

THE SUBTLE RESIDUAL:  
BAROQUE ECHOES IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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ABSTRACT

The following essay analyzes a significant Baroque substrata underlying *The Scarlet Letter*, taken up, among other things, in relation to the momentous Puritan legacy that is an essential element of Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary work. In particular, the paper focuses on analyzing crucial and minor Baroque *topoi* represented in the novel, such as metamorphosis, relativism and ambivalence of reality, anxiety and the obsession with death. Furthermore, the article investigates the role of sharp chromatism within *The Scarlet Letter*, the use of typical Baroque symbols, such as the ellipse and the maze, and the fundamental role of distinctive Baroque tropes, that is, metaphor and antithesis.

In order to examine the aforementioned Baroque elements, the present essay refers to the theoretical framework drawn up by Raymond Williams in his classic work *Marxism and Literature* (1977). That theoretical model, elaborated by Williams on the basis of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, aims at describing social and cultural practices and phenomena as dynamical interaction between "residual," "dominant" and "emergent" components. While the "dominant" represent the core of the cultural triad, the "residual" and the "emergent" situated on its periphery are likewise essential for a persuasive dynamic description of literary phenomena at any given moment.

The following article interprets the echoes of the Baroque literary tradition in the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne as belonging to the domain of "residual" and hence effectively formed in the past, but still active in the cultural process as an effective element of the present.

**Keywords:** Nathaniel Hawthorne; *The Scarlet Letter*; Baroque; Raymond Williams.

No one, these days, would reasonably rehash the critiques made at the end of the Nineteenth century, which regarded Nathaniel Hawthorne—as Francis Otto Matthiessen observes—as “a dweller in the shadows of history, weaving his art out of the haunted memories of Puritanism, but scarcely conscious of [contemporary] real life” (1941, 192). Undoubtedly, being a re-creator of “a dim past,” Hawthorne succeeds in fulfilling the major obligation of the artist, that is to say to confront actual life and to make his art “an act of possession,” as stated by André Malraux (1949), and not one of mere oblique evasion.

The following article aims at examining extensive Baroque substrata underlying *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, exploited by the author with regard to the

reality of contemporary America. In particular, the essay will focus on analyzing the representation of crucial and minor Baroque topoi, such as metamorphosis, relativism and ambivalence of reality, anxiety and the obsession with death. Furthermore, the paper will examine the role of sharp chromatism within the novel, use of typical Baroque symbols, such as the ellipse and the maze, and the fundamental role of distinctive Baroque tropes, that is to say metaphor and antithesis. This essential element, which both links Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary work to European tradition and at the same time distinguishes him from it, shall be analyzed using the theoretical framework drawn up by Raymond Williams in his classic work *Marxism and Literature* (1977).

Williams develops the notions "residual," "dominant" and "emergent" in order to revise the traditional Marxist notion of "totality" that, regarding social and cultural life, suggests the existence of an unchanging and unchangeable monolith. Williams hence adopts Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" (1970) in place of "totality" to suggest the variable relations of social practices. Therefore, expounding the structure of his theoretical model, Williams states: "We have certainly still to speak of the 'dominant' and the 'effective,' and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we have also to speak, and indeed with further differentiation of each, of the 'residual' and the 'emergent,' which in any real process, and in any moment in the process, are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the 'dominant'" (1977, 121-122). The concepts forged by Williams are extremely useful in literary analysis, since the set might provide a persuasive dynamic description of literary phenomena at any given moment. Thus, Williams calls the element that is displaced by the dominant the "residual" and the one that in turn shall displace the dominant, the "emergent," and emphasizes active interrelations within the triad. Since the following essay interprets the echoes of the Baroque literary tradition in the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne as belonging to the domain of "residual," it is fundamental to clarify the meaning of the term. "The residual," Williams states "by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (122).

In the introduction to *Emergent U. S. Literatures. From Multiculturalism to Cosmopolitanism in the Late Twentieth Century* (2014), Cyrus Patell, theorizing about the concept of “residual,” stresses that the definition given by Williams does not imply that “‘residual cultures’ should be considered ‘minor’ or ‘insignificant.’” “On the contrary,” Patell insists, “they represent the major part of any cultural formation”<sup>1</sup> (2014, 4).

