Scarlet Letter as a Feminist Novel; Formation of Female Identity

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Završni rad

Student/ica:

Matej Kovačević

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Doc. dr. sc. Marko Lukić

Zadar, 2016.

Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

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Zadar, 19. rujna 2016.

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SCARLET LETTER KAO FEMINISTIČKI ROMAN; FORMIRANJE ŽENSKOG IDENTITETA

SCARLET LETTER AS A FEMINIST NOVEL; FORMATION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

Matej Kovačević

Sažetak:

Ovaj završni rad bavi se socijalno – kulturalnim aspektima djela *The Scarlet Letter* Nathaniela Hawthornea, točnije, promatra autorov pristup ženstvenosti te razvoju i karakterizaciji glavnog lika Hester Prynne sa feminističkog stajališta. Uz historijsko – geografski opis same pozadine radnje, naglasak je stavljen na razvoj i međuodnos ostalih likova primarno gledano kroz aspekte pojedinih feminističkih teorija dvadesetog stoljeća. Cilj istog je pokušaj dokazivanja hipoteze autorovih feminističkih sklonosti.

Abstract:

This thesis is concerned with socio – cultural aspects of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, more accurately, it examines the author's approach to femininity, the development and characterization of Hester Prynne from a feminist perspective. Furthermore, along with the historical and geographical description of the plot, main emphasis has been placed on the intricate relationship of the characters and their development from the aspect of some of the feminist theories of the 20th century. The goal of the paper is an attempt to prove my own hypothesis on the feminist inclinations of the author himself.

Ključne riječi: karakterizacija, identitet, feminizam, kulturni odnosi

Key words: characterization, identity, feminism, cultural relations

1.Introduction

Best known for the very novel this paper is about, Nathaniel Hawthorne helped shape the American Romanticism. With his works, which were mostly inspired by the Puritan legacy, he contributed to the development of American literature and plausibly the development of feminist thought.

The main focus of the paper will be on the attempt to establish a connection between revolutionary feminist movement of the 20th century and Hawthorne's narrative in the form of a 19th century 'seduction novel'. One of the aims of this paper is to emphasize the importance of Hester Prynne being the centerpiece of the puzzle in Hawthorne's story back in a time when female characters were far from being able to acquire an individual identity. Feminist theories all deal with rebellious nature, resisting and opposing the patriarchy which disenables women to become independent individuals on their own. Even now it is not a rare occasion to encounter that women are viewed through prescriptive attributes of belonging to someone. The half of the entire population of the world are being oppressed solely on their gender. From birth they are raised to obey and submit to their fathers, their brothers, their husbands which is not far from being treated like property. This is exactly the reason why observing *The Scarlet Letter* from the feminist viewpoint becomes interesting. Feminism and the entire emancipation of a gender is relatively young in existence, dating back to the 20th century, and Hawthorne created a novel in which a woman of modern virtues resists and prevails over the oppressive patriarchy. Using Hester as an example I will try to analyze how patriarchy and the distribution of roles through the gender binary influenced her will to fight and persist. How it shaped and developed her character during the 17th century when the male – female differences were even more accentuated. More notably, I will analyze Hawthorne's portrayal of characters through contemporary feminist theories and try to determine whether or not this novel could be considered one of the first works depicting essential feminist ideals in recent history. In

continuation, an attempt will be made to depict Hawthorne himself as an unknowing feminist author according to the present – day standards. This very problematic will be tackled with contemporary feminist theories described in Rosemarie Tong's *Feminist Thought,* Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones' *Contemporary Feminist Theories* and most notably Judith Butler's view on gender and sex in *Gender Trouble.* Tongs as well as Jackson – Jones' handbooks contain reviews of important works such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* which will certainly serve in the analysis of the paper.

The initial chapters will be dealing with the brief historical retrospect of what was happening before and after the events of *The Scarlet Letter* using the comprehensive collection of historical facts gathered in Cyril Aydon's, *A Brief History of the Mankind* and Alan Taylor's *American Colonies: [the Settling of North America]* as well as Hawthorne's own portrayal of his ancestors in *The Scarlet Letter*. Regarding the literary environment of the Puritans Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson provide an amalgam of Puritan sermons and works in *The Puritans: A sourcebook of Their Writings.* Finally, as reference for the facts on Hawthorne's life, Milton Meltzer's research on the author in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography* will be used.

2.Setting the scene

Since every society plays a role in shaping the creation of one's personality it is only natural to assume that to understand what Hester Prynne went through we first have to know what kind of people she lived with. This chapter will be dealing with exactly that subject. The historical review of Boston, the Puritans and the 17th century overall. Right at the beginning, it is important to point out that the first associations that come to mind when we hear the word 'Puritan' are not always the historically accurate ones. There are certain discrepancies between

what one is able to conclude from reading fictional novels and what history really had to say about what went on in that part of the world.

Firstly, it is important to have in mind how the world stage looked like in the 17th century, and who played the main roles. As Cyril states in his chapter on the founding of America the true treasures of the new continents were just being discovered and the main actors and actresses of the world stage have begun turning their heads to look towards the west. Europe and the old World have grown tired of battles and rewriting the borders for a few acres of land. The race for the undiscovered has just taken hold and the Spanish and Portuguese were in the lead (177). It is exactly at this point of the historical timeline where the roots of the American literature have begun sprouting. The authors are concerned about the great American wilderness and its inaccessibility as it is evident from the work of John Smith who in his *Description of New England* writes about the potential of the newly discovered land and how to acquire it for the motherland. Other authors create biographies and written speeches which accord typically to the British style of writing. Furthermore, Cyril also argues that England was not the only participant in the race for the colonial conquest. Their aspirations for spatial expansion were followed from the old world to the new one by their European neighbors and rivals, the French. The 16th - century world stage was dominated by the struggle to rule the European throne and Great Britain was exhausted from fighting with the Portuguese and the Spanish. As it is transparently explained in Taylor's work, the political conflicts were not posing the sole threat to the Europe's citizens since overpopulation left its rulers as well as their subjects, claustrophobic and from the 17th century both the English and the French had suddenly fathomed the true potential of the new land across the pond. In continuation he states that the English crown, caring ever so little for the pretensions of the Spaniards and the Portuguese, began showing greater interest in the eastern coast of the northern continent where some prior expeditions have already been attempted (48). Moving on to the American colonization, the

