference to feminist literary criticism has been produced. The aim of the following paragraphs is not to map out each and every one of these ideas, but to put forward those that are the most relevant with regard to the lives of the women in *The Scarlet Letter*. These issues are closely related to subject matter which has already come up in previous chapters, for instance the power of patriarchy. As these themes are extremely interconnected, it is nearly impossible not to mention them again. Nevertheless, whereas the former section was rather centred around the specific New England circumstances and characters, as presented by Hawthorne, the theoretical aspect will currently be the focal point, with Hester’s observations regarding the race of womanhood as a starting point.

2.3.1 Feminist utopia

Thus far I have established that the world in which Hester tries to find her place is controlled by patriarchal and Puritan principles. In many instances her ‘resistance’ consists of inner rebellion and progressive thoughts which remain unuttered. The most crucial illustration can be found in the 13th chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester quietly formulates her own ideas regarding womanhood and a possibility of a world in which both sexes fulfil an equal role. She reflects on how such a change could be made possible:

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. 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. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish. (Hawthorne 144)

Even though Hester harbours these bold contemplations, she has no desire to become “the destined prophetess” she is meditating on (227). The thought alone suffices for her, “without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action”. Above all, it makes her sad, because she deems it to be “a hopeless task before her”, which does not exude much optimism for the future (144). The explanation for Hester’s passiveness will probably be perceived as rather unconvincing for 20th century readers. She is far from helpless or ignorant, and although she is able to intellectually grasp the concept and pinpoint the problem, she cannot or will not put her theory into action. What is more, during the further course of the tale, she moves farther and farther away from her feminist thinking and transforms into the perfect model of a domestic heroine (Kreger 333-334).

Bearing in mind that the attitude of both the narrator and the 19th century audience towards rebellious women has proved to be unsympathetic on more than one occasion, it comes as no surprise that the former considers Hester’s “freedom of speculation” to be a threat to society. Likewise, the moments where she shows frustration by throwing off her cap and letting down her hair, would be seen as irresponsible and uncontrolled incidents by contemporary readers, as indicated by Kreger (331). The latter goes as far as stating that Hawthorne believes Hester’s thoughts concerning possible gender equality on the one hand

and infanticide on the other, to be “equally horrifying” (331). Since this is the most obvious instance in which Hester’s mind wanders dangerously, it must be restrained and cannot be allowed to realize its potential. The author has created a heroine who stands alone in the world and as a result, is able to “cast off the fragments of a broken chain” (Hawthorne 143). But even though “the world’s law was no law for her mind”, the narrator does not allow her to develop an emancipated intellect (143). The thoughts that visit her are held to be “perilous” and a “deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter” (143). The ominous symbol had not yet “done its office” at this point (145).

However, at the conclusion of the story, when she has reached the aforementioned ideal of womanhood Hawthorne set out for her, Hester recognizes “the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow” (227).

“The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! (228).

When exactly this “brighter period” shall arrive or when the world will “have grown ripe for it”, we don’t know (Hawthorne 227). Given that Hester Prynne does not see herself fit to reveal this “new truth” that will “establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness”, the only possible candidate for this role is Pearl, who has pledged to “grow up amid human joy” (227, 222). However, certainly to twenty-first-century readers, it seems implausible that the girl will ever tear down the existing structures of the world, when she has vowed to “be a woman in it” (222). Denise Knight accurately observes on this topic that Hester looks to the future, instead of to the moment itself. “The immediate hope of the world is in women [...] She’d better hurry” (256). Nonetheless, at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, the promised changes are nowhere near in sight and can only be anticipated in a distant future.

2.3.2 Representing Hester Prynne: influential aspects

In previous chapters, I have inspected the protagonist's own reflections on gender equality and the restrictions, either external or self-imposed, she is confronted with. Presently, I would like to continue by examining two concepts which have, in my opinion, had an impact on Hester's and Hawthorne's treatment of the subject.

2.3.2.1 Patriarchal binary thought

In *Working with Feminist Criticism*, Mary Eagleton has, among other things, explored the concept of binary thinking. She defines it as the tendency "in our culture to construct the world in terms of oppositions", for instance good versus evil, or the individual versus society (146). Eagleton employs comments of feminist critics, Hélène Cixous in particular, who have studied this subject, "because of their belief that binary thinking upholds patriarchy" (146). Cixous analyses this concept of "patriarchal binary thought" by listing oppositions like active/passive, head/emotions, day/night and investigating the corresponding underlying opposition man/woman. She claims that these are "heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system" since "each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the 'feminine side' is always seen as the negative, powerless instance" (Eagleton 147). I would like to explore whether there are such hidden male/female oppositions with a positive/negative evaluation present in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Intellect versus feeling

The most obvious pair of contrasting concepts to begin with is the opposition between head and heart, which Eagleton defines as "the opposition between an intellectual, rational mode on the one hand and the order of feeling and senses on the other" (148). Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, we are presented with certain notions regarding the way human life should be organized. The text renders unmistakable evidence of the belief that, in an ideal situation, man and woman should take up their natural role and not transgress the area that was assigned to them. It is simply a way to structure the role of the sexes in a harmonious manner. One of the novel's main warnings appears to be that nature made man and woman in a certain way and that these distinctions should not be dispensed with. They are simply put forward as socially desirable.

The traditional gender-based distribution of duties assigns the intellectual domain to the male and the emotional to the female. This state of affairs is applicable to the situation in

The Scarlet Letter as well, since the conclusion of the novel makes perfectly clear that the main social function of a female in society should be based on her affections. For that reason, Hester's brief excursion in the intellectual realm has got to be a temporary one, if she wishes to remain in touch with womanhood. Similarly, Barriss Mills argues that the symbol on Hester's breast is not merely a punishment for her evil deed, but as a side-effect, suppresses her femininity and allows "for a masculine freedom of speculation" (200). Consequently, the narrator underscores that, while Hester is exploring this new territory, "some attribute [...] departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman" (143). The fact that her "life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought" results in the loss of her femininity and gives her countenance a "marble coldness" (143).

[...] there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statue-like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection (142)

The social role she eventually, but voluntarily complies with, demands that she leaves those "thoughtful, self-devoted years" behind her, with the ultimate purpose of becoming a counselling and comforting "Sister of Mercy" with regard to affairs of the heart. Although she does not entirely discard her subversive political visions - she still has faith in the social reforms yet to come - she leaves them to another time and to another person.

Again, it seems that Hawthorne restrains woman's capabilities and possibilities in life by assigning to them a particular function. It is possible, however, that I have judged too hastily without taking into account the specific nineteenth century viewpoints concerning gender. It may be true that the story's moral is essentially conservative, nevertheless, I do not doubt that Hawthorne considered the social structures he presented to be an accurate picture of the world these character inhabited and beneficial for both sexes

Certainly, Hawthorne's deliberate choice to situate Hester and Pearl entirely in the emotional realm is confining, but on the other hand, on more than one occasion he has placed 'the heart' in direct opposition to the general rigidity of Puritan philosophy. The devotees of that philosophy organize their lives around discipline and morals and accordingly lack the humanity which characterizes Hester. In discussing Hawthorne's viewpoints, Mills observes that "his is an emotional philosophy, based on sympathies and antipathies of the heart, not the mind [...] He discarded the whole Puritan exegesis as too coldly intellectual" (102). Thus,

even though Hawthorne limited the female and her role to the personal sphere, he also voiced the faint possibility “that if society is to be changed for the better, such change will be initiated by women” (Baym *Woman’s Fiction*, 73).

The private versus the public

The concept of the private and public sphere is one that needs to be treated with care, especially in view of the Puritan background of the story. Previously I have declared that the Puritan way of life demands, to a certain extent, the forfeit of a private life. There is a peculiar and relentless mechanism of public social control at work, which paradoxically restrains the behaviour in private life as well. I have already established that both Hester and Dimmesdale fall victim to this phenomenon of self-discipline. But be that as it may, I have not yet looked into the influence of gender-related assumptions that have an effect on the distribution of public and private roles.

Cixous argues that women in literature are often destined to be the “non-social, non-political, nonhuman half of the living structure”. The female finds herself “on nature’s side of this structure [...] in direct contact with her [...] affects” (Eagleton 149). In other words, woman’s duties are restricted to the private domain. Hester’s situation, however, is more complex and cannot be simplified in this manner. As a woman, she has no real political power or authority in the Puritan community. But due to her indiscretion and the placement of the scarlet letter she is established as a public figure, on which all gazes are fixed. At the same time, these circumstances that make her an object of public observation also separate her from normal activities and the rest of society, thus forcing her to concentrate on her private experiences. In the seclusion of her own sphere, hiding behind the calmness of her features, she can harbour her potential rebellious feelings, which could endanger the structure of society.

