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“Shame, Despair, Solitude”: Punishment for Adultery in *The Scarlet Letter*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter deals with the Puritan Boston and the treatment of the sin of adultery in that socio-cultural context. The aim of this paper is to explicate how Hester and her daughter Pearl are punished for their connection to the sin, with Hester being an active participant in, and Pearl the product of an illicit relationship. To do this, the paper first establishes how the Puritan colonies dealt with adultery and then looks at the representation of it in the novel. The external and internal aspects of punishment of Hester and Pearl are then analyzed.

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) penned works that have not ceased to inspire scholarly interpretations and even admiration from other writers. Henry James, Herman Melville, T. S. Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence are only a few prominent writers and literary critics who have written about him. One of the most oft quoted scholars dealing with Hawthorne, Sacvan Bercovitch, the author of the 1991 study *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, highlights that “virtually every scene in the novel is symbolic, virtually every symbol demands interpretation, and virtually every interpretation takes the form of a question that opens out into a variety of possible answers, none of them entirely wrong, and none in itself satisfactory” (1988:639) and that “[a]nyone reading the novel has to come to terms with extra-textual speculations” (1996: 2). The variant readings include those of Hawthorne’s narrative ambiguity, his view on abolitionism, the autobiographical elements built into the prose, feminist interpretations of the novel, and so on. For this paper, it is especially important to recount some of the historical readings of Hawthorne’s best known novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Namely, many scholars have written about Hawthorne’s relation to the Puritan customs or the representation of Puritanism in his works. While T. S. Eliot calls his literary achievements “truly a criticism (...) of the Puritan morality” (2014: 23), other works and views on Hawthorne’s Puritanism include contributions by Barriss Mills, Harrison G. Orians, and Joseph Schawtz, to mention a few. Historical readings also deal, more narrowly, with Puritan laws and punishments in Hawthorne’s works,

for example, works by Ernest W. Baughman, Laura Hanft Korobkin, Nina Baym, and Tracy B. Strong.

The Scarlet Letter is a novel, or rather, a romance, as it is subtitled, about Hester Prynne, being punished for the sin of adultery and giving birth to an illegitimate daughter, Pearl; her husband, Roger Chillingworth, who haunts Hester’s implied lover, Reverend Dimmesdale; Arthur Dimmesdale, who hides his involvement in the affair and only confesses at the end of the plot, after which he dies. The plot is set in the Puritan Boston, between 1641 and 1649. A self-pronounced romancer, Hawthorne does fit the definition of the term, as found in Charles Brockden Brown’s definition: a romancer, such as Hawthorne, who imagines a plot that is temporally distant from the contemporary reader’s present, “is a dealer, not in certainties, but probabilities, and is therefore a romancer” (1800: 251). In the novel’s preface “The Custom House”, Hawthorne establishes that his goal is to relay a story that he has found in a manuscript by Surveyor Pue, who also lived only after the events took place. Hawthorne admits to “dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in it”; he ranges outside of the alleged documents of the surveyor. He announces: “I have allowed myself, as to such points, nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention” (2018: 26). Hawthorne weaves the tale whilst keeping in mind the balance of history and fiction (Stubbs, 1968: 1440). Therefore, Hawthorne is a romancer, but his familiarity with the bygone times is a strong foundation for the plot set in the Puritan New England. This is why this paper first examines the historical circumstances of the era – specifically, the prosecution of adulterers in Boston, where the novel takes place – and how they are translated into fiction. This paper aims to cast light on how two central female characters, Hester and Pearl, are treated as a consequence of Hester’s sin. Hence, the paper deals with the embodiment of their punishment, the scarlet letter A, and analyzes the various effects of such punishment on both mother and daughter.

2. Puritans and Punishment: The Historical Background

American colonies were stocked with instruments of physical restraint, but long-term confinement was not prominently present until the late 18th century. This can be explained by factors such as sparsity of the population, which means that serious offenders can be dealt with (by death or banishment), while the less serious offenders can be punished through other means. This was also supported by the view that punishment should be physical – mere confinement would not suffice (Miethe, Lu, 2005: 90). The jail served as a holding place in which the accused remained before the trial or before they were penalized, rather than as a punishment in itself. The stocks, another type of a temporarily restraining punishment, represented a penalty for those upsetting the social order: for example, those who loiter, drink too much, or curse excessively. It is also noted that standing in the gallows with the rope around the neck was used against those guilty of adultery, incest, burglary, blasphemy, and theft. The pillory was used for the crimes of forgery (for example, lowering the value of money or counterfeiting) and blasphemy. More painful punishments included whipping, which was applied to a variety of miscellaneous crimes, such as burglary, drunkenness, cursing, fornication, being a vagabond, children's disobedience, and so on (Orians, 1952: 426-429) and was a standard punishment for sexual transgression (Hanft Korobkin, 1997: 202), and, rarely, branding on the cheek or forehead (Orians, 1952: 428).