earliest and the most important establishment was that of Jamestown on the James River peninsula and the proclaimed Virginia territory. It was on May the 14th 1607 when this first colony has been founded. It will be the first colony ever to start growing tobacco, the first one to introduce African slaves and the first one in 1619 to establish a parliament (Cyril Aydon 179). Not all immigrants were in search for fame and glory. Some were just hardworking, courageous individuals looking for a piece of land to call their own and start their life anew, free from religious persecution in their homeland. It was the second colony that was most remembered by history and the one that is linked to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Aydon concisely explains the voyage of the Mayflower and its Pilgrims in the 21st chapter in *The Brief History of Mankind* which I will try to paraphrase in the following lines. He states that in 1620 a group of rebellious individuals has embarked on an epic journey from the British harbor Plymouth across the ocean in search for a better life and landed in new Plymouth, Massachusetts. According to some online sources, half of the 102 passengers that survived the winter voyage, died in the first year from a weakened immune system and diseases and the others would die from hunger if no aide was provided by the native inhabitants. When the first harvest was over, the pilgrims joined the native Americans in the celebration of the first Thanks Giving day and thus the famous, or better to say notorious, tale of the American history began. It is a tale of betrayal and blood, human greed, and savagery in search for individuality and belonging and it is exactly that 'issue' that shapes the mentality of the common early American. The short lasting friendship between the noble savages and the lowly civilized was interrupted soon after it was established. As the exaggerated news of abundance and survival of the pilgrims reached the easterners, new settlers started following in the footsteps of the religious reformats. There was an ever growing desire to tame the great American wilderness and to subdue nature to human's needs. With the number of the settlers growing, they began searching for new fertile land everywhere. According to their understanding, the new land was theirs for the taking, and

the ownership of it was determined by a piece of inked paper. Since the natives had no such things in their possession the newcomers arrogantly started prescribing the land as their own. The natives' mindset was a great deal ahead of the so - called civilized Europeans' (Alan Taylor 19). They considered the earth as well as the air to be for the good of all people and that the ownership of such could not belong to only one man but to the community of all the peoples of the Earth and that was beyond the materialistic and narrow - minded comprehension of a common European. Therefore, slowly but surely, the Indians realized that they were forced to come to a decision. Either fight for the sanctity of nature and the freedom of human spirit or let go and accept the extinction of their people. Since land in Europe was lacking and the population was constantly on the rise the solution for the problem was completely evident. Ship more people to the west to work on the unused land and send the produce of their labor back to the motherland for consumption (Cyril Aydon 180).

2.1. The Puritan Rigor

As mentioned in the introductory part of the paper, this chapter will be dealing with the historical as well as the author's own portrayal of the Puritan society. What were their characteristics and how their society viewed sin, punishment, predestination and liberty? The importance of those questions lies in the connection that any milieu has to a person's character. Hester's defiance in the rigidity of early Puritan ways only adds more to her personality, therefore, seeing the New England settlers as stern as they were plays a crucial role in understanding why it is so extraordinary for her to rise up to our modern expectations.

Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson in a comprehensive anthology, *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings* provide us with an extensive assortment of facts and information.

According to them, Puritanism was a movement whose roots can be traced back to the separation of England from the Roman Catholic church in 1530. The English eliminated corrupt practices, disbanded monasteries and introduced reformed rituals thus creating the English Protestant church or, the otherwise known, Anglican Church. A few decades later, those who found it necessary to purify the English Protestant church even further by returning back to the simplicity of the original church were called the Puritans (6). In the Collins Classics publication, the editors have given a concise and to the point description of the Puritan character: "The Puritans were, in essence, very conservative Protestants with intransigent beliefs about good and bad behavior. This censorious moral view was especially stern when it came to matters of pleasure, including sex" (Hawthorne vi). Another American historian and author Milton Meltzer, in his work *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography*, states that the first Puritan settlers were prone to scrutiny and quick condemnation towards anybody that did not share their political or religious beliefs (10).

In their collection of Puritan works, Miller and Johnson managed to acquire and preserve a sermon of a colonial reverend called Thomas Hooker who first handedly exemplifies the attitude of early New England colonials towards sin: "And it's certain it's better to suffer all plagues without any one sin, than to commit the least sin, and to be freed from all plagues" (301). If their stance on sin was this severe then it is not hard to imagine that their attitude towards punishment and atonement was any less rigorous. Following the Catholic analogy of doing good things so that one may reach a place next to God, Puritans took that religious perspective to the next level. Their whole way living and their ideology was centered around sin and how to avoid any sinful actions. The individuals of the society were entwined, so one's sinful actions affected the lives of their neighbors and in one's wrong doings the whole community was compelled to pay the price: "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"

(Hawthorne 59). By publicly shaming the sinners they teach the observers as well as the observed, an important lesson and thus ensure the path of righteousness to be the one the whole community should strive to take.

2.2. Hawthorne's Puritan heritage

The emphasis put on Hawthorne's ancestry denotes and perhaps explains his decision and mental framework behind the creation of Hester and making her the centerpiece of the novel's puzzle. As Meltzer states, Hawthorne's forefathers were the founders of the legendary town of Salem and not only have they participated in the towns formation but they have been the main participants of the infamous witch trials. Judge John Hawthorne who enjoyed his role of enforcing rigorous punishment without a chance for atonement inflicted 'a family bloodstain' which haunted Nathaniel Hawthorne almost two centuries after the horrific events (14). In the following pages, Meltzer also provides us with a possible justification for Hawthorne's choice of preference for the gender of his main protagonist as well as why he portrayed the Puritans in a dark one – dimensional manner as he did. He argues that even though the misdeeds of Hawthorne's family may have faded with time the author of *The Scarlet Letter* found himself still haunted by the lingering residue of the crimes his family has committed. He even went so far as to presume that Hawthorne himself seemed to 'believe the legend that a curse had been flung upon the Hawthornes by a witch on the scaffold about to be hanged' (14). The relation of Hawthorne's intrinsic guilt and the analysis of his novel through feminist standpoint could be found in his attempt to portray an independent woman rising above the gloom of the Puritan atmosphere. The author could have chosen a male protagonist for his story but that would beat the purpose of his atonement. He is aware that his ancestors have wronged the women of his hometown who were already an oppressed section of society by being subjects to the patriarchal body.