In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” musing on “a touch of Puritanic gloom” that lurks in Hawthorne, Herman Melville compares Hawthorne’s “mystical blackness” to the one “against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits” (1853, 1417). “Shakespeare has been approached. There are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe,” Melville affirms implying Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “literary genius” (1419). Afterwards Melville points out respectfully: “I do not say that Nathaniel of Salem is greater than William of Avon, or as great. But the difference between the two men is by no means immeasurable. Not a very great deal more, and Nathaniel were verily William. This, too, I mean, that if Shakespeare has not been yet equalled, he is sure to be surpassed” (1421). Subsequently, albeit condemning “literary flunkeyism towards England” (1421) and hence trying to emancipate Hawthorne from the heritage of William Shakespeare, Melville’s meditations bridge the Atlantic nonetheless and, by a sort of paralipsis, reinforce Shakespearean echoes which resound in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s literary work offering thus the first cue for the following analysis.<sup>2</sup> Melville likewise asserts that “it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed

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<sup>1</sup> In order to support his argument, Patell cites the excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journal of 1840: “In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of private man. This, the people accept readily enough & even with loud commendation, as long as I call the lecture, Art; or Politics; or Literature; or the Household; but the moment I call it Religion - they are shocked, though it be only the application of the same truth which they receive everywhere else, to a new class of facts” (2014, 4). Patell emphasizes that, in spite of “living in post-Enlightenment, post-Jacksonian market society when the influence of the old republican biblical culture presumably has fallen away,” Emerson, promulgating his doctrine of the “infinitude of the private man,” finds resistance “only when he begins to talk about religion” (4).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in his classic work *The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship*, René Wellek mentions the thesis of Oskar Walzel, who states that “the number of minor characters, the unsymmetrical grouping, the varying emphasis on different acts of a play, are all traits supposed to show that Shakespeare’s technique is the same as that of baroque, i. e. is ‘asymmetrical, atectonic’” (Wellek 1946, 88–89). Wellek as well mentions the article “Barockstil in Shakespeare und Calderòn” by Wilhelm Michels (1929) and the work of Roy Daniels “Baroque Form in English Literature” (1945),

in imitation” (1420) and this statement both epitomizes the phenomenon christened by Harold Bloom “the anxiety of influence” (Bloom 1973)—which analyses how the yearning for originality might be triggered by the frustration over a standard considered unattainable—and alludes to one of the key features of The Baroque Age, that is, renunciation of mimesis typical of classicist ideology (Battistini 2020).

The title of the full-length piece of fiction Hawthorne published in 1851 — *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance* — suggests that the author identifies this work as “a romance” rather than “a novel.” In the well-known passage from the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) Hawthorne sets up the following distinction:

When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. The former — while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart — has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation. (Hawthorne 1851, 569)

As Michael Davitt Bell emphasizes, the “latitude” of the romance is hence a latitude of imagination which in order to preserve “the truth if the human heart” consents the author to “manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen and enrich the shadows, of the picture” (1988, 425).

Subsequently, this image imbued with intense *chiaroscuro* overtones introduces the concept of “the Marvellous,” the crucial notion for the following analysis: “He [the author] will be wise ... to make a very moderate use of privileges here stated and ... to mingle the Marvellous ... as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor” (Hawthorne 1851,

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who emphasize William Shakespeare’s affiliation to the Baroque (Wellek 1946, 80, 84). For more on Baroque elements in Shakespeare’s plays see, also, Barasch 1983 and Russell 1964.

569). The idea of the “marvellous real,”<sup>3</sup> essential for the Baroque’s poetics, therefore emerges in this passage as the key concept of Hawthorne’s literary project termed “a Romance.” It is hence possible to trace the *fil rouge* which links *The Scarlet Letter* to the massive Baroque substrata which represents the residual of Hawthorne’s poetics.

According to the thesis expressed by Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue in *Anatomia del Barocco* (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 31–32), the “concept” of Baroque consists in the surplus of metaphor — a classical trope defined by Aristotle as “putting things before eyes” (*pro ommaton poiein*), since it links the production of meaning to a sensible, pictorial or iconic quality (Aristotle 1926). Metaphor, the cornerstone of Baroque poetics of wonder (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 79), is likewise fundamental for the structure of the romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Save the central metaphor embodied by the scarlet letter itself, the fiction is rich in other striking examples of this trope. Thus, Pearl, “the living hieroglyphic” (Hawthorne 1850, 538), “herself a symbol” (510), is recurrently depicted as a wayward extension of the scarlet letter Hester Prynne is bearing on her chest. This statement is fitly illustrated by the following passage of Chapter VII, “The Governor’s Hall:”