In Massachusetts Bay Colony adultery was a capital crime, that is, the punishment for it was death, according to laws from 1641, 1648, and 1672 (Orians, 1952: 430). In *The Massachusetts Body of Liberties* of 1641, it is listed that “[i]f any person committeth Adultery with a married or espoused wife, the Adulterer and Adulteresse shall surely be put to death” (2012: 274). In a legal prosecution of an adulterer, the offender would be placed before a jury – twelve freemen – in a trial court. The magistrates would serve as judges. The jury decides about the offender's conviction and which crime had been committed. This is important because the jury phrases the crime as they will and then present their decision to the magistrates, who sentence the offender. Because of this order, the jury can avoid convicting someone for adultery *per se* – the offender can be pronounced guilty, but for a lesser offence and thereby avoid inflicting capital punishment (Hanft Korobkin, 1997: 194-198). The involvement of the jury implies the involvement of the whole society. This public aspect of prosecution is also seen in the requirement of a public confession. In Massachusetts Bay Colony the confession was asked of perpetrators of various kinds. In

the cases of adultery, the public acknowledgement of the sin was most probably required to enable the child to be baptized. Both the court and the congregation judged the misbehaving member of the society (signalling the dual jurisdiction of court and church) and, importantly, the confession could not have been made in private if it were to be valid (Baughman, 1967: 533-539).

The public nature of the crime and its confession is extended to the punishment, as well. Except for the already enumerated ways of penalizing sexual crimes, another instrument was the public exposure. Offenders were also made to stand in the pillory for a certain period of time, with their offense spelled out in capital letters and placed on the offender's chest. The phrases were then shortened into letters. An example is found in the case of Robert Coles, who first had to carry a white sheet of paper on his back, with the inscription “A Drunkard”. For his next offense of drunkenness, he had to wear a red letter D for one year (Orians, 1952: 429).

The first reference to the letter A as punishment is from 1694 and can be found in *The Charters and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, published in 1814 (Orians, 1952: 431). The province law mentions whipping and standing upon the gallows for an hour, with the rope around the throat,¹ as well as that “every person and persons so offending shall for ever after wear a capital A of two inches long, and proportionable bigness, cut out of cloth of a contrary colour to their cloths, and sewed upon their upper garments, on the outside of their arm, or on their back, in open view” (1814: 277-278). The law also establishes that “if any person or persons, having been convicted and sentenced for such offence, shall at any time be found without their letter so worn, during their abode in this province, they shall by warrant from a justice of the peace be forthwith apprehended and ordered to be publicly whipt, not exceeding fifteen stripes” (1814: 278).

Hawthorne's sources of inspiration for the scarlet letter A may have been a 1658 act of the colony of New Plymouth and the aforementioned 1694 act described in *Annals of Salem* by Joseph Felt (Hanft Korobkin, 1997: 202; Felt, 1827: 317). The act of New Plymouth, an update of

1 “[i]f any man may be found in bed with another man's wide, the man and woman so offending, being thereof convicted, shall be severely whipt, not exceeding thirty stripes, unless it appear upon trial, that one party was surprised and did not consent, which shall abate the punishment as to such party. And if any man shall commit adultery, the man and woman that shall be convicted of such crime before their majesties' justices of assize and general gaol delivery shall be set upon the gallows by the space of an hour, with a rope about their neck, and the other end cast over the gallows, and in the way from thence to the common goal shall be severely whipt, not exceeding forty stripes each” (*Charters*, 1814: 277).

the document from 1636, removed adultery from the list of capital crimes, but it was still a criminal offense (1836: 42-43). It assigns that “whosoever shall comitt Adultery shalbee severely punished by whipping two severall times; (...) and likewise to weare two Capitall letters viz. A D. cut out in cloth and sowed on their uper most Garments on their arme or backe” (1836: 113).

3. Law and Order in *The Scarlet Letter*

Hawthorne embeds the majority of the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* into the period from 1642 to 1649 and, while the plot takes place in the same time frame as the English Civil War, Hawthorne seems to make a point to present the sense of concurrent social order in the American colony and juxtapose it to England’s unrest (Bercovitch, 1996: 3). One townsman describes New England as “a land where iniquity is searched out, and punished in the sight of rulers and people” (Hawthorne, 2018: 48).

