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Feminism in *The Scarlet Letter* and comparing Hester Prynne with  
Margaret Fuller's writings in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*

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## **Poděkování**

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### **Prohlášení**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the issue of Feminism as one of the approaches to Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel is considered feminist not only because of how Hester is portrayed in the book, but also because it was written during the rise of the feminist movement and also because Hawthorne was close to Margaret Fuller who was one of the leading feminists of her day.

Having compared notes from Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and having discussed other approaches to the novel, this paper shows that Hester Prynne, although she does show signs of it, is not as much a feminist rather than a transcendentalist. This judgment is evident when the reader realizes Hester did not change how society views independent women pursuing their goals, but rather trying to live for herself in harmony with God and nature.

keywords: feminism, independence, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne

## ABSTRAKT

Tato práce zkoumá otázku feminizmu jako jednoho z přístupů k postavě Hester Prynne z románu *Šarlatové písmeno* od Nathaniela Hawthorna. Tento román je považován za feministický nejen kvůli tomu, jak je v něm Hester vykreslena, ale také kvůli faktu, že kniha byla napsána v době vzrůstu feministického hnutí a také kvůli tomu, že měl Hawthorne blízko k Margaret Fullerové, která byla jednou z předních feministek své doby.

Na základě srovnání poznámek z knihy Fullerové *Žena v Devatenáctém Století* a diskuze o dalších přístupech k románu tato práce ukazuje, že Hester Prynne, ačkoli vykazuje známky feminizmu, není ani tak moc feministkou jako spíše transcendentalistkou. Toto je zřejmé, když si čtenář uvědomí, že Hester nezměnila pohled společnosti na nezávislé ženy, které usilují o své cíle, ale že se snaží žít sama pro sebe v souladu s Bohem a přírodou.

klíčová slova: feminizmus, nezávislost, Margaret Fullerová, Nathaniel Hawthorne

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Fuller was an extraordinary woman who, among other things, wrote a very successful book that was amongst one of many that contributed to the start of the 19th-century feminist movement in America. A few years after the launch of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) which became the subject of numerous critical reviews. Among them are those that claim the main protagonist Hester Prynne conveys a feminist thought.

Alison Easton who wrote a chapter on “Hawthorne and the question of women” suggested that the upbringing of Hawthorne by women and being surrounded by them affected most of his work. Moreover, the companionship between Hawthorne and Fuller, one of the most important feminist writers of her time, is viewed as a crucial influence on his writings. However, feminism is not the only approach to *The Scarlet Letter* as is depicted in Ross C. Murfin’s *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*.

Upon reading *The Scarlet Letter* myself, it left me with a feeling that the novel was strongly feminist. Nevertheless, other perspectives were brought to my attention, and I learned to know that the issue of feminism was more controversial than I initially thought.

Is Hester Prynne and thus the whole of *The Scarlet Letter* truly feminist or is that merely an association with when the book was first published? The culture of the feminist movement of the nineteenth century and the perspectives from which the novel can be read but also the course of lives of Margaret Fuller and Nathaniel Hawthorne will serve as background to the issue. By comparison of the arguments from Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) with the character of Hester Prynne, I will try to prove that she indeed is a bearer of feminist thought. I will conclude the thesis with a brief discussion of the extent to which the whole of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is feminist.

## 2. Feminism and Margaret Fuller

### 2.1. Nineteenth-century feminism in America

Feminism in general is a movement of women as well as men who aspire to gain equal rights for all genders. Margaret Fuller is considered to have written the first manifesto in the US that was publicly advocating for the rights of women in her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* which will be, together with the author, discussed more profoundly in the upcoming chapters.

But first, a background to this movement must be presented. Apart from Margaret Fuller, there are many other women (as well as men) who are closely connected to the start of feminism. They all dealt with the question of women from the early years of their life. Seeing how marriage, for example, was handled was quite uncomfortable for many women. Rooted in the eighteenth-century law, “[t]he married woman, or *feme covert*, was metaphorically “covered” by her husband in the eyes of the law” (Parker, 342). Women had no right to vote or politically engage whatsoever, and they were only viewed as subordinates to men and God. Some women, mainly the ones from the middle class whose husbands earned enough money for the whole family, accepted the so-called separate spheres (that women and men were created for different things) and were content to be stay-at-home mothers and wives. Nevertheless, less rich or slave women “could not follow the ideology of separate spheres[, t]hey worked in poor conditions as forced or low-wage laborers in other women’s homes, on farms, and in textile mills and other factories” (Parker, 342). For many, the advocacy for women’s rights was associated with abolitionism. In 1837, the National Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was held in New York where many black and white women voiced their wish to be involved in the public and political movement to end slavery. Among those women were, for instance, the Grimké sisters. The older sister, Sarah Moore Grimké,

wrote *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Women* (1837–1838) in which she rejected the idea that women are suited only to be housewives. Her younger sister, Angelina Grimké, saw no difference in the rights of men and women’s rights (they are all just human rights) and elaborated on this topic in her *Letters to Catharine Beecher* (1838). Both sisters were condemned for sharing such morals. From this moment on, not only the Grimké sisters but other abolitionists joined to defend the women’s right to also have a say in social and political reform movements.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, two other women who were concerned with the issue of women and slaves, wanted to take part in the World Anti-Slavery Conventions in England in 1840. To their dissatisfaction, nearly all men voted against women engaging in the debates and they were allowed to only observe silently from behind a curtain. The first to express disapproval afterward was William Lloyd Garrison, an abolitionist, and journalist, who insisted women should be included in the process. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, who were equally irritated by this behavior, decided to hold a convention back in the States that was entirely dedicated to women’s rights. The Seneca Falls Convention happened in 1848 and was attended by three hundred people, one hundred of whom signed a “Declaration of Sentiments.” As Alison M. Parker mentions in her review of *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Woman's Rights Movement* by Sally G. McMillen, “[t]he 1848 convention was far from being the first discussion of women’s rights in America” (344). Margaret Fuller serves as an example as since 1839 she led conversations on various topics such as the question of women. However, The Seneca Falls Convention was regarded as the formal start of the feminist movement that also launched The Suffrage Movement. Here another man supporting not only women’s activity but also the end of slavery must be mentioned, and that is Frederick Douglas. He attended the Seneca Falls Convention and was among the many speakers and signers of the Declaration of Sentiments. He did not advocate for the rights of women alone but defended



equality in general. Douglas believed in “suffrage rights for all American adults, regardless of race and sex” (Parker, 344).