2.3. Why Boston?

Could Hawthorne, by carefully setting the story in Boston, have prescribed the inception of feminism to the city as well? Was *The Scarlet Letter* a feminist novel is a matter of meticulous discussion, yet, undoubtedly, Hawthorne was the first American writer who centered the plot of his work solely around the trials and hardships of a woman among dominant men. Him choosing to position the story in a time where sin was dealt with more strictness only adds to the idea of him being a female sympathizer, if not a feminist at heart. This chapter's goal is to establish a relationship between the nature of the founders of Boston and Hawthorne's decision to make it the home of his most known character.

The theme of *The Scarlet Letter* is defiance and strength of heart manifested in a beautiful young woman, which imaginably is exactly how Hawthorne envisioned the early stages of liberation and creation of his home country. The general prescription and personification of femininity in homelands and the peculiar choice of the author to create one of the first American novels whose main protagonist is an independent female may just be a coincidence or perhaps exactly Hawthorne's purpose. Maybe it was his intention for the reader to make a connection on a subconscious level that his theme, dealing with the position of women in the beginnings of the American society, somehow represents the severing of ties from something outdated and restraining, the patriarchal Britain. Hawthorne was not the first to materialize freedom and independence in the image of a beautiful woman.

In 1830 Eugène Delacroix (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online), in his painting Liberty Leading the People, constituted something so quintessential to the human spirit in a nameless woman who seems to possess the qualities women were rarely portrayed to have - the audacity to lead, to stand behind one's morals and beliefs and to fight for them. Hawthorne might have been copying Delacroix's idea in his own way, trying to paint a picture with words, encouraging

women to stand up for themselves and fight off the ever - long patriarchal oppression and injustice.

Following *The Contemporary Feminist Theories* by Stevi Jackson the core point of feminist theory is "to analyze the conditions which shape women's lives and to explore cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman" (1). In continuation Jackson also rightfully argues that the core objective of feminism is to refuse to accept the inequalities between women and men as "natural and inevitable" and to resist the oppression the male – dominated societies have conducted throughout the history (1). Setting aside the sexual, one could draw a parallel here between the political oppression of women and the political oppression of the entire American nation. The event that peeks my interest here is the Boston Tea Party of 1773 which symbolizes the breaking point in the colonial ties to the motherland. Much as more recently the women have had enough of the inequality imposed to them by the whole system so have the Bostonians and early American patriots had enough of the British tax difference and the unevenness in the situation. My point is that the political oppression of the whole nation is to a certain extent equal to the gender, i. e. sexual oppression of the entire section of society. The Bostonians have displayed their affiliation towards equality and liberty through rebellious behavior and Hawthorne must have spotted the connection, therefore, placing Hester Prynne in a historical town such as Boston and not his own, Salem. She is a rebel in a society that has already rebelled, not once now but twice. Seeking religious freedom, as explained in the chapters above, the Puritans broke off from the main branch of their religion thus ensuring spiritual independence and later on the New England colonials sought for equality in the government and in that way protected their political independence as well.

3. Hawthorne, the Pioneer Feminist

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Hawthorne may truly be one of the first representatives of feminism in history. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know with certainty whether or not he had actually noticed the injustice of patriarchy and its binary inclinations regarding the gender roles disposition. On the one hand, reading his works today, we can only speculate what his intentions were in choosing such themes and protagonists to be the carriers of his thoughts. But on the other hand, exactly his choices compell us to strongly assume that he was undoubtedly aware of what women experienced in the oppressive male – dominated society. The hypothesis I will try to argue in this chapter is that it is very much plausible to denote the title of a 'feminist' to Nathaniel Hawthorne using modern feminist theories and analyzing Hester's character formation and identity development throughout his novel.

Maggie Humm in her chapter on Feminist Literary theory in *Contemporary Feminist Theories* distinctly states the three major ideas of central interest to feminisim: "that gender is a social construction which oppresses women more than men; that patriarchy shapes this construction; and that women's experiential knowledge is a basis for a future non – sexist society" (Jackson and Jones 194). I have already been following these main three perceptions while writing about the Puritan background and society, and I intend to further elaborate and extend them by placing some aspects of *The Scarlet Letter* and the characters portrayed by Hawthorne in the margins of feminist theories.

3.1. Feminist Standpoint

This chapter will primarily be dealing with my attempt to prove that Hester Prynne possessed the qualities contemporary radical feminist theorists deem to be crucial in rehabilitating the imbalance introduced to various social structures by the patriarchal ideology. It will have the purpose of an introductory part of the paper slowly setting the foundations for

the feminist nature of it by elaborating the fundamental principles of the feminist theories. Namely, the approaches that will be used are found in Rosemarie Tong's *Feminist Thought* in which she describes Mary Daly's take on the cultural aspect of the radical theory and Kate Millet's view on the libertarian radical feminism. Combining both criticisms the plausibility of Hester's androgyny through Hawthorne's depiction of her will be suspected.

To further elaborate the subject of the chapter, I would first like to introduce the main attributes of radical feminism. As stated by Tong "radical feminists agreed in the principle that sexism is the first, most widespread, or deepest form of human oppression" (51), confirming that statement in Allison Jaggar's and Paula Rothenberg's interpretation of evidence for the severity of women's sexual oppression. The latter duo noted the evidence in five key concepts corroborating the position of women in the society and those exact concepts are the very reason for the rise of revolutionaries who sought to change the structure of the society from its core Tong 51). The women of the 20th century noticed that there is an intricate connection to each and every of their experiences in the oppressive patriarchal ideology and that by standing alone they cannot accomplish anything. Establishing the notable connection of the "women's fates" they proclaimed that "the personal is political" and that all women are "sisters" (Tong 51). Some followers of the feminist movement couldn't agree about what attitude women should establish when dealing with the problematic of patriarchy and what qualities they should possess, thus, they start to break apart and form two main branches of the radical movement. It is exactly here where Hester's personality becomes interesting to observe from those two main viewpoints.