Despite the utopian idea of the New World, Hawthorne notes that the prison had to be built, thereby implying the continued existence of crime. The prison is, much like moral aspects of the Puritan society, grim and rigid: “[t]he rust on the ponderous ironwork of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the New World. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era” (Hawthorne, 2018: 37). In the novel, Hester does not seem to spend time in prison in terms of a prolonged confinement; she is there before and after her plight at the pillory, which agrees with the abovementioned purpose of a jail. The next instrument of punishment is the pillory: “this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine, which now, for two or three generations past, has been merely historical and traditionary among us, but was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent, in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France. It was, in short, the platform of the pillory” (Hawthorne, 2018: 43).² The instrument contained a framework intended “to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to the public gaze” (Hawthorne, 2018: 43). The pillory serves not only for Hester’s initial punishment, but also, in much praised symmetry, as a set for the scene in the middle chapter when Arthur Dimmesdale refuses to confess, and, finally, when he does expose his sin at the novel’s closing.

² Hawthorne is not perfectly replicating history – he anachronistically uses the word “scaffold”, hinting at beheadings which were a staple of the later era or regicide, as well as the concept of “citizenship”, inappropriate for a colony still dependent on Britain (Thomas, 2001: 181).

In Hawthorne’s Boston, power is embodied in a specific group consisting of legal and religious elders – because they act together, they “make that power appear diffuse and impersonal” (Baym, 1970: 214). They unite two order-making and order-upholding institutions, law and religion, because they oversee “a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused” (Hawthorne, 2018: 39). Even as a representative of the two powers united, a clergyman who gets a spotlight during the first part of Hester’s punishment “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, 2018: 50). In other words, the society’s elders do not seem to be qualified to pass judgement to the members of that same society. However, Hawthorne ascertains that the punishment for Hester’s sin should be death; but the magistracy, “in their great mercy and tenderness of heart”, decide that Hester is “to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom” (Hawthorne, 2018: 48). Even though the magistrates did not, in history, have the ability to impose a milder penalty, if the crime for which the jury convicted the offender was adultery (Hanft Korobkin, 1997: 197), Hawthorne’s characters do seem to be showing mercy to Hester.

But, it must be kept in mind that Hester and Arthur’s illicit relationship is “an inexpiable sin against a close-knit 17th-century Puritan Community” (Živić, 2014: 164). The involvement of the community is clearly discernible from the outrage that the magistrates’ relatively mild punishment caused. It is interesting to highlight that it is the female part of the populace that seeks a harsher punishment for Hester. One woman, a “dame of fifty”, proposes that 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” and implies that they would settle on a stricter measure (Hawthorne, 2018: 39-40). Another “autumnal matron” agrees that Hester does not mind the scarlet symbol, which “she may cover (...) with a brooch, or such like heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever!, as much as she would mind being branded with hot-iron” (Hawthorne, 2018: 40). Finally, another woman pronounces: “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly, there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book” (Hawthorne, 2018: 40). Except for one woman who comes to Hester’s defence, they all grumble

against the scarlet letter as a punishment and regard the magistrates as “merciful overmuch” (Hawthorne, 2018: 40). This might stem from the fact that Hester’s crime is something that might be within their reach, as well – with the difference that they have not reached for the opportunity. They might be asking themselves, if I cannot seek happiness outside of marriage, why is she allowed to do the same? Another reason may lie in the exact opposite; namely, the question arises: “if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne’s?”(Hawthorne, 2018: 66). This reasoning would bring forth the explanation that the other women are stern with Hester to show their adamant adherence to the social and moral laws, even though they themselves have broken them. But, since the common members of society hold no power and their judgments carry no consequences, they are not able to subject Hester to repeated evaluation (Hanft Korobkin, 1997: 200).

Of the male part of the populace, only Chillingworth desires a personal vendetta. He imagines “a more intimate revenge than any mortal had ever wreaked upon an enemy” (Hawthorne, 2018: 105). This is against the tenets of the Puritan society, since the cuckolded husband is “legally obligated to leave the prosecution and punishment of the crime to the colony’s courts” and his attempt at vigilantism is a “destabilizing threat” to the society (Hanft Korobkin, 1997: 210). Hawthorne clearly presents the vengeful husband as a villain, at least up until Arthur’s death, which robs Chillingworth of his revenge and after which he leaves his inheritance to Pearl. His avenging intentions are equalled with the devil’s work and the torture he inflicts on Arthur etches into his own skin: “a striking evidence of man’s faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil’s office. This unhappy person had effected such a transformation, by devoting himself, for seven years, to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture” (Hawthorne, 2018: 127). Both the case of the adamant women and Chillingworth’s misplaced industry point to the integral component of Hawthorne’s Puritan society – the legal punishment is in the hands of the magistrates. Because of the contrast of the mercy shown by the powers-that-be and the bloodthirsty crowd and individuals, it can be said that the figures in power are “ultimately compassionate, reasonable, and devoted to the community’s welfare” (Hanft Korobkin, 1997: 208).