Nevertheless, even though Hester and the female in general, have a central role to fulfil in the private realm, they must see to it that, in the quiet shelter of their homes, they do not become too fixed on their own individuality and keep in mind that their sensibilities should serve the greater, public good. A woman who wastes her heart through self-indulgent sentiments is too reminiscent of the despised “seduced heroine” (Kreger). At the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne embodies the opposite, i.e. the ideal woman who uses her sensitivity and empathy to assist other unfortunate creatures.

It had been her habit, from almost an almost immemorial date, to go about the country as a kind of voluntary nurse, and doing whatever miscellaneous good she might; taking upon herself, likewise, to give advice in all matters, especially those of the heart; by which means, as a person of such propensities inevitably must, she gained from many people the reverence due to an angel [...]. (Hawthorne 32)

This description brings back to mind the contrasting figure of Arthur Dimmesdale, who dedicated his entire life to his intellectual development, but was incapable of doing any real good for the people in his community.

In retrospect, the aforesaid attitudes can be easily interpreted as a condoning position towards male supremacy and female suppression. Earlier, I have attempted to take the edge off this statement by bearing in mind that Hawthorne constructs human life in the aforesaid manner to the advantage of both man and woman. However, even though the narrator seemed to favour the aspects of the private, emotional sphere instead of public, intellectual and spiritual ones, we cannot ignore that the Puritan society in *The Scarlet Letter* imprints numerous disadvantages and restrictions on the woman in it.

2.3.2.2 The silent woman: a variety of motives

A second concept Eagleton has devoted attention to as well, is the idea of women being silenced. She defines it as the “social and cultural pressures which undermine their confidence and make them hesitant about speaking” (16). I wish to examine this particular concept and relate it, not only to the fact that Hester never verbalized or put into action her views on social reform, but to all the other instances in which this character remains silent as well.

To begin with, Eagleton comments that the phenomenon of silencing women frequently is a product of patriarchal power, which is particularly conveyed via the use of language. This is of course no new finding, since Pierre Bourdieu already stated in 1982 that language is essentially “a symbolic power relation, where the power relations between speakers and groups are enacted” (Izzo 155). Eagleton claims that “language and the public platforms where language is used most prestigiously” are the fundamental locations for patriarchal power and indicates such areas of “linguistic status” as “the pulpit, the bench, the board and the dispatch box,” which are for the most part associated with men (16). In *The Scarlet Letter*, too, there is mention of such *linguistic* places.

For instance, appended to the meeting-house, there was “a kind of balcony, or open gallery [...] whence proclamations were wont to be made, amidst an assemblage of the magistracy, with all the ceremonial that attended such public observances in those days” (Hawthorne 59). Since the narrator only speaks of “these foremost men of an actual democracy” when it comes to the colonial magistrates, I believe it is safe to assume that women had no part in politics or public proclamations (206). They rarely get the floor and when they do, it is to be scrutinized, which is Hester’s fate. Women, in this story, generally talk less than men as well. In the first chapters, it is mostly Reverend Dimmesdale who addresses Hester and later on, the word is given to Reverend Wilson, who prepared a discourse on sin for the multitude.

The character of Arthur Dimmesdale is the most evident example of the prestigious use of language. This man of religious fervour possesses an eloquence, his native gift, capable of affecting his audience “like the speech of an angel” (61). He holds a certain power over the congregation he leads and is predominantly depicted as a “sainted minister” or “an admirable preacher [...] looking down from the sacred pulpit upon an audience, whose very inmost spirits had yielded to his control” (214).

In spite of the fact that he is clearly feminized in appearances and character, his social position and the office he holds require highly developed verbal skills and numerous public performances, which, as a result, places him firmly in a dominant male position. With the exception of one particular scene, it is the reverend who is doing the talking and Hester who passively listens to his discourse. On the other hand, even though the Puritan community never questions his authority, the narrator noticeably does so, which makes Dimmesdale unbelievable as a male dominator. Nevertheless, the fact that the minister comes across as a weak character to the reader, does not diminish the fact that men form the dominant party in the linguistic power relations of *The Scarlet Letter*.

On the subject of linguistic power relations, Van Dijk points out that “the powerless have literally ‘nothing to say’, nobody to talk to, or must remain silent when more powerful people are speaking, as is the case for children, prisoners, defendants and in some cultures [...] women” (21). Since Hester and Pearl are, at some point in the story, all of the above, it is to be expected that their struggle with speech is partly based on gender issues. It seems that the problem is not necessarily the act of speaking in general, but rather being able to speak one’s mind *in public*. Hester appears to feel constrained to speak in the presence of male authority, or anyone who occupies a higher rank in the social hierarchy, which could be virtually anyone. Eagleton remarks that “to declare oneself publicly is in various ways unseemly for

women, whereas expressiveness in the private sphere is acceptable” (17). Certainly, in her secluded sphere of her own, Hester is capable enough of thinking for herself and focusing on herself and her needs, but she never seems willing to violate any more laws than she already has. Therefore, she does not only censure herself by not voicing her true thoughts and passions, but she renders her own daughter speechless as well, a topic on which I will elaborate later on.

Hawthorne clearly communicates the opinion of the town’s gossips and magistrates to the reader, but Hester is rarely allowed to speak her mind in a direct and clear manner. The reader has to deduce her beliefs from her actions or lack thereof and her silent, innermost thoughts. This naturally implies that, as readers, we get a more accurate picture of her persona, but as a human being in her community, she remains mainly unspeaking and thus unheard. The aforementioned ideal woman of the domestic novel offers a possible explanation. Since females are supposed to overcome their private desires and radical thoughts, it makes sense that “the woman” in *The Scarlet Letter* remains mostly speechless. The silence of Hester, however, seems to be partly self-imposed. In her situation, it just seems wiser and easier to keep silent for the reason that revealing unconventional beliefs in a hostile world might have severe consequences. Thus, she restrains herself, and she exerts a similar control over Pearl (see below chapter 4.3).

So far, I have solely given consideration to linguistic strategies which are used to control and dominate less powerful groups in society, and I have not yet taken into account that the “dominated group” does not always stay completely powerless. Hester, too, occasionally engages in forms of both active and passive resistance, which has already become clear previously. The relatively passive resistance to her fate involves the observations on womanhood I started this third chapter with. In contrast, she defies the authority of the leading inhabitants in a more energetic fashion when she is in danger of losing her daughter and delivers a passionate discourse in order to prevent this scheme. A second display of her rhetorical talent takes place when she attempts to persuade the minister to cast off his shackles and realize the possibilities that lie before him. In that moment she is not only mentally superior, but she becomes at once more articulate than the otherwise so eloquent Dimmesdale as well.

Nonetheless, speaking one’s mind might not be the only method of protest. Until now, I have regarded silence solely as a means of restriction. I have not yet reflected on the possibility that

consciously refusing to utter a word can be a response itself. In these instances, “silence can be superior to speech” and imposing it on yourself can be empowering instead of self-restraining (Eagleton 22). At the very beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, the fallen woman, refuses to speak when she is expected to. She chooses to hang on to her “hardness and obstinacy” and hides the name of the man who tempted her “to this grievous fall” (Hawthorne 60).

“Speak, woman!” said another voice, coldly and sternly, proceeding from the crowd about the scaffold. “Speak and give your child a father!”

“I will not speak!” answered Hester, turning pale as death, but responding to this voice, which she too surely recognized!” (63)

The motives for this act of non-speech, appear to be ambiguous. On the one hand it is attributed to the private nature of woman who cannot be forced to “lay open her heart’s secrets in such broad daylight, and in presence of so great a multitude” (61). Later on, though, we observe such descriptions as the sacred “mystery of a woman’s soul” or “the wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart” (62, 63). But even if Hester’s quietness is ascribed to the supposed female unease of speaking in public, her silence is not of the kind that goes unnoticed amidst the dominant speech of others, on the contrary, it creates a centre of attention instead. In her comment on “discourses of silence”, Donatella Izzo argues that by declining to speak, a woman like Hester can escape “the power structure underlying the confession” and even reverse it into a “retaliation, where the relations of power are turned upside down by the refusal to verbalize and share a knowledge that is thereby transformed into a secret” (158).

In retrospect, silence can be viewed as a cultural restriction with evident gender connotations. On the one hand it relates to the tradition of silencing women and excluding them from the public realm. Alternatively, it can also be employed as a deliberate empowering strategy. In those cases, the power is not held by the person who speaks, but by the one who opts for silence. However minimal, this approach is used as well in *The Scarlet Letter*. It seems that the strategies of silence cannot be described exclusively as negative and unconstructive for Hester Prynne, since they are a combination of “a consciously chosen ploy” on the one hand, and a restriction which is imposed on the female on the other (Eagleton 22).

