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A Reconsideration of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*¹

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Abstract

This paper aims at offering an in-depth analysis of both the 1926 and the 1995 movie adaptations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Caught in a story of love and shame, of sin and salvation, Hester Prynne oscillates between Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, two men too coward to bear the consequences of their actions. Why is Hester's story still fascinating today? Will contemporary readers be willing to read the 1850 novel? Which are the main differences between the 2 movie adaptations? These are only a few of the questions this paper focuses upon.

Key Words: Universal themes, Screen adaptation, Puritan legacy, Witchcraft.

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Introduction

Being forced to work among unimaginative people, the narrator himself becomes incapable of producing any original literary piece of work and is deeply affected by their sterile perspective upon the world. By accident, he stumbles across a piece of worn and faded red cloth in the shape of the letter A. Puzzled and intrigued by the interesting embroidery, he becomes curious about the possible symbolic connotations of the letter and for a moment he “experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat, and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron” (Hawthorne, 2004, p. 50). After losing his job, he feels relief because he has been haunted by the image of the scarlet letter and thought about writing its story.

The novel starts with a preface in which the first person narrator confesses to his readers that although his authentic profession is that of a writer, he is forced by pecuniary circumstances to work as chief executive officer of the Custom-House in Salem, Boston. The preface functions as a pretext for the writer to create the illusion that the story he is going to recount reflects an event belonging to a specific period in history carrying the characteristics of the respective time:

The *Scarlet Letter* opens with an extended, semiautobiographical preface, which serves the book less as an overture than as a bridge linking the past, as portrayed in Hawthorne’s narrative, to the present and to the modern art of referential techniques associated with modern and postmodern fiction (Bloom, 2011, p. 20).

Furthermore, the narrator recounts his experience as a writer who explores his imaginative freedom by producing his stories as romances combining the real and the ideal. Bendixen emphasizes the idea that *The Scarlet Letter* has all the qualifications related to symbolic romance: the setting of the novel is in the distant past; the language of the characters are abstract and artificial; the plot consists of crucial experiences, obsessions, personal investigations, and escape; and a profound dependence upon a kind of symbolism which requires various steps of interpretations (2012). Moreover, besides its amalgam of two romantic forms – the Gothic and the historical novel, *The Scarlet Letter* clearly heralds realism into the American novel.

The novel sheds light upon some historical events. According to Bloom, *The Scarlet Letter* is not completely an account of history, but it assembles a number of details from history (2011). In addition, “these events, however, do not simply exploit history for

background material; rather, they test our understanding of that past history and attempt to resurrect from dry facts a living picture of the past in all its moral complexity” (Bloom, 2011, p. 20). On the same wavelength, Samuels (2012, p. 5) states that it “can be read as a historical novel, presenting episodes from United States history through the lens of the author’s nostalgic retelling of past trauma”. Thus the novel reflects historical facts embroidered with fiction.

Even though it takes place in Puritan Boston between 1642 and 1649 with so many sources from the 17th century, the novel itself as well as its features in terms of historical fiction can still be read as an appealing contemporary piece of literary work:

In *The Scarlet Letter* the violence is internalized and largely self-inflicted, the rebellion is generated by an act of love, not hate. Yet nothing in American literature up to this point provides as bleak a prognosis for happiness in the New World as that which Hawthorne gives us in this anatomy of the human soul. For though *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the historical past, it seems to me to be a profoundly contemporaneous work (Rowe, 1988, p. 27).

Set in Puritan times, the novel depicts the fact that as first dwellers in the New World, those people were confident that they would be able to build a new society according to their own beliefs and dogmas; therefore, it would be a purely religious society, most certainly a theocracy in which church and civil governments were indistinguishable. Hence *The Scarlet Letter* can be read as a utopian novel, because “in America, Puritanism was also a utopian social philosophy” (Person, 2007, p. 18).

On the other hand, since Puritans become the reflection of an excellent representation of local bigotry and inhabited discrepancy between theory and practice, Bloom claims that while the novel is about judgement oscillating between dictated values and moral choices, simultaneously the novel is read as a disapproval of Puritan hypocrisy and dogmatism (2011).

Simple plot is common in Hawthorne’s novels and in *The Scarlet Letter*, the plot is easy to follow because it has minimum events concerning the interplays between the characters in a mainly fixed, stratified difficult situation. Considering these interactions, Hawthorne also “deals with moral crises”. For instance, “Hester Prynne is definitely guilty of adultery, and, while the crime is unfortunate, it is not abominable” (Bloom, 2011, p. 21).

The story of the scarlet letter is in fact Hester Prynne’s story as much as it is Arthur Dimmesdale’s story and Roger Chillingworth’s story. It takes a lot of time for Arthur to be able to assume responsibility for his own actions, therefore he will step on the pillory of infamy arm in arm with Hester and Pearl only after 7 long and tormenting years. Interestingly,

these three characters, rather than their acts throughout the novel, represent Hawthorne himself as he introduces himself in the Custom House, “with Hester representing the disenfranchised, feminized artist Hawthorne imagines himself to be, Dimmesdale the bureaucratic (and finally unmanned) Hawthorne in his Custom House position, and Chillingworth the vindictive (because fired) Surveyor whose vitriolic attacks on his fellow Salemites emanate from a sense of being wronged and humiliated” (Bendixen, 2012, p. 378).