3.2. Post – colonial Feminist Theory

The feminist post – colonial theory is in fact an offshoot of the mainstream original. The point of this chapter will be describing main foci of both of the theories and to analyze how *The*

Scarlet Letter fits within their margins. While trying to do so I will be using Sara Mills' elaboration of the subject within the *Contemporary Feminist Theories* of Jackson and Jones. The reasoning behind the choice of this particular theory is the fact that Hawthorne himself wrote in the post – colonial period and the theme of his novel is placed in the time when colonization of North America was at its inception. Even though the focus of the feminist post – colonial approach is mainly on India and Africa their outlook on the subject will be useful for this type of analysis.

Sara Mills explains the theory to revolve around Edward Said's 1978 work *Orientalism.* Furthermore, she states that Said "analyzed the way that Europe in the nineteenth century represented many of the cultures with which it came into contact through imperial expansion" (Jackson and Jones 98). For Said, the West has represented the other colonized countries as the Other to a Western norm. Travellers and scholars alike represented the countries with negative connotations. They described the people of other cultures to be lazy, degenerate, uncivilized and barbaric as opposed to the civilized western nations (Jackson and Jones 98). Furthermore, those same travellers and adventurers were depicted as 'courageous, hard – working, patriotic and resilient' (Jackson and Jones 99) which is where the feminist outtake on the mainstream comes into my consideration.

After determining the post – colonial norm, there is an approach from another angle to Hawthorne's thematic, i. e. choice thereof. In her essay on the 19th century literature, Emilia Kreger underlines the key importance of the quite popular genre for that period so called 'seduction novel' (Kreger 312). However, there is a certain discrepancy to that popularity. Authors who dabbled in that type of novels were mostly of female gender as well as the reading audience (Kreger 316), which it is yet again even more intriguing to observe how Hawthorne chose to follow his female rather than male contemporaries. It is important to also note that the

fight for women's rights actually stemmed from the same period when Hawthorne was writing. The most notable event of those times was the US women's resistance to men's power inaugurated in 1848 Seneca Falls New York which helped women achieve "many important legal, political, and economic liberties and equalities" (Tong 54). Perhaps there was a link to the collective consciousness in people of that era which enticed them all to notice the injustice and inequality and provided them with the fiery fighting spirit to oppose the patriarchal norm and achieve balance.

In continuation, the main feminist criticism on the post – colonial theory, as provided by Mills, is that of Anne McClintock who argues that "Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno – tropics for the European imagination – a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (qtd in Jackson and Jones 101). In continuation Mills adds on the McClintock by stating that "British females were represented as the innocent pure support for this system and indigenous females were the object of these sexual fantasies" (Jackson and Jones 101). The notion that feminists try to point out regarding the post – colonial theory is that there is a certain lack of address to gender issues. Women in these colonial works are depicted as property or objects, both the indigenous and the western ones. The whole field is masculinist, concerned primarily by texts written by males and their standpoints on the events (Jackson and Jones 99). It is exactly at this point where observing Hawthorne's work as a feminist novel becomes incredibly conspicuous. While his contemporaries write about how to acquire an indigenous woman and how to conquer more unexplored land, Hawthorne, a male, writes about the position of women in a male – dominated society. Not only does he completely ignore the mainstream tendencies to feed the male ego in amassing as much land and as many women as possible, but he centers his whole work around a single woman, facing the patriarchal constructs in a religiously rigorous society alone. Paying attention to the feelings of his characters and their mental states is something contemporary

feminists would find very much amiable and admirable. While other authors of the 19th century depict men one – dimensionally, governed by reason and lacking any emotional influence, Hawthorne introduces a male character of borderline feminine qualities, Arthur Dimmesdale.

3.3. The Queer Reverend

In this chapter I will rely on Erika Kreger's analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* in her essay Depravity Dressed up in a Fascinating Garb as a supportive source for my argumentation. The goal of the chapter will be proving Hawthorne's gender binary role reversal as seen in the examples of Hester and Arthur and the probable reason behind it. The main hypothesis I will introduce will be dealing with Dimmesdale's sexual preference, or better to say nature, using Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble.*

Kreger's starting premise is that Hawthorne introduced a dislikable male character by prescribing him feminine characteristics, and a likeable female character prescribing her masculine characteristics. She points out that same thought in the following quote: "Dimmesdale exemplifies the socially unacceptable qualities associated with the earlies narratives, while Hester embodies the cultural ideal developed in later ones" (310). Hester is strong, resilient, courageous and hard – working, just like men were depicted in the chapter above. The minister, on the other hand, is anxious, weak, sickly and unable to confront his fears, almost as if waiting for Hester to save him. This is interesting to observe because the majority of the 19th century seduction novels portrayed "women as vulnerable and in need of male protection" (Kreger 316). There were, of course, those like Hawthorne who "abandon the seduction plot and instead follow the progression of a young woman who, without familial or financial resources, must educate herself and find a secure place in the world" (Kreger 316). The feminization of the minister as the main male protagonist is what Hawthorne added to the likeable heroine. His gender role reversal is most evident in the way he portrayed Dimmesdale

and the situations he placed him in, as well as the way he dealt with them. “From the moment he is introduced, Dimmesdale is depicted in feminine terms. Physically he is as weak and drooping as the seduced heroine, and morally he is as hypocritical and deceptive as the seducing villain” (Kreger 318). Arthur is egotistic and desperate, wallowing in self – pity. He is unable to own up to his sin and publicly display it like Hester did. His shame drives him to the point of madness when he eventually succumbs to his own weakness of character. Kreger argues that what Hawthorne essentially did by depicting Dimmesdale as a disparaged and unlikeable character is emphasize the notability of Hester’s self – reliance and, in doing so, he made her and her qualities more amiable to the reader. Furthermore, such strong negative connotations with a male protagonist would serve to “guide readers to definite conclusions even without an overt authorial intrusion telling them what to think” (Kreger 318).