3. Maternal ideal

From the beginning of the story onward, Hester has primordially been a mother. First of all she is a mother to Pearl, but secondly, and perhaps more significantly, Nina Baym remarks that Hester Prynne is a “Magna Mater” or “mother to all” as well (“Introduction” 23). While, the first type of maternity symbolizes her adultery and as a result involuntarily detaches her from the rest of the Puritan community, the latter does the exact opposite and creates a connection between Hester and mankind. In the next section, I offer my views on both, paying special attention to the readings of Nina Baym and Franny Nudelman as well.

3.1. Hester and Pearl

3.1.1 A mutual connection

The relationship between a mother and her child is typically a powerful one, but in the case of Hester and Pearl, this bond is even more intensified due to their peculiar situation. They both stand in the same circle of ignominy and are each other’s sole chance of human comfort in the seclusion of their existence. For the most part of the novel, Hester never meets the public gaze without her daughter by her side. The continuous presence of “her Pearl” and the girl’s restless, unpredictable behaviour have been read in various ways, of which Nudelman offers the most interesting and plausible perspective. She argues that “poisoned by her mother’s feelings, Pearl expresses, indeed typifies, Hester’s moral state” (“Emblem” 193) A first illustration of this undeniable connection between a mother and her child takes place immediately after Hester’s exhibition on the scaffold.

After her return to prison, Hester Prynne was found to be in a state of nervous excitement that demanded constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence upon herself, or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe. [...]

The child, who, drawing its sustenance from the maternal bosom, seemed to have drank in with it, all the turmoil, the anguish, and despair, which pervaded the mother’s system. It now writhed in convulsions of pain, and was a forcible type, in its little frame, of the moral agony which Hester Prynne had borne throughout the day. (Hawthorne 65)

Regardless of how strong and seemingly indifferent she previously behaved in front of the spectators, Hester’s true emotions are at all times demonstrated through the little girl’s distress. The inner struggles and torments she experiences, and which are kept neatly hidden behind a peaceful and composed facade, are visualized through the little girl’s tantrums and

unruly behaviour. The hostile feelings Hester undoubtedly harbours towards the Puritan citizens, find an outlet in the actions of her daughter:

Pearl felt the sentiment, and requited it with the bitterest hatred that can be supposed to rankle in a childish bosom. These outbreaks of a fierce temper had a kind of value, and even comfort, for her mother; because there was at least an intelligible earnestness in the mood [...]. (Hawthorne 84)

Near the close of the tale, the child once more personifies Hester Prynne's concealed excitement.

Pearl, who was the gem on her mother's unquiet bosom, betrayed, by the very dance of her spirits, the emotions which none could detect in the marble passiveness of Hester's brow. This effervescence made her flit with a bird-like movement, rather than walk by her mother's side (198).

The very next minute, Hester's sinking spirits and unease are transmitted to Pearl as well.

Pearl either saw and responded to her mother's feelings, or herself felt the remoteness and intangibility that had fallen around the minister. While the procession passed, the child was uneasy, fluttering up and down, like a bird on the point of taking flight (208).

However, Pearl's actions do not merely reflect her mother's present, suppressed sentiments. We can detect something dark and wild in her character too, mirroring the undisciplined conduct of her mother at the moment of her error. Nudelman comments that "Pearl embodies [...] the very passions which motivate Hester's transgression, and the sufferings that accompany her punishment" ("Emblem" 193). Several passages in the tale support this statement.

Hester could only account for the child's character [...] by recalling what she herself had been, during that momentous period while Pearl was imbibing her soul from the spiritual world, and its bodily frame from its material on the earth (Hawthorne 81).

Above all, the warfare of Hester's spirit, at that epoch, was perpetuated in Pearl (82).

It appalled her, nevertheless, to discern here, again a shadowy reflection of the evil that had existed in herself. All this enmity and passion had Pearl inherited, by inalienable right, out of Hester's heart. In the nature of the child seemed to be perpetuated those unquiet elements that had distracted Hester Prynne before Pearl's

birth, but had since begun to be soothed away by the softening influences of maternity (84).

Furthermore, Nudelman emphasizes “the punitive potential” of this “maternal transmission” and indicates that “if a mother cannot discipline herself [...] her child’s preternatural capacity to embody maternal character will reveal her failure to the public gaze” (“Emblem” 207, 205). Mother and daughter might stand in “together in the same circle of seclusion from human society”, but Hester is not likely to forget her transgression and her punishment, due to Pearl’s uncompromising enactment of her immoral self (Hawthorne 84). Even if the community gradually provides alternative meanings for the letter on her bosom, Pearl is always present to confront Hester with her past sin and her present punishment. The moment in which Hester throws away the symbol in the woods and Pearl accordingly refuses to recognize her mother demonstrates this most clearly:

At length, assuming a singular air of authority, Pearl stretched out her hand, with the small forefinger extended, and pointing evidently towards her mother’s breast. [...] Pearl [...] suddenly burst into a fit of passion, gesticulating violently, and throwing her small figure into the most extravagant contortions. (Hawthorne 182-183)

Pearl’s “punitive potential” even prevents her mother from committing new and different crimes, deadlier than that “stigmatized by the scarlet letter” (143). Were it not for the girl, she might have “suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period” for attempting to undermine the foundations of the patriarchal establishment with her intellectual transgressions. Instead of putting her reformatory ideas into practice, “the mother’s enthusiasm of thought had something to wreak itself upon [...] in the education of her child” (144). Pearl acts as a power of surveillance and control, which is for the most part absent from Hester’s isolated life. The child, as a second scarlet letter and emblem of sin, prevents her mother from disregarding her guilt and her stigma. Hester, “with a crimson blush upon her cheek”, is forced to take up the letter and fasten it once more to her bosom. Only “with her shame upon her” does Pearl acknowledge Hester as her mother (184).

At the close of the novel, Hester’s troubled nature has quieted down and she is able to reconcile herself with society’s demands. As a result, we can observe that Pearl is no longer the moody, fitful child she once was, but has taken up a conventional female position in the world she once rejected. She does not have to act out Hester’s inner turmoil any longer and there is no more need for her to operate as a moral conscience for her mother. Hester takes up

her shame out of her own accord and finds peace where her sorrow was once situated. Consequently, Pearl is free to be “married, and happy” but still “mindful of her mother” (Hawthorne 227).

3.1.2 Motherly duties

Nudelman makes one more interesting point by drawing attention to the importance of “maternal influence to collective life”. In order to determine what exactly was expected from a motherly figure, she specifically refers to 19th century domestic advice literature, which recommended mothers to be “temperate in all things” and to “indulge no agitating passions”, since these “change the aliment” of the child (“Emblem” 202). In the previous section, I have already established that Hester’s “agitating passions” are very noticeably transmitted to Pearl. It was believed that if this “poison” was indeed introduced to the child, its education and further development were in danger. This knowledge offers a reasonable explanation for the Puritan design to separate Pearl from her mother, who is believed to be a harmful influence on the girl.

The point hath been weightily discussed, whether we, that are of authority and influence, do well, discharge our consciences by trusting an immortal soul, such as there is in yonder child, to the guidance of one who hath stumbled and fallen, amid the pitfalls of this world (Hawthorne 98).

Hester is supposed to provide a model of virtue and obedience through her own behaviour. Governor Bellingham reasons that “because of the stain which that letter indicates”, Pearl ought to be taken out of Hester’s care and transferred into other hands (98). Nudelman points out that this strategy might have been not entirely inconceivable to an antebellum audience.

Ideally, the mother is a medium through which communal values are transmitted to a child; but if the mother harbours sentiments which, far from the communal will, connote dissent [...], her child is endangered (“Emblem” 203).

If the child [...] were really capable of moral and religious growth, and possessed the elements of ultimate salvation, then, surely, it would enjoy all the fairer prospect of these advantages by being transferred to wiser and better guardianship than Hester Prynne’s (Hawthorne 89).

The arguments of the elderly statesmen highlight the fact that Hester, and consequently Pearl, are in desperate need of spiritual guidance. The “communal values” we are acquainted with in *The Scarlet Letter* involve Christianity and above all religious virtue, therefore, Pearl is

expected to receive a Christian form of nurture. When we take into account the limits of this strict and religious society, the question must indeed be “What canst thou do for the child, in this kind?” (Hawthorne 98).

To begin with, the nurture Hester Prynne provides is of a less rigid and disciplined kind than the Puritan one. Instead of “the frown, the harsh rebuke” and “the frequent application of the rod”, she imposes a strict, but above all, tender control on her infant (82). Moreover, she supplies an example for her daughter, which is more humane and down to earth than the one provided by the heavenly-minded Puritans. In their eyes she is a woman tainted by sin, but due to her misstep, she is able to teach her daughter so much more.

“I can teach my little Pearl what I learned from this!” answered Hester Prynne, laying her finger on the red token. [...]

“This badge has taught me, - it daily teaches me, - it is teaching me at this moment, - lessons whereof my child may be the wiser and the better [...] (98).