Movie Adaptations of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

Movie adaptation can simply be defined as the transfer of a written work to a movie. However, while this transfer takes place, moviemakers employ their interpretations and thus “these interpretations can augment or detract from the original work” (Van Vugt, 2011, p.1). Moreover, Geiger claims that “many moviegoers see the cinema as no more than an entertaining visual experience, requiring little explanation or thought” (2005: 76). Therefore, moviemakers who are aware of this fact make changes in adapted movies basically in terms of their narrations, characterizations, themes, plots and settings. The adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter* belong to this category; the most notable versions are the ones adapted in 1926, respectively 1995.

The first movie is an American drama film directed and produced by Victor Sjöström in 1926; the main stars are Lillian Gish - Hester Prynne, Lars Hanson - Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, [Henry B. Walthall](#) - Roger Chillingworth. The second movie is also an American film directed and produced by Roland Joffé and Andrew G. Vajna and the main stars are Demi Moore as Hester Prynne; Gary Oldman as Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale; Robert Duvall as Roger Chillingworth.

New Perspectives Up on The Novel’s The Matic Messages

The 1926 black and white movie entirely relies upon visual and auditory images. The few lines at the beginning of the movie emphasize the exceptional character of “a story of bigotry uncurbed and its train of sorrow, shame and tragedy.” In the first scenes in the silent movie the townsfolk are gathering at the church to listen to the young and attractive Reverend

Dimmesdale beloved by all the people in Puritan Boston. While everybody is going to the church to listen to the Sabbath sermon, Hester is in her house in front of her mirror covered with a cloth with the Puritan dictum “vanity is an evil disease.” She uncovers the mirror and checks her reflection proving that temptation and her independence are far more important than any pre-established Puritan moral values.

The director of the 1995 movie assumes a feminist contemporary perspective upon Hester Prynne focusing upon the fact that she sees the Massachusetts Colony as a place of freedom and new hope and at the same time the viewers understand that she has passed through some unfortunate experiences in her past. From the very beginning, Hester proves to be an independent woman refusing the others’ offer to live with them and preferring to live by herself. As in any typical patriarchal society, men assume that women cannot manage by themselves and that their fathers and husbands should protect them and be next to them. To assert her masculinity, she even buys a slave by herself.

There is a very clear difference between the two directors’ perspectives regarding Hester’s marital status and the way Arthur behaves with respect to this situation. In the 1926 movie, Hester does not tell Arthur that she is married until he asks her to go to England with him and to marry him. On hearing this, Arthur is shocked and leaves for England with a petition for the King. In the 1995 movie, Arthur is rapidly informed by the community members that she is a married woman.

The movies do not dwell upon the appearance of Hester’s scarlet letter. The color of the letter A is simply red in the novel and the movies, while in the novel “surrounded with elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy” (Hawthorne, 2004, p. 30); indeed, it is “not a stitch in that embroidered letter but she has felt it in her heart” (Hawthorne, 2004, p. 31). In the movies it has become a simple image without any embellishment or any of its powerful symbolism from the novel.

The Symbolism of The Letter

The letter A requires a diversified interpretation of its meaning. In the novel, most definitely it symbolizes “Adulteress”. According to Person, Hawthorne plays with “A” words – “affair,” “advice,” “angel” (2007). Additionally, as the time passed, Hester gained fame due to her service for the townsfolk and these people “refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a

woman's strength." (Hawthorne, 2004, p.94) Moreover, Hester embellishes the letter, italicizes it and thus the A letter becomes her vivid signifier; she seems as if she is not regretful for her sin. To sum up, the letter A stands for numerous words such as; Angel, Able, Affair, Advice, Adulteress, and according to Hester's current positions, the meaning of the letter changes from one to the other. From my perspective, although the scarlet letter stands for many words, it definitely refers to Arthur Dimmesdale. The reason why Hester embroidered the letter refers to the fact that she wanted to carry the name of her shared sinner on her bosom, indeed, in her heart. Whereas in the 1926 movie, the symbolism of the letter A is still powerful, in the 1995 movie, it seems to have lost much of its expressiveness as well as its punitive and redemptive connotations.

Changes in The Story Outline

Pearl, the little bird-like creature from the novel is physically materialized into a bird in the two movies. In the 1926 movie, Hester has a bird in a cage and this is singing on Lord's day to the Puritans' outrage; when the bird finds its way to freedom Hester follows it into the forest. The same happens in the case of the 1995 movie when Hester is distracted by a little red bird and follows her again into the forest. The little red bird becomes a symbol of her passion and hidden desires therefore it is this bird that facilitates her first meeting with Arthur Dimmesdale. In the 1926 version of the movie, Hester is late for the sermon because of the bird and at first Arthur blames her for having profaned God's day in such a manner. In the 1995 version of the movie, she first meets Arthur in the forest when following the bird. Furthermore, the forest itself is perceived as a place where lovers find it appropriate to meet and unleash their hidden emotions and feelings. In the 1926 movie, it is in the forest that Arthur confesses his love for Hester.