After having analyzed the play on gender roles and Hawthorne’s confrontation with the norm, one may be as bold as to approach the subject with suspicion towards the reverend’s sexuality. The hypothesis for this part of the chapter is revolving around Dimmesdale’s refusal to ‘step into the light’ and live out the rest of his life in ‘sin’ with what is essentially his family. The reason behind his hesitant behavior might lie in the inner struggling to come to terms with his sexuality or, more plausibly for Hawthorne’s age, the primeval fear of God. The latter assumption shall be disregarded because it doesn’t serve the purpose of this problematic. Him being a homosexual, or bisexual in that matter, could possibly be explained by the conflict within himself which results in noticeable anxiety affecting his physical and emotional state “But how could the young minister say so, when with every successive Sabbath, his cheek was paler and thinner, and his voice more tremuluous than before” (Hawthorne 132). Following Kreger’s factual evidence regarding the reversed prescription of what is masculine and feminine on the example of the two main characters, it could be possible that why the godly reverend ‘fell in love’, i. e. had intercourse with Hester in the first place is exactly because of her

'masculine' traits. She was determined, courageous and strong willed, Dimmesdale on the other hand is anxious and hesitant, seeking comfort and support which he might have found in Hester. Judith Butler's argumentation on the topic, especially dealing with desire, would oppose this assumption. Her stance on the connection, or in this case distinction, between sex and gender is that they are concepts which are unrelated to one another. She argues that sex appears to have 'biological intractability' whereas gender is completely 'culturally constructed' (Butler 6). This is the well – known 'nature versus nurture' debate that has been going on since the 1990ies which Butler elaborates in continuation

> "Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of 'men' will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that 'women' will interpret only female bodies" (Butler 6).

She introduces a more liberal view on the relations of gender and sex by saying that they are free floating concepts "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituated by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25). In other words, she tries to argue that gender is conditioned by what you do, i. e. your performance at certain times, rather than who you actually are. With her work, Butler was at the very inception of the term 'gender fluidity' which is exclusive to the recent social media outbreak on the subject. With modern medical achievements people of the 20th and the 21st century are able to come out of their personal prisons claiming to be trapped within their own bodies while they are essentially of the opposite gender and/or sex. However, such controversy is much advanced for Hawthorne's period and his possible intentions and therefore there will be no more say on the subject. The purpose of Butler's argumentation for the said

hypothesis would prove that Dimmesdale's representation of gender and sex are in discord. His feminine characteristics which are akin to his personality are very much different from his biologically determined sex. However, that does not entail that Dimmesdale was homosexual or even sexually confused, but his attraction towards Hester and her androgynous characteristics are exactly what is 'queer' about him. Following the norm of the 17th century public he certainly shouldn't possess such qualities which would portray him as vulnerable and weak as he is. Moreover, the whole purpose of *Gender Trouble* was to disprove the continuum caused by the biological sex and culturally constructed gender which in correlation cause desire for the opposite sex. She considers that to be the common and logical concept in society and what she proposes instead is that one should be more flexible when approaching such constructs.

Whether or not one can identify with Dimmesdale and thus empathize with him and have more understanding, it is still a fact that Hawthorne managed to create a male character by prescribing him feminine qualities, which was certainly not a common practice in his time. It was a characteristic of the so called 'seduction novel' favored by the female reading audience as well as female authors. Since the 19th century reading public consisted of women, as stated in Kreger's essay, his intentions might have been conveniently of budgetary and commercial nature rather than revolutionary and mindful towards the problematic of gender inequality. Nevertheless, he was still more inclined towards the opposite gender for whatever reasons, which shines interesting feminist light on his biography.

3.4. Hester's Androgyny

In *Sexual Politics* Kate Millet argues that "Patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological differences between men and women" (Tong 52). In order to bypass that exaggeration and

establish a functional society without prejudice, disparity and inequality, Millet strongly believes that the society as a whole should strive for an androgynous self – representation. Another radical - libertarian, Marilyn French, validates such point of view by stating that

> "the best society is an androgynous one in which both men and women embrace the historically feminine values of love, compassion, sharing, and nurturance just as eagerly as humans embrace the historically masculine values of control, structure, possessiveness, and status" (Tong 58).

However, there is a pitfall to that theory which, as Millet accentuated, should be approached with caution "Androgyny, is a worthy ideal only if the feminine and masculine qualities integrated in the androgynous person are separately worthy" (Tong 54). In continuation, she argues that not only is it undesirable to combine two negative aspects of personality, arrogance and servility in her exemplification, but it is also impossible since the two are polar opposites (54). After having read *The Scarlet Letter* and once the basis for radical - libertarian feminist thought has been set, one may begin to notice the connection between the feminist understanding of female qualities and Hester Prynne as Hawthorne portrayed her. She displays both aspects of the desirable masculine and feminine qualities. The roles of both parents fall solely on her alone and she manages to tackle those responsibilities with composure nevertheless all the while countering the suffering she experiences in the meantime. What does that make her gender wise then? In her charity work and altruism she is kind and compassionate. Not even once does she lash out at people who are openly displaying their bitterness and resentment towards her. She is well aware of what people think and how they feel about her and yet she is still graceful and determined in her demeanor. An outcast from the rest of the society she is condemned to bear the burden of the sin alone, for which it took two, and in the middle of that she has to raise a child. The way she juggles all struggles placed before her and

manages to overcome them puts to shame many other found in much better circumstances. Even though libertarians promote abortion and rejection of motherhood in order to surely and strongly oppose the patriarchy, Hester, in doing the exact opposite, manages to fight it all the same. Hawthorne succeeded in creating a character that is the embodiment of libertarian feminist ideal almost a century and a half before the same idea has been even realized. She is so perfect that it is hard to imagine a person whose nature is so well balanced in masculinity and femininity in even the modern age. Hester's love and nurturing, however, could be viewed malicious and harmful for her, or other women who possess such qualities in the patriarchic system. This concept is argued by Mary Daly in *Beyond God and Father* who insists that when combining both aspects of androgyny women must proceed with caution. "For example, loving ordinarily is good, but under patriarchy, loving can become, for women, a form of total self-sacrifice or martyrdom" (Tong 60). Having noticed Daly's warning, one can now evidently ascertain that this is exactly what Hester did. In her overwhelming love and nurturing, towards her daughter, the reverend as well as the society who alienated her, she became a martyr. In addition, one could say that she is a true philanthropist because Hawthorne doesn't depict any negativity inside her towards the others in the novel, barely even towards Chillingworth who tormented her and Dimmesdale. Radical - cultural feminists also insist that it is of utmost importance for a woman to embrace her femininity and the benefits that being a woman contributes to the society. This is the main difference between the radical - libertarian and cultural feminists. The first supporting abortion or in vitro insemination, thus rejecting traditional motherhood, while the latter strongly backing up such qualities. "Whereas radical-libertarian feminists believe women should substitute artificial for natural modes of reproduction, radical-cultural feminists believe it is in women's best interests to procreate naturally" (Tong 74). Moreover, Tong presents Marge Piercy's critique on radical – cultural

feminists by stating that “Women should not give up biological motherhood for ex utero gestation, not now, not ever” (77).