After the convention, there was hope that women’s suffrage would become a part of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, unfortunately, the motion was denied. However, many women were given the courage to use their own voices. Sarah Peyton Willis, alias Fanny Fern, took this opportunity to become a famous writer. In her works, she treated the theme of the difficult road for a woman wanting to be a writer in a world of the male literary establishment. One notable book of hers is *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (1855), in which she concentrated on a woman trying to make her way in the literary marketplace. Although it does show signs of autobiography, Willis did not aim to write it according to her experience. On the other hand, Sojourner Truth did not hesitate to write about her own life in an autobiography called *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850). She was said to have “combined two of the most hated elements of humanity. She was black and she was a woman” (Gray, 159-160). Truth proudly proclaimed that she saw it as a source of her dignity and worth. She had a difficult life since, as a slave, she was sold three times, raped by one of her masters, and even had to witness her child being taken away from her. Nonetheless, having experienced such brutality made her unexceptionally strong to publicly advocate for women and the black community.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, in the 1890s, there came a clash between the feminists and abolitionists. Both fought for a better life for their group, but sadly enough they did not seem to be able to combine their demands and try to work mutually towards a better life for all. Fortunately, with time, there was a change in leadership and “progress in moving average Americans toward an acceptance of woman suffrage and equality” (Parker, 348) as well as slight adjustments to marriage laws were made. Finally, women gained the right to vote in 1920.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the advocates for the rights of women were not only women but also men. Already mentioned were William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who emphasized that education is a way to any kind of freedom. Nevertheless, at least one more man must be pointed out when we speak of this era, and that is Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is a controversial topic to many. Even so, plenty of people believe he contributed to the movement through his works and therefore is considered a feminist writer. Such beliefs might even come from the fact that he was greatly influenced by Margaret Fuller.

## 2.2. Brief introduction of Margaret Fuller

Margaret Fuller is known to be an exceptional woman in whom her parents put a lot of hope. Born in May 1810 as the first child of the Fuller family, her father, Timothy Fuller Jr. took it upon himself to raise a sophisticated and intelligent woman, just like his father, Timothy Fuller Sr., tried to raise him. As Timothy Jr. was the fourth child but the first boy, he constantly felt the pressure and lived in fear he could not live up to certain standards. He was taught not to expect to get somewhere without working hard and that is what he wanted to pass on to his daughter. Fuller later revealed that her father lived a childhood marked by a lack of freedom and lack of empathy, so he also became relatively indifferent to emotions. "Rather, his lack of warmth arose because he never quite understood that the heart had offices the head could not perform." (Matteson, 2) Timothy Sr. was praised as an example to all for how he was bringing up his children, and so it might have been from him that Timothy Jr. got the idea of how he wanted to pursue the role of being a parent. He made Fuller study hard, so it was no surprise that before she turned ten, she was fluent in Latin and English grammar and read rather difficult works in both of those languages. She stated that she was unwillingly set into the role of a miraculous child, and she felt that especially after her sister Julia Adelaide, who was two years

younger, died only fourteen months after she was born. Margaret Fuller had merely a vague recollection of that happening as she was only three years old; however, she did carry a feeling of isolation from that time since she believed Julia “would have helped to nourish and develop her heart” (Matteson, 13). After that, her father focused on her even more, and even though she did not hate the fact she was given that kind of attention at the time, when she was an adult, she assessed that she had “no natural childhood” (Matteson, 27) and that “her life was a contest between the ideal and the real, a struggle between a mind forever striving toward more ethereal space and an ailing physical form that continually pulled her back toward confinement and limitation” (Matteson, 206-207).

After the death of her father in 1835, Fuller got an opportunity to undertake a journey she was longing for for a long time. Nevertheless, she decided to stay home to help her mother with raising the siblings as the mother was deeply saddened by her husband’s passing. A year later, in 1836, she met Ralph Waldo Emerson and soon after Bronson Alcott who offered her a job as a teaching assistant. Though tempted, she was not completely happy with this proposal because she did not want to be a subordinate. Instead, she moved to Boston and opened her own school to raise awareness among women of German, French, and Italian literature. This decision was unfortunate for the school did not make the money that she needed to support her family. That is why she eventually took the job Alcott offered her. Fuller changed her stance towards working under a man and she even got praised by him for doing her work excellently and to a standard most women he knew could not. Three years later, in 1839, she published a translation of *Conversations with Goethe* by Johann Peter Eckermann, which is until now her most challenging accomplishment in the literary field. The same year she was determined to start classes of “conversations” for women on various topics that were attended for instance by Elizabeth and Sophia Peabody, or Lydia Maria Child. These conversations initiated a shift in the thinking of not only her listeners but also her own and they are considered the beginning of

Margaret Fuller taking a part in the Transcendentalist movement, which was a movement that, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, emphasized the relationship of God, man, and nature, and condemned the society and its institutions because of the belief they harm the innocence of the individual.

While she kept giving the classes for five years, she also worked for two years as an editor of the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*, for which she wrote the most notable work “The Great Lawsuit: Man *versus* Men, Woman *versus* Women” in 1843. This article is believed to be one of the first manifestos of American feminism, as it contains ideas such as that society is guilty of not providing girls with an opportunity to be more independent. However, the article does not speak entirely only in favor of women. “Fuller intended her argument to be more comprehensive, and she meant her work to foster a greater good for Man and Woman alike, whom she regarded as the two halves of one thought” (Matteson, 208). This essay was then extended into a book treating the same subject called *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that Fuller published in February 1845.

*The Dial* brought Margaret Fuller to the attention of Horace Greeley, the founder, and editor of the *Tribune* in New York, who proposed that she should move there and become a literary editor. She took that opportunity and relocated there permanently in November 1844. She very much enjoyed the new challenges she had yet to face but she was not happy that she had to leave people behind who were a big part of her life, including Anna Ward, the Hawthornes, Caroline Sturgis, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and even her family. But she took it upon herself to make the best out of this opportunity “to help foster a new American literary culture” (Matteson, 279).

In 1846, she fulfilled her biggest dream to sail to Europe. In addition to that, she became the first ever foreign journalist as Horace Greeley wanted her to report on the “political, social and artistic life of Europe” (Matteson, 303). Her journey started in England and Scotland,

continued to France, and ended in Italy. Here, in 1847, she met a man called Giovanni Ossoli, who was almost eleven years younger than her. She was not interested in him at first but shortly after, she got a proposal of marriage from him. She rejected it and proceeded to explore Italy more in-depth as she was astonished by how relaxed and independent she felt there. At that time, there was also a revolution for freedom in Italy. Fuller once again met with Giovanni Ossoli and they started spending a lot of time together, in secret. This secret relationship was soon to be revealed, though, because she found out she was pregnant with his child. Since having a baby out of wedlock was considered a sin and a scandal, they married covertly. In 1850, they decided to return to America. They chose to sail on the *Elizabeth* but to their misfortune, they were hit by a storm and all of them, Giovanni Ossoli, Margaret Fuller, and the son, drowned. Fuller's last words were "I see nothing but death before me – I shall never reach the shore." (Matteson, 422).

In her life, Margaret Fuller wrote not only countless articles in many magazines but also some very influential works. Matteson mentions that Fuller never regarded herself as someone who writes fiction. Even so, in some of her writings, it is noticeable that she had the tendency to sometimes adjust the ugly truth and embellish it as is common in novels. For example, *Summer on the Lakes* (1843) is chiefly non-fictional, and Fuller admits the main character is slightly autobiographical as the book is based on her own travels to the Great Lakes region. On the other hand, Fuller did write a sketch called "Mariana" that was added to the book, in which the tendency for fictionalizing was clear. The story concerns Fuller's former classmate dying while Fuller was in Chicago. Nevertheless, Mariana was "no dead classmate, but rather a living manifestation of Fuller's own personality" (Matteson, 56).