4. Hester Prynne

4.1. The Office of the Letter

The scarlet letter can be said to serve to prolong the punishment and torturous experience of Hester’s exposure at the pillory. Hester must wear the embroidered

A on her bosom. While it is implied that it stands for Hester and Arthur’s sin – that of adultery, the “intended signifier” does not make an appearance in the text (Last, 1997: 361); that is, Hawthorne does not explicate that the A stands for “Adulteress”. Throughout the text, the meaning of the letter is, time and again, reinterpreted, but it is never rid of ambiguity (Last, 1997: 373).³ Bercovitch underlines that the scarlet letter actually belongs to the society, not Hester – although she is the one who fashions it and does have a part in establishing its meaning, even if just for herself, the people around her imbue it with meaning (1996: 6). The people see what they want to see. The meaning of the letter even grows into its polar opposite and it is likened to a nun’s cross (Hawthorne, 2018: 122).⁴ The variance of readings might be best exhibited with D.H. Lawrence recognizing it as an emblem of “alpha”, “Abel”, “Adam”, “America” (2014: 86). It will now be delineated what punishments Hester suffers through and how the letter realizes its purpose, or its office, in connection to that.

a) External

The punishment’s results are first seen in the external aspects of it. When Hester dons the scarlet letter, she becomes the object of observation, exposed to the penetrating public eye. While standing at the pillory, the attention is brought to two symbols of her sin at her breast: her child and the embroidered letter. The punitive function of the letter is evident in that Hawthorne describes her experience of wearing it – and appearing with it in the public – as an agony, an ordeal (2018: 43). Everyone sternly looks on; even the children, who do not perceive the reasons behind the commotion subject Hester to their gaze: “[a] crowd of eager and curious school-boys, understanding little of the matter in hand, except that it gave them a half-holiday, ran before her progress, turning their heads continually to stare into her face, and at the winking baby in her arms, and at the ignominious letter on her breast” (Hawthorne, 2018: 42). But this public showing is only the beginning of her punishment.

The second factor of the punishment Hester has to endure is the violence to which she is subjected. Her

3 The letter may have had an extra-textual office, as well; that of reminding Victorian women “of the consequences of sexual transgression” (Battan, 2004: 601).

4 The changeable meaning of the letter is exposed when it is presented to outsiders. In the election day scene, Hawthorne brings attention to how the Native Americans might view the letter and the commotion around it: “affected by a sort of cold shadow of the white man’s curiosity, and, gliding through the crowd, fastened their snake-like black eyes on Hester’s bosom; conceiving, perhaps, that the wearer of this brilliantly embroidered badge must needs be a personage of high dignity among her people” (2018: 184).

everyday experience proves to be more difficult to bear than the exposure at the “pedestal of shame” (Hawthorne, 2018: 53, 89); namely, standing at the pillory was one, isolated, traumatic event, but her torture continues throughout the novel. Women attack her verbally, in cases both explicit and implicit. On the other hand, children are more creative in their haunting: “they pursued her at a distance with shrill cries, and the utterance of a word that had no distinct purport to their own minds” (Hawthorne, 2018: 64-65).

However, more prominent is the subsequent behaviour of the townsfolk towards Hester. When they are not terrorizing her, they make certain to stay away from her. This factor of her punishment, the marginalization, is made apparent by the narrator: “that scarlet letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself” (Hawthorne, 2018: 42).⁵ Hence, it is the sight of the scarlet A that keeps the people away from her.⁶ The letter brings to memory the public exposure of Hester’s shame. Her marginalization is signalled by her lodging: “[o]n the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage” (Hawthorne, 2018: 61). She is physically set apart from the rest of the town. When she does come to closer vicinity, her interactions seem to be stilted: “[i]n all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished” (Hawthorne, 2018: 64). All links with the mainstream society have been broken (Hawthorne, 2018: 120); instead, she is said to be “not merely estranged, but outlawed, from society” (Hawthorne, 2018: 149), and is described as “the people’s victim and life-long bond-slave” (Hawthorne, 2018: 170).