The 1995 movie starts with the Governor and Arthur Dimmesdale visiting the Indians during one of the burial ceremonies. The savages seem to penetrate the Puritans pretenses and lies seeing directly into their hearts. Arthur Dimmesdale, the future sinner and the person to be corrupting Hester is paradoxically perceived by the Indians as "the only one who comes to us with an open heart."

Whereas in the novel the third person narrator stresses primarily Hester's actions and feelings, in the 1995 movie Pearl becomes the narrator recounting her mother's arrival into the New World. If in the novel the story begins in media res, after Hester has already committed the sin and is in the town prison, in the movie the director seems to be more

interested in gradually following all the stages of the initiation and development of the love affair between Hester and Arthur.

What is more, the forest in the novel is a place where Hester arranges a secret meeting with Arthur and offers him a plan to leave the city. The forest “is the scene of putative witches’ Sabbaths; it is the domain of the native inhabitants deemed ‘savages’, and the place in which Chillingworth learned some of his medical secrets” (Bloom, 2011, p.38). In addition, the forest functions as a symbol for a place in which sins may appear unpunished. While both in the novel and in the 1926 movie, Hester throws her letter off and states that “with this symbol I undo the past and make it as if it had never been”, and Pearl takes the letter up and appends it onto the bosom of her mother again, in the 1995 movie this does not happen. Moreover, whereas in both 1995 and 1926 movies, Chillingworth watches them and learns Hester’s secret, in the novel Chillingworth is not existent in this scene; on the contrary, Hester uncovers Chillingworth’s identity and confesses that he is her husband.

Whereas the novel and the 1926 movie finish almost similarly, the 1995 movie finishes differently. In the novel after Arthur delivers his speech and calls Hester and Pearl, he climbs onto the platform and confesses his sin, opens his chest and shows it to the crowd; “the reader is plainly meant at least to entertain the idea that the letter A is there, carved into Dimmesdale’s flesh” (Bloom, 2011, p.42). Then, he dies. The scene is almost the same in the 1926 movie; however, in the 1995 Chillingworth kills a male dweller and scalps him. As a result, the Puritans announce war with the Indians; Chillingworth commits suicide since the war is the consequence of his murder; while Hester is about to be hanged, Arthur rescues her by confessing his sin. After the attack of Algonquian, they leave the city to find happiness somewhere else.

Different Characterization of The Protagonists

Both in the novel and in the two movies, the Puritan community disapproves of Hester’s libertine behavior. In the 1926 movie, Hester is running and playing with her bird on the Sabbath day and in the 1995 movie, she is living alone, she is driving a carriage all by herself and is going to church alone. Under the circumstances, her entire attitude becomes condemnable from a Puritan perspective since it is contrary to their image of a woman’s role in society.

In the novel and the movies, Hester Prynne is “tall, with a figure of perfect elegance” (Hawthorne, 2004: 30) and a strong woman who faces the difficulties of her life. However,

the similarity in the character appearance does not go for the other main characters; for instance, in the novel Pearl “looks so intelligent, yet inexplicable, so perverse, sometimes so malicious, but generally accompanied by a wild flow of spirits, that Hester could not help questioning, at such moments, whether Pearl was a human child” (Person, 2007, p. 75) and in the movies she moves as an ordinary cheerful child. In the book, Chillingworth is “small in stature, with a furrowed visage” (Hawthorne, 2004, p. 34), in addition, his left shoulder is “a trifle higher than the right” (Hawthorne, 2004, p.33). In the movies, Chillingworth does not bear these features; in the 1926 movie, he looks like a kind of ogre with a long hair and beard and a stick in his hand; on the contrary, in the 1995 movie, he has a smart face and an athletic body without any hair and beard. In the novel, after Hester takes the blame for their sin, and in the 1926 movie after Arthur learns that the woman in his heart is married to somebody else, his physical weakness becomes obvious. In contrast, in the 1995 movie Arthur knows that Hester is married from the very beginning; therefore, he does not suffer from his shared sin. Moreover, he has a strong personality; he even fights like a warrior in the final confrontation between the Indians and the Puritans.

As far as Arthur’s moral probity is concerned, he is a man highly respected by the entire community; his sermons are always praised by all the people coming to church. In the 1995 movie, he is speaking of a New Jerusalem built on the power of love, of the unity between the English and the Indians and of the fact that God is daily testing the strength of their faith. He also seems to exert a different kind of fascination upon the feminine representatives of the community since young girls always want to marry him.

Conclusions

The story of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale will be always considered as one of the greatest classic stories of American literature. Moreover, this story including so many historical facts embroidered with fiction will continue to shed light upon the time of the first dwellers in America. Although the novel and the two movies share many changes besides the similarities, they all reflect the main themes such as crime, shame, love, sin and salvation. However, whereas the novel and the 1926 movie succeed to demonstrate Hester’s pain, the 1995 movie falls behind. In today’s world where nobody is innocent, readers and watchers can find many things related to their life, because the themes depicted in the novel and in the movies are universal and will keep maintaining their fascination upon the generations to come.

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