Some other works of hers include *Papers on Literature and Art*, a two-volume collection of critical essays, or *At Home and Abroad. Woman in the Nineteenth Century*,

however, remains to be her most notable work and will be discussed more in-depth in the next chapter.

### 2.3. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as a work of feminism

*Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is a literary essay officially published in 1845. This work is an expansion on the already existing article “The Great Lawsuit: Man *versus* Men. Woman *versus* Women” which was published in the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* in 1843. Nowadays it is considered the first actual public declaration of feminism in America.

The book starts with a preface where we learn under what circumstances the author expanded the essay. The initial essay had received such enormous interest that Bronson Alcott offered Fuller to expand her ideas into a book-like treatment. Fuller also explains the meaning behind the original title, which is that she regarded ‘Man’ as representative of both genders. She did not mean to discriminate against either gender, she merely wanted to emphasize that women deserve the same treatment as men.

At the beginning of the book, she describes how, in accordance with the biblical creation in which man came before woman, men were designed to be placed into a superior position. They sought perfection that they could not live up to and they forgot the meaning of divine love. Fuller then moves on to discuss how men and women live in nineteenth-century America. There is still a tendency that a woman must depend on a man to bring money to support the family and that a woman's role is to merely be a housewife, a mother, and an obedient wife. However, this time is better than any other to voice an argument that women deserve to gain independence. Fuller states women are constantly in the mode of childhood. They were taught to be dependent on their father and later on their husbands. They never got a chance to develop as individuals of the same feelings and states of mind as men possessed. Men were always considered to be at the top and women at a lower place, perhaps because of the biblical creation of man. A man was formed first, and a woman was shaped from his rib

and that is why there was a belief that a woman was created for a man, which is a statement Fuller strongly rejects. She declares all women, just like men, have a soul and intelligence and should be allowed to voice their opinions, to develop their self-improvement, which is one of the concepts of Transcendentalism.

Fuller then begins to consider the question of marriage. In the nineteenth century, the husband was deemed to be the superior one in the relationship. Women did not have much say in anything. In the book, Fuller shared one of her discussions with a man, who was irritated by his wife wanting to abandon the traditional way of marriage after Fuller's speeches even though he thought he knew she was happy with the way they were living: "She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have, every means of improvement, every indulgence" (Fuller, 11). The author skeptically asked if the man had ever asked his wife whether she was truly satisfied to which he replied: "No, but I know she is. She is too amiable to wish what would make me unhappy, and too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex. I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions" (Fuller, 11). Fuller then informed him, that "it is not consent from [him] that is in question, it is assent from [his] wife" (11). The man then asked: "Am not I the head of my house?" (11) to which Fuller replied that he might be the master of the household, but he certainly is not a master of his wife. The perception of men that their wives are slaves who must obey their husbands is also a topic that is much discussed in this work.

Women often lived in fear of what their men were about to do, especially when they got angry. Fuller provides one general example of woman wanting to break up with her husband because she is not satisfied in the marriage and taking their child with her. The husband gets angry and wants to steal the child from the mother because "it seems, the fact that she alone had borne the pangs of [its] birth, and nourished [its] infancy, does not give an equal right to

[her]” (Fuller, 13). The woman is then threatened by the husband and fears him and would do anything to save the child from this poor behavior.

Fuller later develops this theme and the one of marriage by saying that marriage should not be of convenience, but the parties should form a union: “Father and mother should assist one another to learn what is required for this sublime priesthood of nature. But, for this, a religious recognition of equality is required” (36). This idea of equality in marriage is presented in four ways. The first one is the household partnership. The man provides equipment to the apartment, the woman takes care of the household. There might not be divine love; however, the partners respect each other, and neither one is dominant. The next two types of relationships are slightly better than the first one, those being mutual idolatry and intellectual companionship. The former stands on the fact that the partners rely merely on each other, they do not let the world outside their partnership meddle. The latter type is based on a relationship out of friendship where love did not play a big role either. As Margaret Fuller said, “[t]his is one of the best instances of a marriage of friendship[, i]t was only friendship, whose basis was esteem; probably neither party knew love, except by name” (37). The last type of marriage is the highest one of all, and that is the religious union. To reach this stage, all the above, household partnership, mutual idolatry, and intellectual companionship must be practiced in marriage.

Fuller also discusses the fact that there might be differences in men and women based on the idea of masculinity and femininity; however, both genders have the same soul and an element of the opposite gender in them. “There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (Fuller, 62). The differences therefore should not be measured between the two genders but among the individuals, meaning that women should not be excluded in any way.

With that being said, Fuller concludes her work with wishes for girls and women to become strong and self-dependent, find their voices, and stop letting men treat them as



submissives. Men should treat women as equals and let them be who they want to be. As Margaret Fuller stated:

What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home. If fewer talents were given her, yet if allowed the free and full employment of these, so that she may render back to the giver his own with usury, she will not complain; nay, I dare to say she will bless and rejoice in her earthly birth-place, her earthly lot. (16)

This paragraph is a great summary of not only the attempts of Fuller but perhaps the whole feminist movement, with which Nathaniel Hawthorne is also associated.

### 3. *The Scarlet Letter* and Hester Prynne

#### 3.1. A brief look into the author's life

One of the authors believed to have dealt with early feminism was Nathaniel Hawthorne. He was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Salem, Massachusetts as the middle child of a ship's captain Nathaniel Hathorne and a member of a prominent family, Elizabeth Manning Hathorne. As Hawthorne had two sisters, both older and younger, he was not oblivious to the question of women of that time. Moreover, because his father "was off at sea" (Murfin, 3) more than he was at home, Elizabeth Hathorne had to care for the children mostly alone, in a house with her husband's "rigidly Puritanical mother and three equally sharp and stem unmarried sisters" (Murfin, 3) who disapproved of her as she got pregnant before being married. Furthermore, when Hawthorne's father died of yellow fever in 1808, the mother was left to provide for their three children aged around six, four, and two completely on her own which was not easy as they were left with little to no money. She, therefore, decided to move into her family's house to provide better conditions for them all. Even though Hawthorne's mother tried her best when bringing up her kids, there was a lack of men in the household that especially young Hawthorne could look up to. He was left to fend for himself; however, that proved to be beneficial for him not only in his personal but also in his professional life as Richard H. Millington mentions in the *Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*.

"Because Hawthorne lives out the creation of a new style of masculinity – the "self-reliant manhood" that replaces the "bloodline hierarchy" of an aristocratic social model – he is able in his writing to show us the operation of that ideological

system with disturbing clarity. Alienated from this cultural formation, even as he assents to some of its key values, Hawthorne writes into his texts its definitive features: its generational conflicts, its inner manifestations in self-division and emptiness, its projection of its own contradictions onto women and into the emotional life of marriage.”