There was fire in her and throughout her: she seemed the unpremeditated offshoot of a passionate moment. Her mother, in contriving the child’s garb, had allowed the gorgeous tendencies of her imagination their full play, arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered in fantasies and flourishes of gold thread ... But it was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and indeed, of the child’s whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form: the scarlet letter endowed with life! (481)

The description of Pearl’s sumptuous attire, which alludes explicitly to the Baroque taste for artificiality typical of “conceptism” (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 45–48), is indeed reminiscent of the portrayal of the scarlet letter when it first appears in the novel.

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<sup>3</sup>The concept of the “marvelous real” mentioned in the following essay as the basis of Baroque poetics should not be mistaken for the conception of *lo real maravilloso* as perceived by Alejo Carpentier, who subsequently appropriates and elaborates aesthetic principles of the Baroque.

Interestingly enough, the child and the token make the scene together in the first “threshold” chapter of the novel since they were born from the same sin:

Lastly, in lieu of these shifting scenes, came back the rude market-place of the Puritan settlement, with all the townspeople assembled, and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne — yes, at herself — who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom. (Hawthorne 1850, 458)

Furthermore, in the course of the novel, the embroidered scarlet *A* is not the unique symbol by which the idea of sin is expressed. The other metaphor brought into play by Hawthorne is melded with an obscure image of the black flower. The former is endowed with a broader spectrum of meaning since it alludes to the universal Puritan concept of the total depravity of humankind (Bercovitch 1988). In fact, in Chapter I, “The Prison Door,” the prison is described as “the black flower of civilised society” (452). Subsequently, Roger Chillingworth uses this symbol in like manner while evoking his eagerness for revenge: “By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but since that moment it has all been a dark necessity. Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiend-like, who have snatched a fiend’s office from his hands. It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may!” (521)

Nonetheless, the chasm between two symbols, which represent two different facets of sin, is never bridged in the novel, as if Hawthorne rejected the monolithic Puritan vision of reality that insulates the chosen ones from the backslidden and binds the sinners into a single horde. Indeed, the image of the black flower, which alludes to innate evilness of human nature, is never assigned to the figure of Hester Prynne. Furthermore, the scarlet *A* seared on Hester’s bosom symbolizes the bright passion rather than the inner corruption of the young woman; it marginalizes Hester but at the same time distinguishes her from rather than binds her to the rest of the miscreants.

Another significant instance of metaphor that elicits awe and bewilderment is illustrated in the second chapter of the novel, “The Market Place,” in the passage that parallels the image of Hester Prynne, the adulteress, to the image of the Virgin Mary:<sup>4</sup>

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman’s beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne. (456–457)

Rita K. Gollin and John L. Idol emphasize, indeed, that “the allusion to the pictorial tradition of the Madonna and Child is arresting, thought-provoking, functional” and induces the reader to cogitate on “the implicit comparison and the explicit contrast” (Gollin 1991, 50). Undoubtedly, the former metaphor, albeit constructed on the edge of paralipsis, links the images of the two women, the hallowed and the apocryphal, subverting thus the orthodox Puritan relation between the Type and Antitype (Davis 1970) and creating the sense of ambiguity, which represents one of the pillars of Baroque poetics.

In *Anatomia del Barocco*, Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue affirms that the rise of the Baroque coincides with the crisis of *endoxa* and myths, both religious and chivalrous, which formerly bound together the society and shaped its imagery (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 89). Thus metaphor—which, due to its epistemological nature, represents an essential tool used in order to analyze and to interpret the mercurial and metamorphic aspect of reality—reflects the acute sense of indeterminateness caused by

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<sup>4</sup> As stated in *Prophetic Pictures: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Knowledge and Uses of the Visual Arts*, Nathaniel Hawthorne frequently relates work of art to character in his fiction by referring to types of figures in paintings or statues, and the former association of Hester with the Madonna represents an instance of this tendency (Gollin 1991, 49). Additionally, in her article “Hawthorne and Visual Arts”, Susan S. Williams accentuates how, by associating Hester Prynne with the multidimensionality of the statue, Hawthorne juxtaposes the character to the Puritan legacy, encoded by the four portraits of patriarchs (2018, 171).