Even when she is recognized for her contribution to the society, through her needlework and altruism, this integrative aspect is limited. The society now views the

letter A as standing for Able: “Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (Hawthorne, 2018: 121). Her art of needlework marks the town – everyone wears her embroidery except the brides, because of the superstition of allowing the scarlet woman to get in touch with matrimony. “The exception indicated the ever-relentless rigor with which society frowned upon her sin” (Hawthorne, 2018: 63); this shows that even with the rigid separation from the society being mellowed down in her favour, she will not be fully reintegrated. This selective embracing of Hester and her work is again brought to prominence in the scene of the election day, when townspeople and foreigners alike congregate in public spaces, waiting for the procession and Arthur’s sermon. Foreigners are attracted by the scarlet letter’s infamy and they “now thronged about Hester Prynne with rude and boorish intrusiveness” (Hawthorne, 2018: 184). In spite of all their curiosity, Hester is here, as usual, physically separated from the rest: “a small vacant area—a sort of magic circle—had formed itself about her, into which, though the people were elbowing one another at a little distance, none ventured, or felt disposed to intrude. It was a forcible type of the moral solitude in which the scarlet letter enveloped its fated wearer; partly by her own reserve, and partly by the instinctive, though no longer so unkindly, withdrawal of her fellow-creatures” (Hawthorne, 2018: 175). However, even the transformed meaning of the letter does not fully invert the attitude of the townsfolk toward Hester. Near the culmination of the novel, during the festivities, Hester is still given her “magic circle” and it is profoundly unusual that anyone should approach her in such a public place. This is evident when Mistress Hibbins – herself balancing on the margin of the society for alleged witchcraft – strikes up a conversation with Hester: “what few of the towns-people would have ventured on; to begin a conversation with the wearer of the scarlet letter, in public” (Hawthorne, 2018: 180). Not even the association of A with Able helps Hester reintegrate into the society.

Finally, another outward purpose of the punishment – and the letter, which stands for it – is to serve as an example for others (Arnold, 2013: 2-3). It easily fulfils this purpose because the letter is what people see in place of Hester. This is best seen in the scene when Hester looks into a convex reflective surface of old armour and “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, 2018: 80). Hester herself has become the embodiment of sin. Early on, it is established

5 The symbolism of the colour should also be highlighted – the scarlet can be seen as the blood seeping through Hester’s garments. Except for suffering, the bloody colour connotes hymeneal or menstrual origin. The latter, Biblically deemed unclean, would again position Hester outside the mainstream society. However, as Hester suffers no injuries that may draw blood, the letter could also represent a bruise, “a welt inflicted by whipping” (Adams, 2006: 4-5), which she should have received for adultery, as elaborated above.

6 Kilborne proposes a more positive view of the letter as a vehicle of protection, which keeps away intruders and, mirror-like, turns Hester’s sin into those of the observers, who then flee from it (2005: 471-472).

that Hester “will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone” (Hawthorne, 2018: 48). Her legal punishment is bound to the spiritual one. Namely, it is often associated with the devil – it is “red-hot with infernal fire” (Hawthorne, 2018: 67) and “it glows like a red flame when [Hester meets] him at midnight, here in the dark wood” (Hawthorne, 2018: 139). In the latter case, the pronoun “him” refers to the devil, or the Black Man, in Hawthorne’s vocabulary. The letter is said to strike fear into children (Hawthorne, 2018: 62). Hence, the letter reflects both the legal and religious mentality of the town.

b) Internal

A more comprehensive reading reveals another layer of Hester’s punishment – the psychological, emotional aspect of her ordeal. First off, the letter and the publicity it connotes are clearly bringing much emotional turmoil to Hester. In Hester’s eyes, it is a “scarlet misery” that she cannot be rid of (Hawthorne, 2018: 158). Her struggle with public exposure does not diminish with time: “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” (Hawthorne, 2018: 65). Her daily punishment is connected with her emotional and physical decline. She loses her physical appeal; Hawthorne describes that there is “nothing in Hester’s bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection” (2018: 123), noting a rare noun beginning with A that cannot be symbolized by the letter. Hester cannot cast away the stigma imposed onto her by the community, although she tries. Even in the wild forest, contrasted to the orderly town (Živić, 2014: 165) and positively inclined toward the uncivilized (Eisinger, 1951: 325), she cannot be rid of the social limitations. Prompted by Pearl, Hester reunites with the emblem she has tried to throw away: “Hester next gathered up the heavy tresses of her hair, and confined them beneath her cap. As if there were a withering spell in the sad letter, her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, departed, like fading sunshine; and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her” (Hawthorne, 2018: 158). The draining effect of the letter is here the most obvious. Hester undergoes degeneration as soon as she puts the letter back on because it stands for all the internal torture that she experiences due to the exposure to the public scorn. The letter, therefore, does not only take effect on the surface-level; when Chillingworth “laid his long forefinger on the scarlet letter, [it] forthwith seemed to scorch into Hester’s breast, as if it had been red-hot” (Hawthorne, 2018: 56). The scarlet A is forever connected to the sin she has been accused of and the physical presence of the letter is the embodiment of Hester’s internal struggle.