(4)

As much as Hawthorne was concerned with American masculinity, he was also not oblivious to the situation of women. He grew up in a household full of women of different ages, and generally in a state full of opinionated and strongminded women that deviated from the expectations of having to be married. Being influenced by that, he focused on women protagonists in his earliest writings as well as the later ones, yet the point of view shifted from isolated suffering women, such as in “An Old Woman’s Tale” (1830) and “Alice Doane’s Appeal” (1835), to reevaluating women’s needs, such as in “The Birth-Mark” (1843) or “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844). This shift was mainly caused by Hawthorne’s own marriage with Sophia Peabody, sister of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody who was a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who would later likewise affect Hawthorne’s writings.

Although Hawthorne had written many stories and sketches by the time he got engaged with Sophia and although his fellow college friend, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s review of Hawthorne’s work “help[ed] establish [his] reputation as a promising American writer” (Millington, XV), he still struggled to make money to provide a satisfactory living for him and his soon-to-be wife and future children. Because of that, he took a job as a Measurer of Coal and Salt at the Boston Custom House. In the meantime, he published only a series of love letters and a children’s book. In 1841, he resigned and joined the Brook Farm community in the hope to earn enough money. However, he left the community six months later and in 1842, he

married Sophia and moved to Concord, Massachusetts where they settled at the so-called “Old Manse”. The Old Manse is a historic house near the Concord River that was occupied by prominent writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Sarah Bradford Ripley to name some.

This period was crucial for his writing career. He established friendships with the Transcendentalist group, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Ellery Channing, and most importantly, Margaret Fuller. Larry J. Reynolds claims that one of the characters of *The Blithedale Romance* (a novel describing a utopian farm based on the Brook Farm), Zenobia, employs Fuller’s own infatuation with Emerson and her feminist thoughts. Nevertheless, this work was not the only one that was influenced by this great writer. In between the summers of 1842 and 1844, the friendship between Hawthorne and Fuller deepened and they discussed many topics as they wandered in the moonlight and went for boat rides. Among those topics were, for instance, their passion for nature and that pleasing moment of being lost in the woods. This perhaps sparked the idea for the famous forest scene in the novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), to which Hawthorne wrote a preface including his experience working at both the Boston Custom House and Salem Custom House (where he worked from 1846 to 1849) and stating that he is a descendant of “New England Puritans not unlike those he describes in the first pages of *The Scarlet Letter*“ (Murfin, 9). *The Scarlet Letter*, however controversial this work was, finally brought him much-awaited success. In 1851, he published several works such as *The House of the Seven Gables*, a new edition of *Twice-told Tales*, and *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-told Tales*, including for instance “The Wives of the Dead” or “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”. For the first time in his life, he had enough money to support his wife and three kids, Una, Julian, and Rose, and after publishing *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and *The Life of Franklin Pierce* (1852), a biographical account of a presidential candidate and fellow college friend, he was able to purchase a house where Amos Bronson Alcott, another one of his acquaintances, was a former resident. Nonetheless, the

Hawthornes did not live there long because Franklin Pierce decided to assign him as American Consul in England where they all relocated in July 1853. Seven years later, the family sailed back to America. They settled in Concord, again, and Hawthorne interested himself in the political situation of the Civil War. As he was siding with Franklin Pierce, he fell out of favor with the residents of Concord, and the biography of the president Hawthorne wrote was sternly judged.

At about this time, his health started deteriorating and he could not finish what he was working on. He died in 1864 while he was sleeping. And to this day, he is remembered as one of the most important writers of the American literature of the nineteenth century whose arguably most notable novel *The Scarlet Letter* is still a subject of controversial discussions on feminism.

### 3.2. Ideologies in *The Scarlet Letter*

Before Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, there were two female images that were considered traditional of the time, those are discriminated femaleness and praiseworthy femaleness. Both these images represent women that are completely subordinate to men. Hawthorne came up with a new image that represents a woman who knows self-respect, who has a strong mind, and who is not afraid to speak for herself even though she is constantly brought down by the system and other people. It also shows an image of a woman who provides for herself and her child by herself without the financial help of men. The image also rebels against the belief that women should not give in to their passions and should be obedient to their husbands no matter what, which is also what they should teach their daughters. This new female image contributed to the emerging feminist consciousness.

One to have dealt with feminism in *The Scarlet Letter* was Nina Baym, a literary critic and historian. She had a perspective on the story that not everyone shares. In her journal article

“Revisiting Hawthorne’s Feminism”, she talks about a traditional literary contrast between a dark lady and a fair lady. The dark lady is, according to her, a representation of genuine women, and the fair lady is an invention of society to be a disciplinarian of the real ones. Same with Hester Prynne, she was a dark lady with the natural needs of humankind and society made her into an example of what not to become. Baym also mentions in this article that Hawthorne “linked artistic creativity, including his own, with traits that might be fairly called “feminine” because they were represented by these sympathetic, embattled “real” women as natural expressions of their womanhood” (33). Baym’s perspective largely was that *The Scarlet Letter* is feministic and that the “novel’s feminism was self-evident” (34) because of what the letter “A” meant for Hester instead of what it should have represented. In addition, there was said to be a connection between Hester and Hawthorne’s mother and so Baym did not see the story to be about the Puritan authority but to be focused on the woman in the story.

However, many “self-identified Hawthorne feminists” (37), as Baym called them, did not share her point of view. Some radically claim that Hawthorne is the opposite of a feminist, that he might have felt threatened by women who knew of their needs and who spoke up for themselves, and he tried to silence them. According to Louise Desalvo, who is mentioned in the article by Baym, Hawthorne “portrayed, with superb accuracy, the condition of women in the nineteenth century and psychological processes of men who could not tolerate the notion of female equality” (37) but it was not meant from a feminist perspective. That being said, it is evident that *The Scarlet Letter* is not to be interpreted with respect to only feminism. There are many ideologies in the work itself as well as perspectives from which the reader approaches the plot. Among the other most apparent points of view belong the Puritanic belief and Transcendental ideology.

As was depicted in his biography, Hawthorne was closely connected to the Puritan community through his ancestors. The connection is also evident from the preface of *The*

*Scarlet Letter* called “The Custom-House” in which he emphasizes the links between him and the Puritans and also his experience and history with the story of the novel.

Hawthorne was seen as a skeptical critic of the Puritans. According to Hawthorne, the first generation of the Puritans was hostile to the arts as they would not have approved of Hawthorne being a writer, and the second generation became even stricter in their belief and was even more intolerant of people committing a sin. The second generation is perhaps the one portrayed in the book.

Approaching *The Scarlet Letter* from the Puritanic point of view makes the reader consider the story from the moral side of things. Puritans are said to have viewed religion and law as almost the same. As there is no sympathy in justice, there was no sympathy when someone committed a sin which was most likely to be displayed for everyone to hear just like the courts are open to the public. Hawthorne once said: “It was the policy of our ancestors to search out even the most secret sins, and expose them to shame, without fear or favor, in the broadest light of the noonday sun” (Mills, 84). This he said as a conclusion “[a]fter picturing the various wrong-doers and their punishments in “Endicott and the Red Cross” (Mills, 84) but it can be easily applied to *The Scarlet Letter* as well since Hester was also publicly exhibited for having a baby out of wedlock, which was considered one of the biggest sins.