the decay of common places that unsettles the epoch. Likewise, the metaphors used by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* frequently allude to the concept of relativism, crucial for the Baroque Age. Being linked to multiple images that cause a kind of a kaleidoscopic effect, the scarlet *A* reveals a myriad of meanings, which disclose the multi-faceted essence of reality. In particular, leaving behind its original role to stigmatize an “Adulteress,” in like manner it may signify an “Antitype,” embodying the principles of typological hermeneutics put to use by Puritans to attain a plain and monolithic interpretation of the world. *A* as well might represent “Artist,”<sup>5</sup> referring both to Hester Prynne and to Nathaniel Hawthorne. The latter statement can be seen in Chapter V, “Hester at Her Needle,” where Hester Prynne is depicted as artist able to discern and to recreate beauty:

She possessed an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. It was the art, then, as now, almost the only one within a woman’s grasp—of needle-work. She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold. (Hawthorne 1850, 470)

Similarly, the strong and direct connection between the token and the narrator is illustrated in the preface to the novel, “The Custom–House,” just as the “rag of scarlet cloth” strongly appeals to the writer at the moment he places it on his chest:

While thus perplexed—and cogitating, among other hypotheses, whether the letter might not have been one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive in order to take the eyes of Indians—I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me—the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word—it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet

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<sup>5</sup> Significantly, as affirmed by Rita K. Gollin and John L. Idol, Hawthorne regularly used artists as central or minor characters in his fiction in order to examine “their minds, hearts, talents, and temperaments” (1991, 54).



almost so, as of burning heat, and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor. (443)

This quotation relates to another passage of the preface, in which the narrator meditates on the fact that his vocation of being a writer would have probably been considered a mere transgression by the Puritan ancestors. In fact, according to stark Puritan logic, fiction, being opposed to the Divine Truth expressed in The Holy Bible, is rather an act of disobedience than an act of imagination:

No success of mine ... would they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful. "What is he?" murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. "A writer of story books! What kind of business in life—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" Such are the compliments bandied between my great grandsires and myself, across the gulf of time! (430)

The figure of the artist therefore, whether interpreted as referring to the author or to the character he created, represents an outcast in this traditional religious community. Being unintelligible to the rest of the flock, the *sui generis* person eventually ends up being considered dangerous.

In fact, Hester Prynne is akin to Nathaniel Hawthorne not only in the artistic streak she is graced with but also in the intellectual freedom they share. The scarlet letter, born from the carnal sin Hester commits, eventually generates another sin, the sin of intellect, connecting thus the protagonist to the narrator, enriching and complicating the network of meanings concealed in the scarlet A. Chapter XIII, "Another view of Hester," sheds light on how the marginalization of the protagonist gives rise to her new heterodox world outlook:

Standing alone in the world—alone, as to any dependence on society... alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position ... she cast away the fragment of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind ... She assumed a freedom of speculation... which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatised by the scarlet letter. In her lonesome cottage ... thoughts visited her such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England; shadowy guests, that would have been as perilous as demons to their entertainer, could they have been seen so much as knocking at her door. (515–516)

This thesis is eventually evoked and reinforced by the passage from Chapter XVIII, “A Flood of Sunshine,” which describes how Hester Prynne, “not merely estranged, but outlawed from society” (534), has habituated herself to a latitude of speculation absolutely unachievable for her interlocutor and her co-prisoner, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. Shrouded by her stigma from the Puritan community who stigmatised her, Hester explores primeval forests of “moral wilderness” (525), unfolds her soul and her mind and approaches the natural state of innocence not yet corrupted by shame:

She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast, as intricate, and shadowy as the untamed forest, amid the gloom of which they were now holding a colloquy that was to decide their fate. Her intellect and heart had their home ... in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions ... The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. (534)

The images and metaphors, however, do not cease to multiply as if reflected in a hall of mirrors, and the scarlet letter Hester is wearing on her breast is in its turn echoed by the stigma Arthur Dimmesdale is bearing. Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale persists in “gripping hard at his breast, as if afflicted with an importunate throb of pain” (498), but the true meaning of this gesture is perceived only by Hester Prynne, Pearl, and Roger Chillingworth, the living beings bound by the same damnation. This mark is never entirely revealed to the reader although the reader is constantly aware of the “scarlet token” on the clergyman’s breast, “right over his heart” (507). In fact, Hawthorne never declares its presence explicitly since he affirms it would be “irreverent to describe that revelation” (564). Additionally, when Roger Chillingworth thrusts aside the clergyman’s vestment in order to bare his bosom, only by capturing the physician’s “look of wonder, joy, and horror” (501) the reader can deduce the nature of his discovery. Likewise, “the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude ... concentrated on the ghastly miracle” (564) confirms this deduction in the penultimate chapter called “The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter.” Hawthorne allows the reader to behold this “token” only through the prism of other characters’ views and by so doing enhances the atmosphere of ambiguity which