In conclusion, Hester embodies crucial aspects of both feminist views. She is a woman alienated through religious scrutiny and patriarchal oppression. An outcast possessing qualities which are today considered necessary to reshape the society. If she were a real person in the present – day society and not just a product of Hawthorne’s imagination, there is no doubt she would be on the frontlines in the rallies for equality and human rights.

3.5. What Hester Read

In this particular chapter I will tackle the questions of identity representation using Sue Thornham’s take on “cultural understandings” and the “conditions which shape women’s lives” (Jackson and Jones 1), when trying to comprehend what constitutes a female character through the eyes of a member of a postmodernist society. In addition, as a supportive argument I will be using the relation of Patricia Waugh’s take on postmodernism and feminism.

At first, it might seem folly to approach a 19th century novel depicting the life of a 17th century woman from a postmodern point of view because of the temporal inconvenience. Right at the start a problem emerges because of the complexity of postmodernism as Waugh explains: “The term ‘postmodernism’ has now come to designate a bewilderingly diverse array of cultural practices, writers, artists, thinkers and theoretical accounts of late modernity” (Jackson and Jones 177). However, in this case it will serve the purpose of the paper perfectly because in order to define identity one needs certain reference of self – representation, and seeing that the majority of the culture the modern society grew up in stems from postmodernism, it only seems as a logical choice to approach the subject from this perspective. The latter movement is a congregation of numerous aspects of contemporary culture and tradition. Where ever we look

we are surrounded and bombarded with content. Literature, media, globalization, everything is blossoming in an infinite disarray of possibilities. All that accessible content can have a purpose of a source from which we can take aspects we like and pin them to our own identity. Taking this postmodernist attitude back to the 17th century New England leaves us baffled. Almost instantly, numerous questions arise, e. g. what kind of content would we be exposed to? Where would we draw the inspiration to create ourselves and add on as many aspects of the world and other people to us as we have the ability to do so now? In between the margins of the postmodernist feminist theory Thornham rightfully argues that "we are all 'multiple' subjects … [and] we can all make and unmake, disassemble and reassemble our identities through playing with a range of media images and identities" (Jackson and Jones 226). This 'multiplicity' and fluidity makes it easier for us to understand ourselves and where we come from. For each of our personality traits we have an explanation or a justification. But what made Hester the way she is? The society which has been portrayed in the 2nd chapter of this paper using Miller and Johnson's work was centered around God, humility, sin, penance but also knowledge. The enlightened or knowledgeable content she could have been exposed to was found in sermons which were written by colonial reverends and other godly people. But what did she read? What did she choose to identify herself with? What kind of content she must have surrounded herself with to disregard the word of God and nevertheless commit a sinful act? There were no TV shows depicting romantic tragedies, movies with star crossed lovers blindly fighting against the world just to be together or even more rebellious women with integrity and character to stand behind their actions and fight for the true meaning of love. There were no constant advertisements depicting humble women, joyful and content with their roles as mothers and wives. The people of New England, in this instance, were not bombarded with misrepresentation of women (if we follow the postmodernist approach of feminist media and film theory). The notion of a woman's role in the society prescribed at her birth was innate to

the collective mentality of the world. That mentality or better to say mindset is what patriarchal binary represents.

With the lack of material content to which she could have been exposed we should take a better look at the social conditions which surrounded her in hopes of finding her self – representative reference with which she might have constructed her identity. Hawthorne did not provide us with any additional information about Hester's background, her family or anything before the events of *The Scarlet Letter*. With that one is forced to presume that, by not being worth mentioning as role models in her life, Hawthorne deliberately left them out from the story making Hester's independence even more accentuated. Furthermore, Hester's self – reliance is visible in her attitude towards her punishment. She was sentenced to publicly display the consequence of her sinful actions in a form of the scarlet letter A, and she made the letter play it into her advantage. She embroidered it with fine silk and golden thread and expressed herself through her needlework. All the women envied her masterful skill and soon the letter A represented more than just her ignominy. Her milieu, according to Hawthorne, consisted of nothing but gloomy, unpleasant neighbors. They were dark and malignant, grim, rigid and stern.

Finally, with all three possible sources of multiplicity missing (society, family, literature), one is left with no other choice but to assume that Hester's individuality, strength of character and rebellious spirit were intrinsic characteristics to her personality. However, Hawthorne was in a slightly better situation regarding the exposure to influence and information. According to Meltzer, he was a bookworm from childhood (20) and could have drawn his affiliation towards revolutionary ideas with a compassionate tone towards his contemporaries from there. This only further serves my point in trying to prove Hawthorne's ingenuity in fighting for women's rights. In the end the pen proves to be mightier than the sword after all.

3.6. Rebellion Out of Envy

The purpose of this chapter, and the ones following it, will be approaching *The Scarlet Letter* from the point of view of the psychoanalytic feminist theory. In it I will mainly be using Sue Vice concise descriptions of the main concerns of the complex Freud's attitude towards the notion of "penis envy" and Melaine Klein's opposing attitude towards the same. In doing so I believe I will expand the feminist theme of the paper. As Vice herself states psychoanalysis' main goal is to reach the explanation as to why a certain person behaves the way they do or to determine the illness that is plaguing them (162). However, according to the nature of this paper, the instruments of psychoanalytic feminist theory will mainly serve to understand Hester's rebellious nature and Pearl's mischievous behavior. The premise of this chapter is that Hester's behavior can be reduced to a psychoanalytic deduction, i. e. that the source of her fiery spirit and insurgency could actually be explained by early sexual development in her childhood.