The concern with sin was a recurrent theme in many of Hawthorne’s works which was what tied him with the Puritans. He appreciated their sternness and even though he likewise believed in universal depravity which is a condition of a person whose mental and physical health worsens or completely breaks down as a result of having committed a sin. Hawthorne embellished it with some sort of compassion for the sinner because as Barrett Wendell, an American academic, indicated, “for Hawthorne Puritanism was no longer a way of life but rather a subject for literary art” (Mills, 79). Hawthorne portrayed sin in a new light. He humanized the sin of Hester which was a sin of passion and “went beyond the Puritans in his

detestation of sins of the intellect above sins of the flesh” (Mills, 102). The sin of Hester was viewed as the least serious violation since she committed merely adultery. Dimmesdale added to adultery the sin of hypocrisy when he, the sinner himself, preached to people not to sin. However, through sin, he became more respected and beloved, and Hawthorne pointed out another effect of sin, that is, educative. Nevertheless, the sin of Roger Chillingworth is perceived as the absolute worst since he “violated in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart” (Mills, 94).

Herbert Schneider states that Hawthorne is “the empirical truth behind the Calvinistic symbols” and that he “recovered what Puritanism professed but seldom practiced—the spirit of piety, humility, and tragedy in the face of the inscrutable ways of God” (Mills, 78). William Crary Brownell associated Hawthorne’s entire oeuvre with themes concerning Puritanism and its influence in America. Finally, Stuart Pratt Sherman saw Nathaniel Hawthorne as “a subtle critic and satirist of Puritanism from the Transcendental point of view” (Mills, 78).

Following up on the last quote, Transcendental ideology is another one that is highly associated with *The Scarlet Letter*. It was a movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that had its roots in ancient times but had been heavily influenced not only by the philosophy of Plato but also by the Romantic movement. Transcendentalism tried to tie everything, from education and literature to economy and politics, within a religious framework, spirituality, and the nature of humanity. God and divinity in general were a huge part of this movement. Numerous church reforms were declared with the rise of this ideology and demands for new conceptions of religion were raised. Theodor Parker, a very controversial Transcendentalist, aimed for both Christian dogma and mythology, and the importance of the spiritual nature of humanity to be recognized.

The central focus of Transcendentalism was, however, on the new consciousness of the mind becoming aware of itself. William Ellery Channing, the leader of the American Unitarian



Association (which was a belief that appeared at the same time as Transcendentalism), came up with a concept of the spiritual quality of the self which was the point of departure for other concepts, such as the concept of self-culture that taught self-knowledge, spirituality, and the development of innate inner resources.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the leading representatives of Transcendentalism, summarized in his essay *Nature* (1836) the principles of the movement and highlighted the importance of the relationship not between God and man only but between God, man, and nature. The work also served to broaden the horizons of how people view nature. It influenced many young people as well as Emerson's contemporaries, namely Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller.

It was perhaps thanks to the friendship of Nathaniel Hawthorne with not only Emerson but also Fuller that he incorporated some of the principles of Transcendentalism into his work. In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is apparent that he addresses the issue of self-growth and self-realization when portraying Hester. Moreover, he puts the forest, nature so to speak, at the center of one scene in which Hester and Dimmesdale find some kind of peace and harmony in their souls and form a kind of unity with each other. However, even though he did handle some of the principles that were crucial for the Transcendentalists, Hawthorne shied away from being one because he was "an artist more than a philosopher, more even than a moralist or an analyst" (Mills, 102).

There might be other approaches that could be used to interpret *The Scarlet Letter*, but I believe Puritanic belief, Transcendental ideology, and Feminism are the most discussed. While the two ideologies described in this chapter are conspicuous, the topic of Feminism remains quite controversial. In the chapter after portraying the character of Hester, which is crucial for the topic, I will attempt to clarify the subject.

### 3.3. The character of Hester Prynne

Hester Prynne was born in England to a once-noble family. Even though she lived in the seventeenth century, Hawthorne prepared a fate for her that many women of the nineteenth century, which is the century the author lived in, must have dealt with. Hester Prynne married an elderly man known as Roger Chillingworth throughout the story. Nonetheless, this marriage lacked love and reciprocal feelings altogether. So, it was no wonder that Hester gave in to passion and temptation when she spent time away from her husband who she believed was shipwrecked at sea on his way to her. For the first time, she experienced that feeling of deep affection she sought even though she knew what she was doing was wrong in the eyes of her society.

When it turned out she conceived a child with someone other than her husband and was punished for it in the form of prison, she accepted the punishment “without resentment and without resigning her authority over herself, even over her own sin” (Bloom, 17). Furthermore, when she was ordered to wear the scarlet letter *A* for adulteress, she made it fancy to show everyone that she might be aware of her sinning, but she would not bow her head down in shame. Here she is presented as rebellious, as someone who “had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness” (Hawthorne, 156).

Hester “exhibits immense strength of character” and is “a stately, robust, and darkly beautiful woman [who] seems to retain some of the grace and poise of the aristocracy from which she is descended” (Bloom, 17). The strength of her character shows the most when confronted with the crowds. The residents of the town treated her like an outcast, almost as if she were a witch. Accusing women of witchcraft was very common in the seventeenth century and it escalated into the Salem Witch Trials which were multiple hearings and prosecutions of those accused. Nevertheless, Hester tried her best to be of benefit to the community. With her talent for embroidery, she put her inner anger into stitching with which she made money for a

decent living for herself and her daughter. Moreover, even though she was not the richest, she still gave money to the less fortunate which showed that she is not selfish and is aware that some people live even in worse conditions than her.

Hester must rely only on herself to guide her through tough times as the residents still show no sign of forgiveness. What is more, since Hester obstinately refuses to ever reveal the name of the father of her daughter because she is determined she can raise a good child without anyone's help, she does not win the people's affection with that either. However, when the governor threatens to take away the daughter due to a lack of discipline and firm hand that caused Pearl to grow into a wild and reckless child, she must give up her pride and ask for help. With this, Hester exhibits signs of her strength having limits. Pearl is everything to her and the thought of losing her almost made her crazy. As Dimmesdale said in his testimony, Pearl is for Hester "the solemn miracle which God hath wrought ... to keep the mother's soul alive, and to preserve her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her" (Hawthorne, 90). Hester also regards little Pearl as a reminder of her sin since she dresses her in red color, the same color as the scarlet letter.

Although Hester is presented as tough and fearless, she is intimidated by one person in the story: her husband. Since he arrived, he awakened a sense of anxiety and uncertainty in her. She feared his reaction to her having a child with someone else. He asked her to never expose his true identity and she had yet another secret she had to keep.

The two secrets, the one being the identity of Chillingworth and another one that Dimmesdale is the father, had different motivations to be kept. While Dimmesdale begs Hester to bring the truth to light, Hester refuses to say it on his behalf. She wants Dimmesdale himself to admit he sinned because, as she naively hopes, it would show that he cares enough about her to go through that humiliation and maybe that it would also be good for him. Chillingworth,

on the other hand, forces her to keep quiet and she agrees as one, she is initially afraid of her husband, and two, she does not want any more commotion regarding herself.