shrouds the clergyman. This uncertainty endures even Dimmesdale's confession and the catharsis it might represent: "It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant's" (565). Reality thus evades a unique interpretation and its fluid, phantom essence is accentuated.

Metamorphosis, an essential Baroque *topos*, is likewise fundamental for the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* since multifarious transmogrifications occur to the characters of the novel. At the outset, the first chapter, "The Prison Door," plainly lays the foundation for the potential transformation of Hester Prynne as the author evokes the story of Anne Hutchinson, baptized as one of the "sainted."<sup>6</sup> Anne Hutchinson, at the core of the Antinomian controversy which struck the very heart of the Puritan community of New England (Hall 1990, 263) professed the concept of sanctification which (being in some way opposed to justification based on the principal of unconditional election) emphasised the possibility to gain grace through faith and good works. According to the official doctrine, the promises of justification and sanctification are joined at the hip:<sup>7</sup> they are often mentioned in Scripture side by side, but sanctification, which aims at revealing "grace infused into us, by which we made conformable unto the image of Christ" (Obadiah, 489), can only derive from justification pre-determined by God's providence. Mere sanctification therefore is not sufficient and "there is something of sin remaining in the sanctified person, which is contrary to that grace which is wrought in us by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:17)" (489).

By consecrating Anne Hutchinson's heterodox teachings, Nathaniel Hawthorne overturns the Puritan concept of pre-determination. Moreover, the author emphasises and praises the possibility of transformation that may come from within. The rosebush, which had believably "sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson"

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<sup>6</sup> For penetrating analysis of Anne Hutchinson's trial see, particularly, McGunigal 2016.

<sup>7</sup> The relationship between Sanctification and Justification is set forth in the second part of Chapter 7 entitled "Sanctification Promised as well as Justification" of the work on covenant theology by Obadiah Sedgwick, a noted Puritan preacher and a member of the Westminster Assembly from 1643 to 1649.

is indeed a perfect antithesis to “burdock, pig-weed, apple-pern, and such unsightly vegetation” (Hawthorne 1850, 452) grown in the very core of the Puritan community. Furthermore, the “sweet moral blossom” of the flower plucked from this bush, which the reader is supposed to “carry” (452) through the novel, represents the foretaste of this transfiguration and makes the reader await it eagerly.

“Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace?” (530), Hester demands of Arthur Dimmesdale during their intimate conversation.<sup>8</sup> In truth, the transformation of Hester Prynne’s image in the eyes of the community illustrated in the Chapter XIII, “Another View of Hester,” alludes to the Antinomian creed professed by Anne Hutchinson since it was precisely a good deed to turn “Adulteress” into “Able.” The following chapter, representing the exact midpoint of the novel, symbolises a kind of caesura which divides the story in “before” and “after” and accentuates the fundamental role of the metamorphosis the protagonist and the symbol are going through. The scarlet letter thus changes its original meaning and, ceasing being “token of sin,” becomes the “symbol of ... calling:”

Hester Prynne did not now occupy precisely the same position in which we beheld her during the earlier periods of her ignominy. Years had come and gone ... It was perceived, too, that while Hester never put forward even the humblest title to share in the world’s privileges ... she was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man whenever benefits were to be conferred ... None so self-devoted as Hester when pestilence stalked through the town ... She came, not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble, as if its gloomy twilight were a medium in which she was entitled to hold intercourse with her fellow-creature. There glimmered the embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray. Elsewhere the token of sin, it was the taper of the sick chamber. It had even thrown its gleam, in the sufferer’s hard extremity, across the verge of time. It had shown him where to set his foot, while the light of earth was fast becoming dim, and ere the light of futurity could reach him. In such emergencies Hester’s nature showed itself warm and rich—a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head

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<sup>8</sup> For the Hester Prynne–Ann Hutchinson analogy see Colacurcio 1972.

that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy ... The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her ... that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength. (Hawthorne 1850, 513–514)

The love for fellow beings that Hester Prynne is endowed with, and the self-sacrifice that she is committing, might suggest to the reader that she should be rather called an “Angel” if only severe Puritan lips could pronounce this word while referring to an adulteress.