Probably the most controversial of Freud's theories regarding female sexuality and psychology is his concept of 'penis envy'.

> "He was convinced that this envy in women grew out of a feeling of biological lack beginning with the little girl's discovery in early childhood that she lacked something possessed by the little boy. Because of this, according to Freud, she believed she had been castrated, and she dealt with this shock either by sublimating the wish for a penis in the wish for a child; that is, becoming a normal woman, or by the development of neurosis…" (Clara Thompson 123).

If we try to apply Freud's concept on the example of Hester Prynne we might encounter an inconsistency in the theory. Hester's resilience and singularity represent a paradox or a hole in the concept which is evident in her personality and her mien. As it is visible in the quote above, a woman desires a child in order to fulfil her envious desire for a penis. If she doesn't somehow

get one she becomes neurotic or hysteric and displays eccentric behavior. Following this analogy, Hester deliberately defied the rules of her society and religion because she was envious of her male counterparts, not because she fell in love. However, Hawthorne not even once depicts her baring and character as erratic which would correspond to someone being neurotic. Even after Pearl was born and after Hester had, presumably, fulfilled her need and ascended to the state of being a complete grown woman, she still keeps her composure, grace and calm: "she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air as if by her own free will" (Hawthorne 56). In that scene at the marketplace where women of her age despise her, sneer and glare at her she is composed. During the judgement at the scaffold she refuses to tell the name of her accomplice in crime not because she has suddenly fulfilled her desperate desire to acquire a penis but because she loves reverend Dimmesdale. Another argument provided by Sue Vice in the *Contemporary Feminist Theories* is in her paraphrasing of Melaine Klein's approach psychological and the sexual. While Freud is concerned with the father figure and his role in the early psychological development of a child, Vice states Klein's argumentation for the emphasis on the maternal role in the same. "Klein argues that the infant feels envy not for the paternal penis, but for maternal plentitude, that state of being united with the mother" (Jackson and Jones 167). Both Klein's and Freud's theories have more sense in understanding Pearl's mischievousness and duality which I will attempt to elaborate further in the continuation of the paper.

To conclude this chapter, Hester's actions of defiance and emancipation come from a place of love and are certainly not based on absurd attempts to explain any woman's behavior as a need to quench her jealousy by impregnating herself.

3.7. Pearl's Flower Shower

As opposed to the Freud's phallocentric attitude towards mental development Sue Vice notes Dinnerstein's argument for a more feminine, 'Kleinian', approach underlining the greater importance of the maternal role in the psychology of a person. Dinnerstein introduces a concept of mourning the 'initial oneness' with the mother which arises as a result of the current child – care arrangements, divided according to gender (Jackson and Jones 162). Both Freudian and Kleinian approach to childhood development of personality as well as sexuality provide us with a better understanding of Pearl's whimsical behavior. Of course, today one would simply prescribe that to being a normal child with a more accentuated naughty side but if we analyze her character from the feminist psychoanalytic approach she represents certain aspects worth looking into. Hawthorne portrayed Pearl as mischievous and elflike in numerous occasions as well as angelic and innocent. Furthermore, as far as *The Scarlet Letter* provides us with such information, neither Hester nor Pearl had a present father figure or a stable male role model in their lives. Here, the loss of oneness that Dinnerstein speaks about could serve as an explanation for Pearl's chaotic duality. The child also displays lack of respect and concern for authority, being cheeky and spiteful while talking to Governor Bellingham who asked her a question if she knew who had made her (Hawthorne 119). In addition, Pearl, in her childlike playfulness, picks flowers and tosses them at her mother's bosom, more accurately, at the embroidered scarlet letter on her chest. This hurts Hester beyond reason but she manages to keep her composure and prescribe her child's actions to her young age and lack of awareness.

> "…she amused herself with gathering handfuls of wild – flowers, and flinging them, one by one, at her mother's bosom; dancing up and down like a little elf whenever she hit the scarlet letter. Hester's first motion had been to cover her bosom with her clasped hands. But whether from pride or resignation, or a feeling that her penance might best be wrought out by this unutterable pain, she resisted the impulse, and sat

> erect, pale as death, looking sadly into little Pearl's wild eyes. Still came the battery of flowers, almost invariably hitting the mark, and covering the mother's breast with hurts for which she could find no balm in this world, nor knew how to seek it in another" (Hawthorne 105)

Of course, from a modern perspective one would conclude that a child of her age could not be aware of her actions or what exactly is the reason behind them. Nevertheless, on more than one occasion, she proves to be more perceptive and insightful than one would have expected, showing the reader that she might know exactly what she is doing. She seems to be more than aware of the embroidery on Hester's chest, therefore, I would dare to conclude that her psyhcological state of development is far more advanced for a child her age. This thesis becomes more evident in the 16th chapter of the novel where Pearl in her forest walk with her mother, encounters Arthur Dimmesdale. Freud's concept of 'penis envy' cannot be ascribed to little Pearl because of the remoteness of her livelyhood and the lack of contact with any other boys or men from her society, therefore, her nature is more likely to be understood from the point of view of mourning the loss of oneness with her mother. That would also serve to explain her protective attitude of her mother once they venture into the town. Hawthorne even insinuates her awareness of who her father actually is, despite the fact that Hester hasn't told her anything yet. This might be due to her perceptiveness. She noticed how Dimmesdale clenches his hand over his heart and wants him to own up to the troubles that are bothering him by joining her and her mother on the scaffold. As he rejects her inclination so does she refuse to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Dost thou mock me now? Said the minister. 'Thou was not vold! – thou wast not true!" (Hawthorne 173).

As a closing notion to this chapter it is safe to conclude that the psychoanalytic approach towards understanding the intrinsic qualities of women in Hawthorne's novel carries little

significance in Hester's analyzation as oppossed to Pearl's. Her behaviour is indeed erratic and peculiar and it is up to the reader to conclude whether that should be presribed to her childfulness or to a more sublime pshychological advancement. However, the lack of presence of a father figure and the deficiancy of contact with the rest of the society certainly does entail possible detrimental aspects in her development.