The primary fear, however, does not last forever. Tested by life's various obstacles, Hester decides to confront Chillingworth. She is now hateful towards him for making her not reveal his identity and for being able to torture Dimmesdale because of it. And even though the residents grow to respect Hester, she is tired of pretending and lying and is desperate enough to agree to flee the country with Dimmesdale to live with him in sin, leaving the scarlet letter and the shame behind. When this attempt is sabotaged by Chillingworth, Hester is angry and hopeless that she will ever be able to live happily with the man she loves. She also realizes she never attempted to move out of the town that shamed her because she did not want to lose Dimmesdale. She wanted him by her side no matter how big of a coward he was for not admitting to his sin.

At the end of the novel, when Hester returns to Boston, she “take[s] up her long-forsaken shame” (Hawthorne, 203) but this time it is not to be reminded of her sin. This time, “the scarlet letter was the object of love and interest with some inhabitant of another land” (Hawthorne, 203), meaning Pearl, whom Hester wanted to keep as close to her heart as possible. This time as well people had no need to humiliate Hester and awaken remorse in her.

“And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. Women, more especially ... came to Hester’s cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy!” (Hawthorne, 203-204)

She always responded with words of assurance that the time will come when people find mutual happiness. And with that, it is more than clear that Hester has achieved her goal of redeeming herself.

#### 4. Comparison of Hester Prynne with Margaret Fuller's writing

The basis has been prepared, I will now move on to the actual comparison of the character of Hester Prynne with the notes of Margaret Fuller.

As *The Scarlet Letter* begins with Hester leaving prison and her being treated almost as if she had committed treason, here it is very much seen what Margaret Fuller depicts in her book with regards to the French Revolution. Women tried to stand up for themselves because they realized they are also residents of one town and both women and men should be equal. Instead, women are treated as subjects. Hester, as well, is treated merely as a subject, displayed on the platform in the marketplace for everyone to be aware of the humiliation. She cannot have a say in how her matter should be handled, whether she wants it to be as public as this, or whether she wants it to be handled rather discreetly. The people, and, more importantly, the men in charge, decided that Hester would serve as a deterrent to other women who might even think of doing what Hester did, that is, sinning with a man other than her husband and having a child out of wedlock. No one took into consideration, however, what Margaret Fuller interprets very frequently in her book.

“As to marriage it has been inculcated on women for centuries, that men have not only stronger passions than they, but of a sort that it would be shameful for them to share or even understand. That, therefore, they must “confide in their husbands”, i.e., submit implicitly to their will. That the least appearance of coldness or withdrawal, from whatever cause, in the wife is wicked, because liable to turn her husband's thoughts to illicit indulgence; for a man is so constituted that he must indulge his passions or die!” (81-82)

Hester Prynne was in a marriage of convenience and her husband required a woman explicitly to take care of him and the household without any reservations. He did not look for a marriage where love would play the most important role. Hester then had to “expect and need a happiness that cannot exist on earth” and “[s]he [had to] stifle such aspirations within her secret heart, and fit herself, as well as she [could], for a life of resignations and consolations” (Fuller, 86-87). And even though she had to have some doubts about the marriage, she supposed it was the “woman’s lot not to be perfectly happy in her affections” (Fuller, 83). Hester did what her husband wanted, she even agreed to sail from England to Boston, as the husband requested. However, when she thought she lost him to the sea and would never see him again, she succumbed to the passion that was denied to women but encouraged in men.

Nevertheless, Hester serves as an example that even women have that same passion, and could act upon it, just like men. Chillingworth only saw Hester as a young and beautiful woman who could give him a child because his clocks were ticking, as was very common, and so Hester went and looked for someone who could give her what she sought. Naturally, Chillingworth then saw it as betrayal, and he did not want her to get away with it. After all, she was still his legal wife which to him meant she belonged only to him. He blackmailed her emotionally, he threatened her, he intimidated her, and she was a kind of a slave to him, which corresponds to Fuller’s statement; “it is with women as with the slave” (31). He held power over her and did not mean to stop. He had his heart shut out from God and love “by the foul visitants [he] ha[d] permitted there” and thus was “incapable of pure marriage” (Fuller, 71). He let society’s ideology of marriage get in the way and could not represent the man Hester longed for. Fuller informs that women, especially the younger ones, dream of marrying a man who does not make her feel that her future has been decided by outside influences, such as the

biological clocks ticking, the wish of the parents, or never being able to find somebody else to spend the rest of their lives with. Women demand “nobleness and honor in man” (Fuller, 91).

And so, Hester goes on and finds herself the man who awakens passion and lust in her, the feelings that were missing in her previous relationship.

“Those who call for a more triumphant expression of love, a love that cannot be crucified, show not a perfect sense of what has already been given. Love has already been expressed, that made all things new, that gave the worm its place and ministry as well as the eagle; a love to which it was alike to descend into the depths of hell, or to sit at the right hand of the Father.” (Fuller, 6)

At that moment of committing adultery, Hester was not thinking about her spouse. She put herself and her needs first. She did not think of the consequences, but she felt alive. Or she might have had that inside voice telling her that what she was doing is wrong; however, it was all worth sinning. In that instance, Hester felt like she could start a new life with a new man who could give her the marriage she, as a woman, deserves, which Margaret Fuller named “religious union”. Dimmesdale respected Hester and they must have had a friendly relationship between them. Hester thought she found embodied in him exactly what she needed and let him love her. Yet Dimmesdale then failed with the last aspect of that religious union they could have formed, and that is, that he let someone, the whole town, meddle in the relationship when it became known that Hester was pregnant. He shut down and let her take the blame.

“Though I might be aided and instructed by others, I must depend on myself as the only constant friend” (Fuller, 17). This sentence was spoken by Miranda, a woman who was not



afraid to speak her mind about women, and it is a phrase that follows Hester every step of the way. While being almost harassed into telling the name of the father and Dimmesdale cowardly never speaking up, Hester had only herself to rely on. She never understood why Dimmesdale would not admit to sinning if he loved her so much. He would have to give up popularity with the people and their trust, which he did not want to lose because of a woman, or two since Hester gave birth to a daughter. “Better a thousand women should perish than one man cease to see the light” (Fuller, 29).

As well as Chillingworth, Dimmesdale permitted “foul visitants” into his heart and let the society decide the faith of this, what could have been, a happy family. Unlike Chillingworth, however, Dimmesdale was capable of worship. He praised Hester with words of being strong enough on behalf of both to go through that humiliation alone and that he was not that strong. “For the weak and immature man will, often, admire a superior woman, but he will not be able to abide by a feeling, which is too severe a tax on his habitual existence” (Fuller, 68). Nonetheless, Dimmesdale was not against Hester telling everyone the name of the father. He might have been aware that if Hester said it, she would still be the one at fault. She would be the one who seduced him, and he was too weak to resist, because, as was depicted in the quotation after the first paragraph of the analysis, men have needs and passions they must satisfy and are hardly ever able to resist. On the other hand, he could just be the perfect example of an idea rooted in the times of Adam and Eve. Adam was lost because of a woman and through that woman, he must be redeemed. Equally, Dimmesdale believes he was lost after Hester appeared and turned his life upside down, so he must be redeemed through her. In the end, it does not work for him well, because the more he “fill[ed] the cup of evil, the deeper [was his] own draught” (Fuller, 71). Dimmesdale and Chillingworth were both ruining Hester’s life, even though the motivations were not the same. They both just watched what Hester would be able to endure and from time to time contributed to her possible collapse. While Hester was still

going strong, for the sake of her daughter and her own, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth's health and strength were significantly deteriorating, which, as they later admitted, was their fault and not that of woman, Hester.