Mindful of “her own errors and misfortunes”, she might be more suitable to train up a child to righteousness than any other New England inhabitant who has never “stumbled and fallen” (82, 98). Particularly since Arthur Dimmesdale, the ‘father figure’ in *The Scarlet Letter* is both physically and mentally weaker and thus inadequate as a role model for Pearl.

Secondly, Hester Prynne, and in particular Pearl, offers an alternative viewpoint to the one of the authoritarian clergymen who prescribe the law in the novel. By announcing that “she had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door”, Pearl evokes a connection between herself and the religious beliefs of Anne Hutchinson (99).

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history [...], there is fair authority of believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door [...] (46).

The latter advocated a relatively independent way of thinking by declaring that Christians ought to “exercise a healthy measure of skepticism toward the ministry” and see through “the falseness [...] of sermon doctrines from the pulpit” (Ditmore 363). She does not insinuate that all members of the clergy are untrustworthy, but rather encourages believers to “not take everything as true from your Minister, because he is your Minister” and to “try his spirit, try every word” (365). Hawthorne seems to place Hester and her Pearl in the same sphere of

rebellion as Ann Hutchinson by calling the incontrovertible authority of the ministry into question. The difference being of course, that these opinions are never directly transmitted to the public in *The Scarlet Letter*.

In addition, Hutchinson transgression consisted of her assertion that “interiority could not be represented” (Nudelman “Emblem” 194). She refers to the human conscience as “a private, inviolable and verbally inexpressible sphere beyond the reach of public examination” (Ditmore 371). Since a person’s true inner state could not be revealed, any interference of the community and in particular the ministers would be unnecessary and pointless. In the scene which is under discussion, both Hester and Pearl refuse to acknowledge the indisputable rule of the male religious leaders. While Hester finds the strength to confront the Puritan magistrates and to defend her “mother’s rights” most vigorously, Pearl stubbornly refuses to answer Minister Wilson’s simple questions concerning her knowledge of the catechism and the person “who made her” (100). The girl identifies herself in the first place as “mother’s child” instead of “a Christian child” (97). She could represent the “sweet moral blossom”, which is plucked of the rose-bush and presented to the reader in the beginning of the novel.

The viewpoint of Nudelman seems a bit limited and grim, given that she primarily interprets Hester’s motherhood as “a horrific form of stasis” in which her present is “irrevocably bound by the misdeeds of the past” (“Emblem” 208). In the end the relationship between Hester and Pearl is so much more than a mere symbolical illustration of the mother’s transgressions. Together with Pearl, Hester offers an alternative to the somber Puritan government and provides maternal love and compassion instead, a function which extends itself to the rest of the settlement as well.

3.2. Mother of all

According to Nina Baym, the way in which Hester stands in the world is “traditionally ‘womanly’ in that it involves connection and nurturance” (“Introduction” 23). Leaving her motivations aside for a moment, nearly from the beginning of the novel onward, Hester mainly appears before the reader as a “self-ordained Sister of Mercy” who takes care of the underprivileged, whether they appreciate it or not.

She was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man, whenever benefits were to be conferred. 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 (Hawthorne 140).

In moments of calamity and illness as well, Hester is at all times nearby to offer consolation and support.

Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Her breast, with her badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one (141)

However, her role of "Magna Mater" is most evident at the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*, where she has evolved into a mother figure for to the entire community, in particular for its female inhabitants.

And as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble (Hawthorne 227).

Hester offers counsel and comfort to those women who struggle with "wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion" or those who suffer the trials of "a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought" (227). In other words, she brings a heart into the society that typically thinks of human existence "as a state, merely of trial and warfare" (98).

Hester Prynne represents the ultimate mother figure, for Pearl as well as for those who seek her guidance at the end of the tale, in that she embodies a curious combination of a heavenly ideal and a more down-to-earth model of maternity. She has been visually compared to the image of Divine Maternity, "so picturesque in her attire and her mien, and with the infant at her bosom" and possesses the benevolence and self-denial which enable her to be of service for her fellow citizens (53). She is endowed with a perfect elegance and dignity, but is caring and tender at the same time. On the other hand, she has tainted this "most sacred quality of human life" by the "deepest sin" (53). Yet, it is her flawed existence which humanizes her and makes her tangible and recognizable to a community of sinners. It connects her "with the race of and descent of mortals" (80).

Had Hester sinned alone? [...] She felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. [...] Again, a mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert itself, as she met the sanctified frown

of some matron, who, according to the rumor of all tongues, had kept cold snow within her bosom throughout life. (78).

As a result of her weakness and imperfection, she finds herself in the perfect position to show a degree of understanding and sympathy, which the Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* have generally lacked. Instead of ambitious religious ideals and a general feeling of sin, Hester Prynne's dominant moral principles are maternal love, selflessness and human kindness.

3.3. Conclusion

Baym points out that "Hester's way of being in the world [...] is traditionally 'womanly' in that it involves connection and nurturance" ("Introduction" 23). The way in which Hawthorne defines femininity is undeniably dominated by a maternal aspect. Motherhood has led Hester to focus on her natural role in the world and has softened her wild passions and desires. However, Hester's dedication to a woman's 'natural task' does not necessarily need to be associated with a restriction of her abilities and possibilities. Lawrence Wilde uses the term "maternalism" to "denote the positive attribution of female qualities, arising from maternal function" (343). It cannot be denied that she has a strong sense of service to the community and sacrifices herself to the human needs of others. At the close of the novel, she seems to transform into a submissive, obedient womanly ideal, but I have failed to notice that Hester evolves from being the symbol of human sin into someone who is "looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (227). Due to her experiences, she is capable of making a difference in someone's life, and, in spite of her impurity, her maternal way of behaving provides an alternative morality to the severe Puritanic code. She may be not be a revolutionary rebel who publicly challenges social obligations or sets off a feminist revolution, but she is capable of comforting and hopefully inspiring the New England women by assuring them that such a change is possible in the future.

In the above I have primarily given attention to the relationship between Hester and Pearl and the role they fulfill in each other's lives. Since their fates are so intricately connected, it may prove difficult to imagine Pearl as an individual human being. I feel, however, that the complexity and importance of this character do make it necessary to undertake this attempt. In the following chapter, I offer a brief overview of this girl's main characteristics and the position she herself takes up toward Hester Prynne and the society that rejects her mother.

4. The many-sided character of Pearl

Generally speaking, the appearance of children is not rare in Hawthorne's stories, but only few of them are as enigmatic as the character of little Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Elizabeth Goodenough has argued that Pearl "can become all things to all men", since she has been interpreted as "childlike and unchildlike, as prelapsarian innocent and darksome fairy, a symbolized conscience and as an example of moral indifference" (230). Hawthorne himself admits that "Pearl's aspect was imbued with a spell of infinite variety" (81). The interpretations are various and often challenge each other, but the charm of the character exactly lies in the fact that she can be seen in different lights. In the following chapter, I will discuss those which are in my opinion the most significant in relation to the subjects discussed in the previous chapters.

4.1 Sin and salvation: "She is my happiness, she is my torture!" (100)

It will become clear shortly, that the child's complex and sometimes paradoxical character cannot be reduced to one single interpretation. Therefore, a first aspect of Pearl that deserves to be mentioned is the duality of her existence, in representing both her mother's sin and salvation. "Pearl was the one, as well as the other" (Hawthorne 91).

This first and most obvious function the girl has to fulfil in Hester's life, namely reminding her mother of her committed impurity, has already been under discussion in the previous chapter, but the peculiar way in which the girl makes the scarlet letter the centre of attention has not yet been looked into.

Mother and child are inseparable and as a constant presence, Pearl is always there to point out Hester's mistake and make sure she does not neglect the past. In her elfish perverse manner, she accentuates this by relentlessly drawing attention to the symbol of Hester's guilt: the scarlet letter. The author compares the infant to "the scarlet fever" or an "angel of judgement" (91). We read about her kissing the symbol, throwing flowers at it or even reproducing it on herself with eel-grass. Pearl's colourful appearance and clothes, capturing everyone's attention, are yet another re-creation of the letter. "It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life" (90). The colourful garb of her child creates a constant reminder to Hester of "that red symbol which sears her breast" (101). On top of that, the infant persistently continues to pester her mother with the question "whose child am I?". In doing so, she does not merely attempt to establish an identity or a "quest for autonomy", she

repeatedly invokes the crime her mother and her unknown father committed and their resulting fall (Goodenough 231). Hester and Dimmesdale too, notice the ambiguity of their daughter's existence.

“She is my happiness! – She is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearls punishes me too! (Hawthorne 100).

“It was meant for a blessing; for the one blessing of her life! It was meant, doubtless, as the mother herself hath told us, for a retribution too; a torture, to be felt at many an unthought of moment; a pang, a sting, an ever-recurring agony in the midst of a troubled joy” (101).