Except for the pain it brings, a possible office of the letter is the spiritual reform that it should bring to Hester. She seems to show some openness to repenting; she chooses to stay in her town, surrounded by people who scorn her because “[h]ere, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul” (Hawthorne, 2018: 61). She finds knowledge in wearing the scarlet letter: “this badge hath taught me—it daily teaches me—it is teaching me at this moment—lessons whereof my child may be the wiser and better, albeit they can profit nothing to myself” (Hawthorne, 2018: 83); the letter is also speculated to be “the talisman of a stern and severe, but yet a guardian spirit” which keeps the spiritual evil at bay and keeps her from sin (Hawthorne, 2018: 136). Midway through the novel, Hawthorne announces that “[t]he scarlet letter had not done its office” (2018: 125) – a sentence that has puzzled scholars – and Bercovitch asserts that this is because of Hester’s misguided rebellion (1988: 631). Her reform and integration into the society is not yet complete because the letter is still imposed and not willingly embraced. Mills proposes to call the process of this reform education by sin (1948: 97). The way in which the letter teaches and reconditions Hester for a successful partaking in the society is harsh; Hester announces: “I,—whom the scarlet letter has disciplined to truth, though it be the truth of red-hot iron, entering into the soul” (Hawthorne, 2018: 130). Viewed like this, it is possible to propose that Hester’s return to New England and taking up the scarlet letter again is a sign that she has been reformed; she “turns her game of ‘penance’ into authentic ‘penitence’” (Colacurcio, 1972: 494).

However, a different point of view must be explored, as well. There is no question about whether or not Hester is pained by the scarlet letter and the public shaming, but the letter itself is a sign of her defiance of strict, unrelenting social norms: “so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony” (Hawthorne, 2018: 41). It is the glorification of what she should, according to the public opinion, be ashamed of (Sandeem, 1962: 426). While the magistrates do not catch up on the hidden meaning Hester gives her letter, the Puritan women notice it (Baym, 1970: 219): “She hath good skill at her needle, that’s certain (...) but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it?” (Hawthorne, 2018: 42). With the opulent stitching, Hester has made a “provocative

exhibition of individuality” (Mansilla García, 1996: 221) and “has obscured and confused the legal intent of the symbol by making it an illegal accessory” (Last, 1997: 361). The letter, Hester’s doing, establishes “her separateness more loudly than the pronouncements of the magistrates” (Last, 1997: 360) because it is impossible not to look at it and it has a lasting effect on the observers. Because she is an active participant in the production of emblem of her punishment, Hester is able to attach to it her own meaning: as well as for Able, the A can stand for Angel, Amor, and Arthur; especially because another version of the punishment for adultery would be wearing two letters, AD – a placeholder for Arthur Dimmesdale (Strong, 2017: 139). That Hester’s and the others’ view of the letter diverges is apparent in the scene when the magistrates offer to take off the scarlet letter. Hester replies that it is no longer their jurisdiction: “Were I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature, or be transformed into something that should speak a different purport” (Hawthorne, 2018: 127).

Nevertheless, Hester perseveres with quiet, but persistent work towards reshaping the meaning of the scarlet letter into an honourable one (Baym, 1970: 216): “[a]ll the world had frowned on her,—for seven long years had it frowned upon this lonely woman,—and still she bore it all, nor ever once turned away her firm, sad eyes. Heaven, likewise, had frowned upon her, and she had not died” (Hawthorne, 2018: 146). Hester’s attitude can be explained with John C. Gerber’s pointing out that Hester does not see “her act of adultery as a sin against God or against any law of her own nature. Nor does she feel that she has sinned against the community” (qtd. in Gross, 1960: 157). Her feeling of shame stems from being aware of the public’s dissection of her situation and subsequent association of sin and the scarlet letter (Sandeem, 1962: 425). Johnston proposes that Hester might continue to wear the letter to show “that she is *not* ashamed, that she has not submitted, that she freely owns who she is and what she has done, that she in fact quietly defies the shame that the magistrates have attempted to use to kill her spirit” (1996: 31). This view is supported by Hawthorne exposing that “[t]he world’s law was no law for her mind” (2018: 123).