And so, because Hester did not have much help from the man, the father of her daughter, or anyone else for that matter, she had to be the adult. She had to put aside any doubts and fears of not making it.

“What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home. If fewer talents were given her, yet if allowed the free and full employment of these, so that she may render back to the giver his own with usury, she will not complain; nay, I dare to say she will bless and rejoice in her earthly birth-place, her earthly lot.” (Fuller, 16)

Hester acknowledged that she and her daughter need to be further away from the people who did not approve of her, and not always in the center. On the other hand, she did have the need to redeem herself in the eyes of the residents. As she and Pearl moved close to the woods, Hester had the option to grow without having to see the disapproving stares. She regained her lost strength and began to pursue embroidery. She was so talented that everyone put aside their discomfort about Hester having a child out of wedlock and even the richest people of the town let her embroider their clothing. With that, Hester was able to turn a hobby into a livelihood because “woman has always power enough, if she choose to exert it” (Fuller, 30).

Still, there were doubts about Hester as a woman who takes care of the finances and the house as well as her child all on her own. For many, it is difficult to comprehend that a woman could be “capable of being and having more than they are and have” (Fuller, 11-12?) and society is certainly not helping to reach the understanding. Obviously, then, the people in town, and especially the men in charge, contemplate taking Pearl away from her mother because they do not feel Hester is doing a good job raising her daughter. Nonetheless, Hester has shown multiple times that she is able to raise a daughter and that these suggestions are nonsense. If she were with a man, no one would think for a moment that the child should be taken away. Women were taught to depend on men, but they were never taught how to cope with things when a wife outlives her husband. Hester must try to go through the process, and she might fail sometimes. On the other hand, at least she tries, and she never gives up.

“We may suppose the women of the prison stood fairest ... because loneliness and sorrow had brought some of them to feel the need of better life, nearer the truth and good” (Fuller, 79). The truth was Hester sinned. The other truth was that because a woman succumbed to her passion, she must have been punished. A man would almost be praised. Even so, Hester chose to live her life doing good deeds even if people tried to stomp on it in the beginning. She let the words “[h]elp others without blaming their need of thy help” and “[l]ove much and be forgiven” (Fuller, 5) be her guides.

“If you took the true way, your destiny would be accomplished in a purer and more natural order. You would not learn through facts of thought or action, but express through them the certainties of wisdom. ... Be still, seek not, but wait in obedience.” (Fuller, 6)

Hester gave to the poor even though she herself did not have a fortune to give. Moreover, she was always kind to everyone. She was doing this all in the hope to be redeemed one day. And then, after many years, people finally began to regard her as an angel instead of an adulteress. But wisely enough, Hester realized by now that the good was worth seeking only for her own well-being, not for others to accept her for there will always be someone who would not approve. According to Margaret Fuller, society will never let women grow because rules are made, and it is settled “what can and cannot be” (62). Yet she is not oblivious to the fact that nature, were it not for the rules, “enables women to bear immense burdens, cold, and frost; she enables the man, who feels maternal love, to nourish his infant like a mother” (62). Were it not for the rules, people would see that Hester is strong enough to go through life without a man by her side, and quite easily. What is more, Dimmesdale would not allow his relationship with Pearl to be on the basis of mere acquaintance. Contrariwise, he would show her the fatherly love he certainly has for her but chose to hide so as not to lose people’s trust.

Of course, that would be exactly what Hester would need to live a happy life. Margaret Fuller eases off on men when she talks about a man being a father to a daughter:

“There is no sweeter sight than to see a father with his little daughter. Very vulgar men become refined to the eye when leading a little girl by the hand. At that moment the right relation between the sexes seems established, and you feel as if the man would aid in the noblest purpose, if you ask him in behalf of his little daughter.” (64)

Hester might not have needed a man by her side, but her daughter would certainly benefit from having a fatherly figure nearby. Dimmesdale could have served as the male figure;

however, Pearl never felt any support from him publicly when she asked for it. Except for that one time when Hester desperately sought help from Dimmesdale, that is when the men in charge tried to take Pearl away from Hester. She knew that this matter required putting behind her pride and letting someone else fight for her and the justice she deserved, hoping for the best outcome. It was essential Hester formed an alliance with the father and, after all, a man who could be able to save what was dearest to her. Fortunately, Dimmesdale acknowledged that putting Pearl into a foster family or orphanage would not be the right thing to do. Pearl would be torn away from the only family member she has, and Hester would be plunged into evil thoughts if she lost her daughter as “Earth knows no fairer, holier” and deeper “relation than that of a mother” (Fuller, 50). And yet it would be enough if society was not so obstinate and “[gave] the soul free course, let the organization, both of body and mind, be freely developed and the being [would] be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called” (Fuller, 51). Hester would not have to seek passion from someone else other than her husband. Dimmesdale would not have to behave coldly towards Pearl and could be the father she needed. Pearl could grow into a well-behaved and self-sufficient woman instead of being reckless. But because society did not let Hester develop freely, and Dimmesdale neither for that matter, Hester grew cold and I must, once again, use the same quote as I have done two times already. “God and love [were] shut out from [her] heart by the foul visitants [she] ha[d] permitted there” and as Chillingworth failed at marriage and Dimmesdale failed at support, she failed at raising her child properly and was thus “incapable of pure parentage” (Fuller, 71). As a result of keeping a secret from Pearl, Pearl never fully developed the sense of trust that a child should have in a mother. That is why she behaved strangely even to her mother. That is why people strove to not let Pearl live in that kind of environment and the men in charge most likely took that as an opportunity to frighten Hester, because “the fact that she alone had borne the pangs of [her daughter’s] birth, and nourished [her] infancy, does not give an equal right to [her]” (Fuller,

13). The leaders of the town expected Hester to be the strong woman she presented herself as. Nonetheless, even at the slightest sign of failure, they took it as an opportunity to bring her down, almost as to show her she truly will not make it on her own. But as Margaret Fuller writes:

“We cannot expect to see any one sample of completed being, when the mass of men still lie engaged in the sod, or use the freedom of their limbs only with wolfish energy. The tree cannot come to flower till its root be free from cankering worm, and its whole growth open to air and light.” (6)

Obviously, they could have not expected Hester to be a strong and independent woman every hour of every day when they were constantly undermining all her efforts to make it on her own.

## 5. Feminism in *The Scarlet Letter*

Until now I have presented Hester, in line with Margaret Fuller's remarks, as an unequivocal representation of a feminist. However, I must consider other aspects, that are apparent from the flow of the story, that weaken this claim.