The very name of the child, seems to have been carefully chosen by the author to mirror this duality of her character. Bearing in mind that a pearl basically is an intruding, irritating grain of sand that stimulates an oyster to create a lovely jewel, the similarity of this process and Pearl's arrival in this world is not too far-fetched. She is born out of an error, but able to inspire good in her mother, which has been confirmed in the previous chapter.

Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that even though Pearl seems to be the bane of her mother's existence, the child has its merits too. She is not merely the emblem of Hester's guilt and torture, but the object of her affection and her sole companion in her isolated state. While Hester defends herself against the agony of her life by becoming seemingly unfeeling and arming herself with an impenetrable shield of calmness, Pearl is the only person who can break this spell. In respect to this topic, Kilcup declares that “by constantly disturbing Hester” Pearl “mitigates against her apathy” and “keeps her from insensibility” (282). Her child is the only thing which keeps her soul alive and “preserves her from blacker depths of sin” (Hawthorne 101). She is Hester's salvation indeed.

4.2 The wildness in Pearl: “That wild and flighty little elf” (Hawthorne 102)

4.2.1 Undomesticated nature

The most eye-catching aspect of Pearl's character has to do with her wild nature, the mysterious atmosphere that surrounds her and her position as an outsider, partly caused by these traits. Part of her enchantment has to lie in her dark and peculiar beauty. Her faultless exterior is able to amaze and put a spell on almost everyone she encounters. Hester moreover dresses her in the most gorgeous robes she can produce, which only intensifies the girl's natural radiance.

Her features and her obvious poise are, however powerful, only a small part of her attraction. The mystery that surrounds Pearl is mostly due to her deep connection to nature. There are numerous instances in the novel where the infant is amusing herself with objects that can be found in the wilderness.

Her final employment was to gather sea-weed, of various kinds, and make herself a scarf, or mantle, and a headdress, and thus assume the aspect of a little mermaid (Hawthorne 155).

The great black forest [...] became the playmate of the lonely infant, as well as it knew how. Sombre as it was, it put on the kindest of its moods to welcome her. It offered her the partridge-berries, the growth of the preceding autumn, but ripening only in spring, and now red as drops of blood upon the withered leaves. [...]

A wolf it is said, - but here the tale has surely lapsed into the improbable, -came up, and smelt Pearl's robe, and offered his savage head to be petted by her hand.

The truth seems to be, however, that the mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child. (178)

The strict, authoritarian Puritan community is both impressed and repelled by the eccentricity of this nymph-child. Many of them believe her to be a "witch-baby" or of "demon offspring". She can look the wild Indian in the eye and make him grow "conscious of a nature wilder than his own" (212). Although she foremost seems to be rooted in the natural world, there is also a part of her that puts her in a supernatural realm. Already in her earliest days of childhood, she would display this certain peculiar look which made Hester wonder "whether Pearl was a human child" (82). More often than not, there lay a "freakish, elfish cast" in her eyes as if "an evil spirit possessed the child" (86, 87). This elfish streak lies not only in her appearance but is also clearly reflected in her dauntless, passionate and mocking behaviour, on which I will comment more elaborately later.

A characteristic that Pearl seems to have in common with nature is a fierce temper and a certain uncontrollability. We can observe that she "could not be made amenable to rules" (81). After she is seen skipping and dancing from one grave to another and blatantly ignoring Hester's request to behave in a more respectable way, the character of Roger Chillingworth affirms the following:

"There is no law, nor reverence, for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that child's composition. [...]."

“I saw her, the other day, bespatter the Governor himself with water, at the cattle-trough in Spring Lane. [...]”

“Hath she any discoverable principle of being?”

“None, save the freedom of a broken law”, answered Mr Dimmesdale, in a quiet way, as if he had been discussing the point within himself (117).

This ‘quality’ of Pearl, her seeming moral chaos and disrespect for authority, evokes images relating to Rousseau’s ideal of the “noble savage” and to Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government” (Goodenough 230). She has never known another life than that of a social recluse and has therefore not yet been corrupted by societal structures. The little child is able to construct an identity of her own and achieve a freedom that would not be allowed, were she to be raised and accepted by a community that preaches the suppression of feelings. Whereas Thoreau exclaims “break the law!”, Pearl *is* a broken law (Cain 965). The forced social isolation could have had, in my opinion, a rather positive outcome. Especially when we take into consideration the popular 19th century belief that “very young children required guidance, not repression, activity, rather than confinement” and “sensitive tutoring from a totally, benevolent mentor” (Finkelstein 124). This process would require “the social isolation of mother and child and an intensification of their relationship” (125). According to this ideology, Pearl’s circumstances are ideal for her to find an individuality of her own and a certain autonomy, independent from society’s conventions. She does not resign her conscience to the authorities of the town, but she is her own law for the most part of the story.

4.2.2 Sensuality

The formation of an identity is a complex process, in which sexuality can hardly be ignored. Since Pearl is “the unpremeditated offshoot of a passionate moment’ and as a result the emblem of (sexual) sin, it may be interesting to investigate possible associations one might make between Pearl and female sensuality (Hawthorne 90).

In her essay “Critical Clitoridectomy”, Paula Bennett comments, that in 19th century literature, flowers were universal figures for female sexuality. Pearl clearly celebrates this sexual presence by recurrently decorating herself with flowers: “Pearl gathered the violets, and anemones, and columbines, and some twigs of the freshest green, which the old trees held down before her eyes. With these she decorated her hair, and her young waist [...]” (Hawthorne 179).

In addition, when focusing on the sexual element in Pearl, one almost immediately associates her name with “clitoral imagery” (Bennett 241). It is possible that the author named the

character this way in order to evoke images of the primordial organ for female sexual pleasure. Kilcup similarly writes that Hawthorne “associates pearls with sensuous, preheterosexual experience” (241). During a morally free and unguarded time in the forest, Hester herself is able to notice the sexuality, which she has banished from her own life: “Dost thou not think her beautiful? [...] How strangely beautiful she looks with those wild flowers in her hair” (180). Yet, Hester feels that the child’s nature has something wrong in it, “which constantly betokens she had been born amiss” (144). The narrator’s rather unfavourable description of the child as “the effluence of her mother’s lawless passion” indicates that these feelings, once strong and wild, should and will be overcome or otherwise be imprisoned within one’s heart (144).

The little girl is not merely a consequence of her mother’s passion, but of the minister’s momentary lapse of control as well. Kilcup points out that Dimmesdale is frightened and “explicitly fearful of Pearl’s passionate nature (240). He expresses these feelings explicitly, saying that he has “even been afraid of little Pearl” and that he knows nothing that he “would not sooner encounter than this passion in a child”(Hawthorne 177, 183). The fact that Pearl is able to evoke fear in the minister; and for that matter in the entire Puritan community, can be related to their position towards freedom and sexuality. Pearl’s boldness and unregulated behaviour intimidates them, just as Hester’s self-sufficiency is a stumbling-block. By defying some of the leading townsmen who wish to transfer her to an environment of discipline, she is able to preserve her child’s liberty.

Kilcup further states that the girl’s “independence signifies a freedom that is the source of her mystery, her power, and of her ability to inspire fear in the conventional male sexuality represented by Dimmesdale, the father. Pearl’s independence must – and will - ultimately be repressed” (241).

4.3. Domestication and suppression: “Be quiet Pearl” (Hawthorne 200)

The focus of the former paragraphs lay on Pearl’s sense of independence, her wildness, her sexuality, her total disregard of rules and other people’s feelings and the freedom this brings. However, when the story draws to a close, it becomes painfully obvious to the reader that her wildness will eventually be repressed and that she will be expected to fulfil the conventional tasks that are expected of a woman of that day and age.

But even during the story itself, it is Pearl's voice that needs to be silenced. However deep Hester's love for her child may be, "she will not permit her daughter an independent voice" and it is her purpose to "prevent Pearl from acquiring an independent voice" (Kilcup 242). Before and during the procession on Election Day we can read the following:

A strange, sad man is he, with his hand always over his heart!
 "Be quiet, Pearl! Thou understandest not these things", said her mother. (Hawthorne, 200)

"Mother", said she, "was that the same minister that kissed me by the brook?"
 "Hold thy peace, dear little Pearl!" whispered her mother. "We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest"(208).

A similar exchange between mother and child can be found following Pearl's constant questioning of the scarlet letter and the minister's behaviour:

"Mother", said she, "what does the scarlet letter mean?"
 [...] "Mother! – Mother! – Why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?"
 "Hold thy tongue, naughty child!" answered her mother with an asperity that she had never permitted to herself before. "Do not tease me, else I shall shut thee into the dark closet!" (158)

Previously, in discussing the relationship between mother and daughter, I have established that Hester's character and most intimate thoughts are quite literally reproduced by Pearl's behaviour. Thus, in censoring Pearl, Hester is simultaneously censoring her own transgressing thoughts and everything that her daughter represents. Kilcup stresses that by silencing Pearl, Hester is also silencing female sexuality (242). The message seems to be that one is not allowed to talk about sexuality in the public sphere (i.e. the market place) and that it ought to be either concealed "in the forest" or smothered by shutting it "into the dark closet".