Her return to New England would, in this view, be yet another act of silent defiance. Seemingly, she takes up the letter again to willingly – because the public opinion is now changed and “not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed” the letter on her after her supposed reform (Hawthorne, 2018: 196) – continue her repentance. But, her return to her marginalized cottage is motivated by the will to help others; notably, other women who come to her with their troubles of “wounded,

wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion” (Hawthorne, 2018: 197). After all, “[t]he scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss” (Hawthorne, 2018: 150). It is because of the marginalization she has endured and this inverted moral purpose of the Puritan punishment that she is qualified to help other women with similar problems (Hunt, 2009: 30-31). Although her scarlet letter keeps her out of the “civic sphere, she (...) helps to bring about a possible structural realignment of Puritan society” (Thomas, 2001: 197). The letter is, then, “a loophole that allows her to hide in plain sight of patriarchal leaders while simultaneously subverting and challenging their authority and encouraging other women to do the same” (Arnold, 2013: 9).

5. Pearl

5.1. Position in the Society

Hester is not the only one punished for the sin of adultery. Like Hester, her daughter Pearl is marginalized because of the connection with the scarlet letter. She is linked to it through her mother; more narrowly, the sin of her parents: “Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, she had no right among christened infants” (Hawthorne, 2018: 70). As Hawthorne makes abundantly explicit, Pearl is not only linked to the sin in an indirect manner; she is the embodiment of the letter and of the sin. Hester knows this and dresses her daughter in clothes juxtaposed to her own drab garments (adorned more than enough by the presence of the letter): “it was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and, indeed, of the child’s whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!” (Hawthorne, 2018: 76). Because of this, Pearl suffers punishments connected with the letter. She is exposed to the scornful looks and tongues of her peers, “the most intolerant brood that ever lived, [who] had got a vague idea of something outlandish, unearthly, or at variance with ordinary fashions, in the mother and child; and therefore scorned them in their hearts, and not unfrequently reviled them with their tongues” (Hawthorne, 2018: 71). When she gets a bit older, she is exposed to even more unruly behaviour: “there is the likeness of the scarlet letter running along by [Hester’s] side! Come, therefore, and let us fling mud at them!” (Hawthorne, 2018: 77). Pearl is aware that her

mother is an outcast, but she does not fully comprehend the reasons for it. She feels her own separation from the others, as well, and connects both instances to the emblem on her mother's breast: "Mother,' said little Pearl, 'the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom. (...) I am but a child. It will not flee from me; for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!'" (Hawthorne, 2018: 137).

Despite Pearl's illegitimacy, the society is still concerned with her well-being – specifically, they want her spirituality tended to (Eisinger, 1951: 328). This is why the Governor proposes the child be taken away from her mother. However, it is worth noting that the concern for Pearl's spirituality is mentioned only after elaborating "a design on the part of some of the leading inhabitants, cherishing the more rigid order of principles in religion and government, to deprive [Hester] of her child. On the supposition that Pearl, as already hinted, was of demon origin, these good people not unreasonably argued that a Christian interest in the mother's soul required them to remove such a stumbling-block from her path" (Hawthorne, 2018: 75). Even in this case of possible social support, the good intentions are mixed with the rigid religious view that casts Pearl aside.

5.2. A is for Ancestry

The wrongdoings of one generation, much like in the naturalist literary tradition, reappear in the next one (Mills, 1948: 96). Even Hester agrees with this stance: "[s]he knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be good" (Hawthorne, 2018: 67). It has been elaborated that Hester's punishment of marginalization extends to Pearl; but, Pearl's own punishment lies in the fact that her ancestry is not publicly acknowledged. This problem is, again, encompassed by the scarlet letter.

It is firmly established that Pearl is keenly aware of the scarlet letter. It is, actually, the first object that she becomes aware of as an infant (Hawthorne, 2018: 73). Not only does she latch onto the question of the scarlet letter upon her mother's breast, but also notices the Reverend's tick of placing his hand over his heart – where a matching letter might be sawn on. She brings together these "ostensibly disparate phenomena" (McNamara, 1956: 539): when asked by Hester if she knows the reason why she must wear the letter, Pearl replies: "It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart!' 'And what reason is that?' asked Hester, half smiling at the absurd incongruity of the child's observation; but, on second thoughts, turning pale. 'What has the letter to do with any heart, save mine?' 'Nay, mother, I have told all I

know,' said Pearl" (Hawthorne, 2018: 134). While Pearl possesses no explicit knowledge of the meaning of the scarlet letter, she constantly connects it to the Reverend.