When it came to the option of Hester leaving Boston, she influenced the readers to think that she will not give up that easily and she will redeem herself in the eyes of the public for her sin. Although she was fooling even herself at the beginning, she did admit in the end that “her motive for continuing a resident of New England,—was half a truth, and half a self-delusion” (Hawthorne, 64). She never left the place where she was so severely humiliated because Dimmesdale, the one with whom she thought she shared a deep connection, never left. Unconsciously at the beginning, Hester wanted to be close to him even though she could not be directly with him. She loved him enough to stay for him and go through the shame. Naturally, she expected him to do the same. He did not and she began to contemplate whether it was ever love between them or a mere momentary infatuation that took an unexpected turn. Even so, she stayed because she could not imagine her life without Dimmesdale in it. “Woe to such a woman who finds herself linked to such a man in bonds too close. It is the cruelest of errors.” (Fuller, 55)

Hester only agreed to leave the town when Dimmesdale decided to at the very end when he was already destroyed by guilt and wanted to start somewhere new. And because he was not strong enough, he asked Hester to go with him, to start a new and happier life together. His reliance on her has been shown. And Hester, with a vision for a better life, the life she had wanted for so long, forgot about her redemption.

When first reading *The Scarlet Letter*, there is an instant tendency to lean toward the belief that Hester is a true feminist. However, after reading it for the second time, there usually

comes a doubt. Suddenly one is confused as to why they felt so strongly about the story conveying a feminist thought. It might have been because at the beginning the narration of the story and the figure of Hester convince the reader that there will come a change in assessing sins. Hester is portrayed as a woman who knows she sinned but also knows that she should be allowed to have some liberties in her life. Hawthorne makes the reader think that Hester will be advocating for women's financial independence from men, and for the necessity of finding oneself regardless of men and morals. Hester conveys the thought that women should be allowed to follow their passion as it is tolerated in men. She is determined to stay and change the perspective of all the people who punish and look down on her for breaking out of the norm.

However, when the reader reaches the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, no change has come. What is more, Hester admits that she went through all that trouble because she did not want to leave Dimmesdale since she had strong feelings for him.

Additionally, when I was looking for more evidence to provide of whether Hester is indeed a feminist, I stumbled upon a paper by a teacher called Lorraine Cella who gave her students the task of reading *The Scarlet Letter* and choosing one of the four approaches, the ones I have mentioned in this thesis, and commenting on it from that one perspective. Many of the students could not decide, meaning that they were set on one perspective in the beginning but shifted to another one as they were reaching the end.

The Puritan perspective was perfectly summed up by a student called Mariel who wrote:

“Hester Prynne is a disgrace to our town. She is possessed by the Devil. I cannot believe that another Puritan would sin so badly. She gave into temptation and self pleasure and she is only supposed to please the Heavenly Father ... her baby can never be accepted into



God's community. She is the devil child, a product of sin and darkness.

[Hester] is the perfect example of what not to become.” (80)

With this statement, she could convince even those who considered the Puritan view to be only the accompanying theme rather than the crucial one that Hester is completely in the wrong and that is what the story should depict. Similarly, a student called Liz initially approached the book from a Transcendental point of view and then switched to being a very offended Puritan because of “[h]ow hypocritical [it was] that [Dimmesdale] preached to [them] about sin and turning from the devil when he was indeed the biggest sinner among [them]” (80). Both Liz and Mariel then saw the sins as the recurrent theme of *The Scarlet Letter*, and it did not even cross their minds that there could be a feminist thought.

The second most treated topic was the Transcendental approach, and I must say that after reading the book for the second time and delving deeper into the meaning of the book, I now identify with the students' insights. The true nature of Hester allowed her to get what she wanted. She did not let her surroundings dictate how she should be and how she should behave. She was exploring herself through the experience. She gained self-worth that grew gradually after every hurdle she had to overcome. It was already mentioned in the previous chapter that if people were allowed to live according to their own nature, things would not have to be as complicated.

However, the most crucial observation was the one of a student called Matt:

“As a Feminist, I would not condone Hester's actions, but would still be there to support her ... the male should be equally responsible.” (80)

This statement describes an initial reaction of many who first read the book. They get blinded by the fact that Dimmesdale was reluctant to admit he was the father that they do not pay attention to the other fact that Hester could have revealed it herself. Dimmesdale is then usually perceived as a coward for not being honest and leaving Pearl without a father and Hester without public support. Nevertheless, if Hester was a true feminist, she would not keep silent and she would have wanted Dimmesdale to take the blame as both woman and man are involved in the conception, thus are both equally responsible for raising it. Instead of that, she was the only one who took the blame resulting in supporting the prejudice that men need not have to be held responsible for making a baby which is completely anti-feminist.

If Hester was supposed to convey a feminist thought, it was constructed only in a way to evoke an atmosphere of the issue that was going around at the time the book was written. However, after researching the problem further, I came to the conclusion that Hester Prynne is not a feminist.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The thesis examined the issue of feminism in *The Scarlet Letter* and was to show that Hester Prynne is a representation of a feminist based on Margaret Fuller's writings in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

First, a background to feminism in nineteenth-century America was presented, highlighting pivotal moments of the movement, such as the World Anti-Slavery Conventions and The Seneca Falls Convention. Later on, the course of the life of Margaret Fuller and a description of her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* was provided as she and her work are the key figures of feminism. A few of her most important arguments were provided, such as that men were created to be in a superior position and women's position was solely to be obedient wives and to raise good children and not give in to their passions. Marriage in general was also a much-discussed topic in regard to which Fuller rejected marriage of convenience and described that marriage should be an alliance of the woman and the man and they should be equal in all things.

To better grasp the concept of the whole of *The Scarlet Letter* and to better deduce the degree of feminism in the novel, the course of the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne was accentuated as many events of his life suggested he would be influenced by the issue of women and their condition, such as the companionship with Margaret Fuller. What is more, descriptions of ideologies that are associated with the novel, besides feminism, were included, such as the Transcendental ideology, Puritan belief, and Freudian psychoanalysis. Finally, the figure of Hester Prynne was characterized more profoundly to secure a better connection between events in the comparison.

In the comparison, paragraphs from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, that could have been linked with Hester or her behavior, were either quoted or paraphrased and in accordance with them it was analyzed how Hester fits the description of a feminist. Hester left her husband

to follow her needs and passions as Fuller encouraged every woman to do so in her book. She also tried to get along with everyone and wished that others accept her and let her live her life in peace which she would appreciate more than having power over them which was also what Fuller was extensively depicting throughout the whole work.

. In the end, a brief discussion was led on the degree of feminism in the whole of *The Scarlet Letter* based on the findings from the comparison.

The initial intention of the thesis was to prove that Hester Prynne is a feminist. However, I refute my own belief that that is the case. Hester merely raises the issue of feminism, as is obvious from the comparison with Fuller's remarks, but is by no means a representative of a feminist. She did not change society's view of women. Additionally, she shows signs of anti-feminist behavior, such as when she refuses to name the father of her baby, thus contradicting the feminist principle that men need to be held responsible for childbearing as well. She focuses more on her relationship with God and nature. Therefore, the Transcendentalist approach is more apparent than the feminist one.

To conclude, this thesis showed that Hester Prynne is not a feminist and thus the whole of *The Scarlet Letter* is not feminist.

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