3.8. Represantation of Women In *The Scarlet Letter*

Despite the fact that this whole work is observing Hawthorne's novel through the lenses of a feminist literary critic, this particular chapter will take on the exterior and interior representation of women as Depicted by Hawthorne following Maggie Humm's understanding of the feminist literary theory. Even though there has been some say on the portrayal of women in the previous chapters where the emphasis was on the inner qualities of the characters, I will try to elaborate the exterior aspect here in more detail.

Oddly enough, how Hawthorne depicts his two main female protagonists does not differ that much from the portrayal of women in the 20th century media which caused much criticism and controversy. Hawthorne creates characters that are nearly flawless in their physical aspects which, viewed from the contemporary feminist criticism, imposes unreachable expectations of women to have from themselves. As seen in his descriptions of Pearl: "We have spoken of Pearl's rich and luxuriant beauty – a beauty that shone with deep and vivid tints, a bright complexion, eyes possessing intensity both of depth and glow, and hair already of a deep, glossy brown... (Hawthorne 110)" and Hester: "The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam; and a face which, besides from regularity of feature and richness of complexion…" (Hawthorne 57).

Hawthorne pays close attention to the position of women in the newly founded colony. Their mindset, heritage and background, their role in the society. He describes Hester's female acquaintances to have everything but the above - stated attributes which were commonly prescribed to women. They were far from appealing and beautiful, there was no compassion and solidarity among them for the member of their own community. Being already oppressed by the patriarchal system one would dare to think that women would hold together and be there for each other. However, this proves the sternness of the Puritan society and how seriously was their punishment for ignominy. Sin knows no gender and straying but a little from the general flock was punished with utmost severity. For female identification, the exterior was still predominant which is evident from Hawthorne's descriptions. What distinguishes Hester from the rest of the women there, on just the first glance, was her appearance and mien. The wooden scaffold which serves to bring out the ignominy and darkness of a person to the eye of the public actually had a completely contrary effect for our heroine. What she displayed on that platform of shame was strength and beauty both of spirit and body and Hawthorne makes that evidently clear for the reader. The bystanders around the scaffold, mostly women, were gloomy and somber. He describes them as unappealing members of the usually considered prettier sex, the bile of the society taking pleasure in other people's suffering and pain. Their interior is evident in their exterior demeanour.

> "Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding than in their fair descendants"…" The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks, that had ripened in the far-off island, and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England" (Hawthorne 54).

4. Conclusion

One woman alone faces the consequences of an act, primordial and natural to every living being on this planet, yet by her community considered unacceptable. The ones around her are more concerned by the circumstances under which, the 'crime' as they call it, has been committed than the emotions giving it foundation and justification. Hester Prynne's ordeal is the centerpiece around which Hawthorne decided to portray the Puritan patriarchal ideology all the while battling the problematic of ignominy, sin and love. Considering the general literary themes of the time, *The Scarlet Letter* does in fact represent a novelty. Much like the modern feminist views are regarded as radical and revolutionary, so could Hawthorne's ingenuity be deemed more than advanced for his era.

The primary concern of this paper was observing Hawthorne's work through a contemporary feminist perspective, i. e. to prove the hypothesis that he himself was a pioneer feminist according to the today's standards. Its very nature conforms to the key principle of the feminist literary theory which is to analyze the historical and present – day literature with criticism all the while paying attention towards the position of women in the depicted society, their experiences and the attitude of the author towards female characters of his work. Using works of some of today's most recognizable feminist authors such as Judith Butler, Kate Millet, Mary Daly and Marilyn French as reference there was an attempt to confirm the mentioned thesis while proving that the essential aspects of feminism are interwoven in every chapter of the novel on the examples of Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and their daughter Pearl. After examining feminist literature and contemporary feminist thought, one cannot help but notice the sublime symbolism almost every theory could be applied to Hawthorne's characters. Hester indeed embodies virtues and qualities which are considered necessary for the radical transformation of the society from its toxic patriarchal ideology to a new one which would transcend the negative aspects of human nature. Those aspects are proven to thrive in the

fertility of patriarchy with its habitual perpetuation of power and control and disregard for any mindful understanding and compassion. What modern feminists are trying to prove is that by looking inwards, accepting and cherishing the aspects of ourselves which we have been taught to consider less valuable and insignificant, we actually hold the 'power' to make the world a better place. Having been born almost two centuries before such ideas began to revolutionize our consciousness, Hawthorne unknowingly created a novel which depicts a woman of quintessential virtues and qualities to modern day feminists. He confronted the norm of his period by creating a male protagonist who possessed qualities coincidentally considered feminine as well as undesirable. Not only was Dimmesdale's role as a male character subordinated to his female counterpart but Hawthorne led the reader to take a disliking to him by playing with the binary gender roles previously mentioned. Hester incorporates positive traits of both the masculine and the feminine aspect of human personality which makes her an androgynous ideal in radical feminist theory. Even after approaching her character through a psychoanalytic feminist theory, one cannot establish any Freudian negativity deeply rooted in her subconscious psyche. Her altruism and compassion serve to show how even in the worst of circumstances one can remain graceful and loving. Sadly, however, as in reality so in Hawthorne's fictitious universe, people rarely follow positive examples and transform their surroundings as well as themselves for the better.

The paper illustrated various speculations and possible options for some of Hawthorne's characters as well as himself. Even though the justification for the hypothesis that Hawthorne was a feminist has been exemplified with actual evidence through feminist theories and the author's own style, the factual evidence for him being as such remains an enigma. This is in part due to the temporal inconvenience and difference of the inception of feminism and the time Hawthorne wrote the novel. The paper only scratches the surface of the possible analysis through theoretical margins of feminism, but in its basic framework it certainly sheds more light

on the clear relation it has with the revolutionary movement of today and the author's awareness that there was something wrong with the way society functioned even during the 17th century. Perhaps, through his narrative, Hawthorne did in fact manage to entice some members of the society to notice the injustice and oppression and actively engage in the process of its correction. Hopefully, that was his ulterior motif all the way.

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