Her abstract consciousness of the significance of the letter translates into the insistence that her mother wears it. Moreover, she is so rigid in her stance that she refuses to approach Hester after she has flung it into the brook. When Hester pins it back, she is rewarded by Pearl's hands around her knees and a kiss. However, Pearl extends her outburst of love onto the letter, as well:

"Wilt thou come across the brook, and own thy mother, now that she has her shame upon her,—now that she is sad?' 'Yes; now I will!' answered the child, bounding across the brook, and clasping Hester in her arms. 'Now thou art my mother indeed! And I am thy little Pearl!' In a mood of tenderness that was not usual with her, she drew down her mother's head, and kissed her brow and both her cheeks. But then—by a kind of necessity that always impelled this child to alloy whatever comfort she might chance to give with a throb of anguish—Pearl put up her mouth, and kissed the scarlet letter too!" (Hawthorne, 2018: 159).

It can be inferred that the image of the letter is coupled with Pearl's recognition of Hester as her mother. Therefore, not only is Hester's identity irrevocably connected with the letter, but Pearl's identity is, for the moment, as well. Before her integration into the society, Pearl requires to be recognized by both her parents. When Arthur finally reveals his fatherhood, Pearl uses the same reconciliatory method of a hug and a kiss (McNamara, 1956: 552): "The child, with the bird-like motion which was one of her characteristics, flew to him, and clasped her arms about his knees. . . . Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken" (Hawthorne, 2018: 188, 191). Only the (literal) embracing of her ancestry and *vice versa* frees Pearl from the scarlet letter and allows her to grow into a potentially prosperous member of the society (Eisinger, 1951: 329; McNamara, 1956: 541). Except for the stigma of unacknowledged sin, another factor of marginalization is now removed from Pearl: Arthur's confession probably

made it possible for her to be baptized and join the mainstream society (Baughman, 1967: 547). Pearl is then finally integrated into society, but not the American one, in which she has been consistently marginalized; instead, she goes to Europe – in “an ironic reversing of the American dream” (Baym, 1970: 229) and finds her happiness there.

6. Conclusion

When Hawthorne’s romance is compared to the historical sources, it becomes apparent that he has made some changes when transposing history into fiction, although he shows expertise in pointing out the union of profane and sacral judgments, as well as the importance of public confession. The greatest divergences are seen first, in the power that his magistrates hold, which is significantly greater than in reality – the novel makes no reference to the jury and builds on the premise that the people have no legal influence. Next, the forms of punishment are slightly different - Hester’s adultery may have been punished by death, as one of the townswomen proposes; if not that, her punishment would probably have included a whipping. These points of difference allow for a deeper interpretation of the punishment that she does suffer. Keeping her alive enables the magistrates to have a living example of what happens to a person who breaks the moral code: this person suffers every day from rudeness and the scorn of the town, as well as blatant marginalization, which, in Hester’s case, never ceases. She is emotionally pained by her experience, but tries to imbue the letter with her own meaning and, at the end, uses the letter and the knowledge it has brought her as a way of helping other, especially women. Her daughter experiences the same punishment of public exposure, as well as of marginalization. This is understandable, since Hester and Pearl appear together in almost every scene and it would be difficult to marginalize one without doing so to the other. However, Pearl experiences a specific form of punishment – because she has no recognized father, she is troubled and intuitively keeps pointing out Arthur’s concealment of sin. Therefore, Hester’s red badge of shame certainly fulfils its punitive office.

Sažetak

“Sramota, Očaj, Samoća”: Kazna za preljub u *Grimiznom slovu*

Djelo Grimizno slovo Nathaniela Hawthornea bavi se puritanskim Bostonom i odnosom prema preljubu u tom društveno-kulturnom kontekstu. Cilj je ovog rada prikazati kako su Hester i njezina kći Pearl kažnjene zbog svoje povezanosti s grijehom – Hester kao aktivni sudionik u njemu, a Pearl kao rezultat tog nezakonitog odnosa. Članak će prvo ustanoviti kako su se puritanske kolonije odnosile prema preljubu, a potom objasniti prikaz istog u romanu. Zatim se analiziraju vanjski i unutarnji aspekti Hesterine i Pearline kazne.

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