What is more, the conclusion of the tale indicates a more general 'silencing' by suggesting that the once undomesticated and feral Pearl has finally assumed her rightful position as a woman in society by marriage and childbirth. Kilcup observes that after "becoming a wealthy heiress who is normalized and synthesized into the heterosexual community via marriage", "her voice is never heard again" (244). By becoming a perfectly socialized and integrated member in a community, she is silenced in a permanent manner, never to be seen or heard of again .

For the sake of thoroughness however, I would also like to refer to the viewpoint of Rory M. Male. In his opinion, Pearl fulfilled a merely allegorical function throughout the story, namely embodying the result of sin. She is a walking, talking scarlet letter. When we follow this reasoning, Pearl actually becomes more humanized in the final scene instead of being tamed. Her integration in the social world is considered to be constructive and not the destruction of unlimited freedom. Although Male certainly makes a valid point, I am more inclined to agree with the former analysis of the end situation. It makes more sense to me to look upon Pearl's initial lack of empathy and societal involvement as an opportunity for individual growth and the freedom to construct an identity without the principles and restrictions of a moral system. The position of outsider enables her to refuse taking up the not so graceful traditions of the Puritans.

The fact that she seems to be impersonalized and devoid of human feeling is not necessarily a negative. Male argues that her hard exterior needed the grief of the final scenes to melt her and make her human (95). I, however, concur with the vision of Kilcup who views Pearl's kiss and tears as the willingness to accept "the masculine sexual economy" (240). Moreover, Pearl "enacts the role of the sentimental heroine" by wetting her father's cheek with her tears (243). At last, she is able to develop all her sympathies and pledge that she would not for ever "do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (Hawthorne 222).

4.4 Conclusion

But what exactly has happened to Pearl in those years after "the great scene of grief" on the scaffold (Hawthorne 222)? After inheriting a considerable amount of property, Pearl leaves the Puritan settlement with her mother and is never seen there again. The conclusion of the narrative insinuates that she is "married, and happy" in the Old World and has assumed the role of motherhood as well (227).

Pearl, the wild child, once resembling Rousseau's uncorrupted noble savage, has been normalized and transferred to a proper, civilized environment. She is presented as newly feminized and seems to have undergone a rite of passage, both sexually and socially. Her boundless freedom is now contained by the laws of man and the social order. The sole ray of hope is that the society she becomes part of is not the one of the scarlet letter. She has succeeded in fleeing the choking grip of Puritan society and has escaped her legacy of sin.

Retrospectively, Pearl has been an intriguing character into which Hawthorne could pour conflicting ideas about womanhood, domestication and human society. On the one hand the girl has epitomized resistance to authority, a force of nature which has to be eventually controlled. Paradoxically, on the other hand, she has played a role of moral surveillance in Hester's life and has held an inquisitorial watch over her mother.

Perhaps, as an inhabitant of the 21st century, my reading of the epilogue has been too pessimistic and veiled by the omnipresent Puritan gloom of the novel. Regulations and laws are essential to an organized group of people. So even though it is an unfortunate turn of events to some, Pearl's adaptation to society should not solely be perceived as a betrayal of liberal principles. She is simply a young woman who attempts to find herself a secure place in the world. What might be upsetting to the modern reader, is the fact that she blends in with the majority of 17th century women by submitting to time-honoured female traditions such as marriage and motherhood and by forsaking her "unflinching courage" and "uncontrollable will".

In spite of this domestication, she might have offered a flicker of hope for future generations by becoming the "lofty, pure, and beautiful" "angel and apostle of the coming revelation" (228). I have already expressed my scepticism with regard to this possibility, but since the author remains vague about Pearl's adult life, there is always the chance that she or any woman in the future will not merely adjust to the existing gender structures, but will in addition modify them for the better.

5. The scarlet letter: Hester Prynne and her “mark of shame”

(Hawthorne 58)

5.1 The adulteress in the market-place

Open a passage; and I promise ye, Mistress Prynne shall be set where man, woman and child may have a fair sight of her brave apparel, from this time till an hour past meridian. A blessing on the righteous colony of the Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine! Come along, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-place (Hawthorne 51).

The severity of the Puritans, characterized by Baym as a “thoroughly public society” that seeks to “bring every aspect of human life under control”, has already been revealed in the opening chapter (“Introduction” 25). Hitherto, I have primarily focussed on the consequences of Hester’s isolated position in society, but I have paid little attention to the scarlet letter itself and the possible motives of subjecting Hester Prynne to this lifelong, public punishment. In order to understand the particular disciplining mechanism that is at work here, we should first ask ourselves the question why adultery committed by a woman is considered to be such a major offence in Hester’s society. Tony Tanner offers a potential explanation by asserting that “the adulteress represents a violation of social contract and the harmonic interrelation of clearly defined roles”(17).

The figure of the wife ideally contains the biological female, the obedient daughter [...], the faithful mate, the responsible mother, and the believing Christian, and harmonizes all the patterns that bestow upon her these different identities. But if the marriage starts to founder, then the different identities and roles fall apart or come into conflict (17).

This description of woman’s functions in life explains why chastity seems to be the ultimate female virtue and why, as a result, the adulteress “portends the possible breakdown of all the mediations on which society itself depends” (Tanner 17). When Hester fails to uphold the image of faithful wife, she is denied the satisfaction of fulfilling the remaining female roles. This “daughter of a pious home” is henceforth considered to be a living example of sin and consequently an unfit mother to her child (Hawthorne 99). A woman who is guilty of infidelity besmirches not only herself and her husband, but constitutes a threat to the social system itself. Bearing this logic in mind, the strict and relentless retribution Hester is forced to undergo, makes sense.

5.1.1 Objectifying Hester

Elizabeth Hoffman examines the way in which the Puritan technique of public punishment attempts to “obtain unlimited power over the individual mind” by referring to 18th century French legalists who used “the criminal’s body in public penalties as a deterrent against crime” (14-15). The system they developed involves certain symbols, or mutilations, which were to show “a close correspondence between the crime and the punishment, so that it would appear as though the latter grew naturally out of the former” (15). Through the use of the scarlet letter, the Puritan governors “inscribe the prisoner’s body with the abstraction of the law itself” and as a result transform Hester Prynne into an abstract symbol as well (15). She will be looked upon as “the figure, the body, the reality of sin” “until the ignominious letter be engraved into her tombstone” (Hawthorne 72, 58). Throughout time she will *become* the symbol at which the Puritan community points its finger and her individuality will be forgotten. From the very first moment she appears before the crowd with the scarlet letter, she already seems different to those who observe her.

The point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer, - so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time, - was that Scarlet Letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom (Hawthorne 51).

The way in which Hester will be looked upon from this point on is primarily determined by the symbol. Roy Male, for instance, points out that Governor’s Bellingham’s view towards Hester and Pearl is revealed in the “grotesque, inhuman distortions reflected by the armor” in his hall of entrance (106).

Hester looked, by way of humoring the child; and she saw that, owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it (Hawthorne 94).

Her character and individuality seem to be discarded and Hester is objectified, reduced to the symbol itself, by turning this specific element of her appearance into the centre of attention. The fact that she bears her fate and her emblem of sin with such a stoic countenance, only reinforces the idea that the scarlet letter and the ensuing social isolation do not only rob Hester of her femininity (see chapter 2.3), but take away her liveliness and human aspects as well.

All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive had she possessed friends or companions to be repelled by it (Hawthorne 142).

Her face, so long familiar to the townspeople, showed the marble quietude which they were accustomed to behold there. It was like a mask; or rather, like the frozen calmness of a dead woman's features (197).

Her refined looks and natural beauty undergo a similar change and waste away. Her shining locks of hair are completely hidden behind a cap and "the studied austerity of her dress" suggests the absence of a once powerful personality (142). Male supports this notion by stating that "most of the garments in the book are accurate reflections of character" (102). Hester's garbs are plain, grey and neutral, in accordance with what was allowed by "the sumptuary regulations of the colony", and underline the selflessness she exhibits near the end of the story (Hawthorne 50). In the beginning, however, Hester's spirit has not yet been concealed behind a mask of indifference, which is reflected by the rich gown she stitched for herself.

Her attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for the occasion, in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity (51).

Other characters such as the sea captain, the sailors and the Indians also seem to "express their individuality in their garb of scarlet and gold" and enliven the general tints of "sad grey, brown, or black of the English emigrants" (Male 102, Hawthorne 202). Hester's only decoration capable of drawing attention is the scarlet letter embroidered on her chest, which constantly lights up her shame.

Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most sombre hue; with only that one ornament, - the scarlet letter, - which it was her doom to wear (Hawthorne 75)

Hester was clad in a garment of coarse gray cloth. Not more by its hue than by some indescribable peculiarity in its fashion, it had the effect of making her face personally out of sight and outline; while again, the scarlet letter brought her back from its twilight indistinctness and revealed her under the moral aspect of its own illumination (197).

She chooses to make a work of art out of the emblem that represents, and to a certain extent even substitutes, her personality.

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel she wore (Hawthorne 50).

Donatella Izzo comments that it takes a work of art, an artefact to ensure the quality of “unalterable permanence” which the punishment seeks to achieve (35). Therefore, the “real woman” hiding behind the symbol must necessarily remain absent (35). However, the fact that Hester’s joy in life, her beauty and her personality fade away, is not the only torment that is inflicted upon the wearer of the scarlet letter.

5.1.2. “Being the object of severe and universal observation”: the power of the gaze (56)

At the very beginning, Hester explains that she considers her sentence to be a worse fate than death.

“I have thought of death,” she said, - “have wished for it, - would even have prayed for it, were it fit that such as I should pray for anything” (67).

Even if I imagine a scheme of vengeance, what could I do better for my object than to let thee live, - than to give thee medicines against all perils of life, - so that this burning shame may still blaze upon thy bosom?” (67).

“Live, therefore, and bear about thy doom with thee, in the eyes of men and women, - in the eyes of him who thou didst call thy husband, - in the eyes of yonder child!” (Hawthorne 67).

The essence and most unbearable aspect of the symbol lies not merely in the fact that it reduces her to a symbol. In addition, it causes the Puritan heads to turn and stare at the symbol on her breast on every possible occasion and it ensures that her ignominy and shame are at all times exhibited for the world to see.

“There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature, - whatever be the delinquencies of the individual, - no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame” (Hawthorne 52).

The sentence of the Puritan tribunal is ever-active and singles the poor woman out for observation. There are numerous instances in the novel where she is subjected to the gaze of the public.

The unhappy culprit sustained herself as best a woman might, under the weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom. It was almost intolerable to be borne (Hawthorne 53).

When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter, - and none ever failed to do so, - they branded it afresh into Hester's soul [...]. But then, again, an accustomed eye had likewise its own anguish to inflict. Its cool stare of familiarity was intolerable. From first to last, in short, Hester Prynne had always this dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token; the spot never grew callous; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive with daily torture (77).

There were many people present, from the country roundabout, who had often heard of the scarlet letter [...] but who had never beheld it with their own bodily eyes. These, after exhausting other modes of amusement, now thronged about Hester Prynne with rude and boorish intrusiveness. [...] The whole gang of sailors [...] came and thrust their sunburnt and desperado-looking faces into the ring. Even the Indians [...] fastened their snake-like black eyes on Hester's bosom. [...] Lastly, the inhabitants of the town [...] lounged idly to the same quarter, and tormented Hester Prynne, perhaps more than all the rest, with their cool, well-acquainted gaze at her familiar shame (213).

The function of this intense observation is not merely to humiliate Hester. Donatella Izzo refers to the gaze as an instrument of punishment and control. Similarly, Hoffman contends that “the exchange of looks” can be a means of “controlling the behaviour of a contractual society” (17). The townspeople and Governor Bellingham are continuously “levelling their stern regards” at the wearer of the scarlet letter (Hawthorne 55). The token makes her into a principle that can be visually perceived, “a shared and “sought for cultural value” (Izzo 36). By becoming a symbol of sin in the Puritan settlement, she is made into “a privileged visual object, thus positioning her at the passive, receiving end of the gaze” (Izzo 36). But while Izzo talks of woman as “being the target and repository of the male gaze, which allows no reciprocity”, we must not forget that Hester refuses to remain a passive object for observation (36).

When the young woman – the mother of this child – stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant close to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around the townspeople and neighbours (Hawthorne 50).

She is not merely being watched by the unitary gaze of the townspeople, but simultaneously gazes back at them. They cannot look without being looked at in return and as a result she disrupts, even though in a minimal manner, “the way in which visual roles are distributed” in a traditional patriarchal society (Izzo 89). However, as was the case with her verbal opposition (see chapter 2.3), these instances of resistance are rare. Furthermore, in spite of these few moral victories for Hester, the letter has so proved to be a relentless source of anguish and psychological suffering. But the question remains whether it is able to fulfil its basic and intended function.

5.2 “The scarlet letter had not done its office” (Hawthorne 145)

5.2.1 Purpose and significance

The scarlet letter is essentially a “punishment for a crime [...] against religious doctrine” which attempts to regain control over the dissenting mind and soul of Hester Prynne (Friedman 57).

Even though the letter A is a constant presence in the novel, its “office” and meaning are never clearly defined and seem to shift, depending on the changing interpretation of the townspeople (Hawthorne 145). The major problem with Hester’s punishment is that the precise meaning of the sign, in spite of its apparent simplicity, is neither fixed nor transparent. The original and official purpose is to call attention to her adultery, but even though her error may be evident to everyone, the word ‘adulteress’ is not once mentioned in the course of the novel. The Puritan children, pursuing Hester through the streets, appear to be the only ones who openly utter the “word that had no distinct purpose to their own minds, but was none the less terrible to her, as proceeding from lips that babbled it unconsciously” (Hawthorne 77). Since Hester’s sin is never explicitly pronounced, the reader remains in the dark and can only assume that the letter on her breast refers to her sexual transgression. This refusal to specify how the symbol should be interpreted, is essential in explaining why the letter cannot control its wearer.

Nudelman points out that the Puritan community is able to assign “different meanings to the scarlet letter” and turn it into “a paradigm of interpretive nuance” (“Emblem” 194). What is meant to be a symbol of domination, is modified several times by different characters. The first to refashion the A is Hester Prynne herself by surrounding it with an embroidered golden border. In this manner, she does not merely draw attention to it, but also turns it into “an object of individually created beauty”, disrupting “the meaning of the A [and] thereby defying

the official purpose” (Friedman 67). In time and due to Hester’s humanity and tenderness, many inhabitants of the Puritan settlement refuse to “interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. Instead, it becomes “the symbol of her calling” and it is said that it meant “Able” or even “Affection” (Hawthorne 141, 143). They no longer look upon the scarlet letter as a token of sin, but “of her many good deeds since” (142). Oddly enough, Hester’s symbol is even compared to “the cross on an nun’s bosom”, imparting to her “a kind of sacredness” as opposed to the expected black stain of sin. Those who are unaccustomed to the sight and unaware of significance of the scarlet letter are left to speculate. The Indians, who occasionally visit the village, presume that perhaps “the wearer of this brilliantly embroidered badge must needs be a personage of high dignity among her people” (212).

The fact that the symbol allows for a certain interpretative freedom unavoidably results in its failure to remind and warn the community of the consequences of a sexual crime. The original meaning of will eventually fade and therefore the scarlet letter fails to express “Hester’s feelings and experience and fails, consequently, to discipline her” (Nudelman “Emblem” 194). The Puritan government made a mistake “by believing that the imposition of a public sign can reform the female deviant” (194).

5.2.2 Reforming Hester?

By now, it has become apparent that the scarlet letter is a means through which the Puritan rulers attempt to regain control over Hester’s rebellious spirit. However, instead of becoming a timeless symbol of sin and sexual transgression, Hester grows to be a Sister of Mercy and a mother figure to those who need care and attention. Ultimately, the sign on her bosom is ineffective as a warning to society of the destructive power of ill-discipline and its consequences. In the following paragraph, I will examine the effect the symbol has on the wearer herself and to what extent it can be said to have “done its office” by converting Hester Prynne into obedience (Hawthorne 145).

The previous chapters have already established that the scarlet letter does not leave Hester indifferent to the shame, humiliation and social exclusion her penalty has brought upon her. Despite her calm demeanour, she experiences her public display as a “leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure” and feels as if she must “shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold, or else go mad at once” (54). Her everyday activities hereafter bring their own trials and torments with it. Every gaze directed at her bosom inflicts anguish and the “mingled grin and frown” of the crowd are a constant reminder of her shame (77). However, in spite of the undeniable agony and grief she is forced to endure, the scarlet

letter does not make Hester more “amenable to just authority” (65). She may recognize that she broke a Puritan law and accepts her sentence, but she does not seem convinced that her crime has been truly evil. This feeling of righteousness can be partly attributed to the fact that Hester found herself in a marriage without warmth. Hester “felt no love, nor feigned any” and became trapped in a “false and unnatural relation” with the old and disfigured Chillingworth (68). Therefore, her most repented crime is not her adultery, but the fact that she had ever “been wrought upon to marry him” (154). Carol Bensick states that the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* “sees inevitability, if not positive justice, in her position” and that “his most general reflection bears, if anything, less on the guilty wife than it does on the husband who went knowingly ahead with a misalliance” (141).

And it seemed a fouler offence committed by Roger Chillingworth, than any which had been done him, that, in the time when her heart knew no better, he had persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side. [...]

Let men tremble to win the hand of woman, unless they win along with it the utmost passion of her heart! (Hawthorne 154).

Chillingworth himself, the betrayed spouse, recognizes his “folly” and the possibility that “this evil” might not have been if she had “met earlier with a better love than [his]” (69, 151). In the dark forest, finding momentary relieve from the community’s gaze, Arthur and Hester too, can freely admit that they are “not the worst sinners in the world”, since they have not violated “the sanctity of a human heart” like Chillingworth has (170).

“Thou and I, Hester, never did so!”

“Never, never!” whispered she. “What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other” (170)

Hester always remains honest and true to her own heart, soul and desires. Therefore she can never truly accept the immorality of their offence. Nina Baym observes that to Hester, her sin is “inseparable from love, love for Dimmesdale, and love for Pearl”. In her inmost heart [...] she does not believe that she did an evil thing” (“Introduction” 18). In a way, the golden embroidery around the scarlet letter could be interpreted as a tribute to that love, which does not go entirely unnoticed.

“She hath good skill at her needle, that’s certain,” remarked one of the female spectators; “but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it! Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates,

and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for punishment?" (Hawthorne 51)

Hester wears the letter openly and, contrary to Dimmesdale, does not surrender to hypocrisy, falsehood and despair. She may have lost her honourable reputation, but her integrity is still intact, enabling her to "retain her self-respect" and survive her punishment "with dignity, grace, and ever-growing strength of character" (18). Rather than breaking her spirit, the token of her shame strengthens her mind and personality.

All the world had frowned on her, - for seven long years had it frowned upon this lonely woman, - and still she bore it, nor ever once turned away her firm sad eyes. Heaven, likewise, had frowned upon her, and she had not died (170).

Moreover, the estranged and outlawed position from society resulted in the liberation of her mind and individuality. Even though this kind of intellectual freedom might be considered to be an unnatural development for a female in the Puritan community, it allows her to break free from society's opinion.

She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest [...]. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside or the church. The tendency of her fate had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread (Hawthorne 174).

At this point, the obvious conclusion would be that the scarlet letter has not left the print of its intended moral lessons not done its office. From a feminist perspective, this would certainly be favourable. However, if these torments have made Hester strong and enhanced her independence, why does Hawthorne point out that it has "taught her much amiss" as well (174)? And what to think of the concluding chapter, in which Hester Prynne freely resumes the A upon her chest instead of "flinging aside the burning letter" as she was determined to do (214)? It is obvious that the occurrences on the New England Holiday, i.e. Dimmesdale's last-minute confession and his ensuing death, force Hester to revise her carefully planned arrangement and fulfil a key role in the decisions she will henceforth take as well.

6. Conclusion

On the same scaffold where Hester's shame was first revealed to the world, the miserable minister chooses to disclose his own secret sin and crush Hester's hope to "meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion" (Hawthorne 222). After Dimmesdale's "death of triumphant ignominy" and Chillingworth's equally spectacular demise, Hester Prynne and her daughter vanish from sight (222).

But, in no long time after the physician's death, the wearer of the scarlet letter disappeared, and Pearl along with her. [...]

The story of the scarlet letter grew into a legend. Its spell, however, was still potent, and kept the scaffold awful where the poor minister had died [...]. (Hawthorne 226).

After many years, however, Hester returns to the New World and willingly takes up "her long forsaken shame" (226).

There was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin, here had been her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned therefore, and resumed, - of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it, - the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale (Hawthorne 227).

This rather unexpected development has given rise to various questions and interpretations. Is this act a mere indication of Hester's surrender to Puritan values or is there more to it than one would suspect at first sight? A first group of literary critics have come to read the concluding chapter in a somewhat negative light. They might have expected a heroine who is truly free according to modern-day standards, a woman who can speak clearly about what she wants and transform her words into action. Someone "who knows and who wills" instead of embodying "the stereotypical supreme value [...] of renunciation and self-sacrifice (Izzo 258). Amy Schrager Lang describes Hester's position at the novel's end as "silenced once and for all" (191). Likewise, the "return of Hester as a domestic angel" strikes Gillian Brown as "Hawthorne's failure to honor the independent spirit of his heroine" and "his capitulation to nineteenth-century conventional ideals of womanhood" (111). Eric Savoy argues that Hawthorne participates in "the male historical project of containing female power" (401). Sacvan Bercovitch asserts that with her final gesture, Hester "honors her superiors" and "re-forms herself [...] as the vehicle of social order (15). However, in spite of this ever-growing

amount of pessimistic critics, there are also several reviewers who remain positive and hopeful. Robert Friedman claims that, instead of symbolizing submission, “Hester’s entire career of bearing the A, from prison-door to gravestone, is based rather on her individualistic deviation from [...] the social order” (65). In addition, Nina Baym claims optimistically that the injustices that were done to Hester are rectified and that *The Scarlet Letter* “ends on a muted note of hope and faith” (“Introduction” 24). Carol Bensick assures that even though the remainder of her life is spent in solitude, it is a “far more independent and original one than any she could have shared with either Roger Chillingworth or Arthur Dimmesdale” (154). Nevertheless, the truth is that there is not a single approach that can provide a definitive and straightforward answer with regard to the moral of the novel. Michael Colacurcio correctly observes that interpreting this story may become “as risky a project as trying to assign one final significance to the letter with which official Puritanism once thought to sign the moral identity of Hester Prynne herself” (11).

This ambiguity and the fact that *The Scarlet Letter* allows a wide range of interpretations can be a merit, but a restriction as well. Hester Prynne, and to a certain extent every woman in the story, remains enigmatic and beyond the reach of the reader. The manly, Puritan world, with all its inhibitions, is much more accessible and understandable. This separation between the spheres of men and women renders an accurate portrait of the colonial world. Colacurcio appropriately comments that “Hester and Dimmesdale feel, act, and suffer not precisely as we might morally prefer but about as we might historically expect” (9). Their suffering seems to be mainly caused by their transgression of the respectively male and female domains of that time. Once Hester’s rebellious traits are finally subdued, she ‘limits’ herself to womanly tasks by forsaking her intellectual efforts and focussing instead on what her heart has to offer. However, feminization and weakness are not necessarily the same thing. There remains no doubt that Hester is capable of so much more than she is allowed to show within the boundaries of the Puritan community. Her revolting mind has undeniably quieted down and she has forsaken all private desires and passions in order to be of service to society. Pearl too, is no longer that restless, elfish girl and has ‘succumbed’ to marriage and motherhood. But Hester Prynne is not fragile and delicate like the typically weak heroines of domestic novels. She is feminine but powerful at the same time and has at all times maintained her independence. She may not have accomplished a “revolutionary transformation of all human relations” but at least she believes in the revelation of a “new truth [...] when the world should have grown ripe for it” (Wilde 346, Hawthorne 227).

Contrary to Arthur, who is driven to despair by the “the law [they] broke”, Hester is capable of altering and transcending her shameful reputation (222). This is why I cannot align myself with the abovementioned interpretation of Hester as permanently silenced and unable to remove her burden of guilt.

Hester returns to New England, because there is a “more real life” for her at the place of her sorrow, than in any place on the surface of the earth where she could have started a new and free existence. Despite the fact that the symbol on her bosom has reformed her into a “passionless woman”, emphasizing her self-denial and maternal qualities, its effect has not been entirely negative. Hester has in truth unsuspectingly become “an agent of social change” (Battan 603, Baym “Introduction 24). The community no longer looks upon her as a stigmatized sinner, attracting “the world’s scorn and bitterness”, but treats her with awe and reverence instead (Hawthorne 227). She has turned into an advice-giver and provides not only comfort, but also an opportunity for women to share their “sorrows and perplexities”, no longer condemning them to suffer in silence as Hester once did (227).

The scarlet letter itself does no more merely refer to her dark sin, but might be explained as an affirmation of her identity and of her ability to finally assume control over her own body and soul. The symbol has shaped her and the pain it caused has been “deeply incorporated with her being” (198). It is “a cup of wormwood and aloes, with which nearly all her years of womanhood had been perpetually flavoured” (198). However, from the moment it was sewed onto her garment, Hester has tried to make it her own and has not allowed the magistrates’ “interference in the punishment of her crime” (Hoffman 27). At long last, Hester Prynne and her letter are “worthy” and “transformed into something that [speaks] a different purport (Hawthorne 147). Hawthorne might have disappointed some contemporary feminist readers, but he has given his heroine “the happiest ending he can” (Bensick 157).

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