Furthermore, in the course of the chapter not only the scarlet A is described as subject to a metamorphosis. It took seven years for the symbol to generate the shift of meaning, and in the meanwhile the scarlet letter generated an oppressive strain that induced vital changes in the inner world of a young woman who was constantly wearing it:

The effect of the symbol—or rather, of the position in respect to society that was indicated by it—on the mind of Hester Prynne herself was powerful and peculiar. All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive had she possessed friends or companions to be repelled by it. (515)

The drought caused by the stigma seared on her breast has likewise wilted Hester's regal beauty. While in the Chapter II the protagonist is described as “a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale” graced with “dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam” and a face “which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes” (455), afterwards this portrayal is replaced by a bitter account of Hester's transformation. Even though she did not lose her “state and dignity” the narrator states that:

Even the attractiveness of her person had undergone a similar [tragic] change. It might be partly owing to the studied austerity of her dress, and partly to the lack of demonstration in her manners. It was a sad transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had either been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap,

that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine. It was due in part to all these causes, but still more to something else, that there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statue like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom to make it ever again the pillow of Affection. Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman. (515)

In spite of the grimness this description conveys, Hester's gorgeous hair, albeit concealed, is evoked in the passage and cannot go unnoticed. Being a striking symbol of her sensuality, it comes to light hand in glove with images of "love" and "passion" and remains in the reader's imagination even if for now eclipsed by the image of a blazing A.

However, the sombre transfiguration Hester Prynne undergoes is not irreversible since in the aftermath the narrator sets forth that "she who has once been a woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration" (515). Perpetual metamorphosis of images and essences—the exact spirit of the Baroque Age<sup>9</sup>—is therefore evoked and empathised in the central chapter of the novel as the fundamental axis of the story.

The crucial scene of Chapter XVII, "The Pastor and His Parishioner," which describes the encounter between Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne in the gloomy forest, accentuates the fallout the scarlet letter has caused. In fact, when the clergyman notices Hester he believes her to be "a spectre:" "Throwing his eyes anxiously in the direction of the voice, he indistinctly beheld a form under the trees, clad in garments so sombre, and so little relieved from the gray twilight into which the clouded sky and the heavy foliage had darkened the noontide, that he knew not whether it were a woman or

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<sup>9</sup> Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue underlines that the Baroque's fondness for incessant metamorphosis, as well as for variations on the theme of volatility of essences and of precariousness of appearance, derives from the consciousness of futility of former *endoxa*. Considered against this background, the taste of macabre and the death obsession typical for the epoch—enclosed in phrases like *memento mori* and *vanitas vanitatum*—represent the counterpart of the former phenomenon (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 61). In his article *Dal Cerchio all'Ellisse: dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, Battistini considers metaphor and metamorphosis the cardinal points of the Baroque literary system, since the tropes embody the loss of constant touchpoints and mirror the new fragmentary world outlook characteristic of the epoch (Battistini 2020).

a shadow” (Hawthorne 1850, 529). Nevertheless, a “magic touch” essential for the transformation comes along and a cardinal metamorphosis occurs as Hester takes the scarlet token from her bosom. “The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit” (536). The inner change consequently triggers the miraculous transformation of the image of the body and Hester’s beauty unfurls vigorously. Her gorgeous hair, a symbol of suppressed feminine sensuality, is first to reveal itself as the burden is cast off:

By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair, and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. (536)

The life energy previously condensed in her bosom and drained out by the blazing scarlet letter could now break the deadlock and start running through Hester’s veins, making her cheeks glow with a “crimson blossom.” Undoubtedly, the impact of the wondrous metamorphosis is intensified by its very nature, unstable and fleeting since confined “in the magic circle of this hour.” In consequence, the illustrated transfiguration of the main character, crafted on the edge of the marvellous and evanescent, is clearly a striking instance of Baroque poetics of wonder.

Furthermore, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is likewise subjected to a very peculiar transformation, which follows the “earth-shaking” encounter in the wilderness. First of all, vexed with “indistinctness and duplicity of impression” (Hawthorne 1850, 542), the character is described as wandering in a “maze,”<sup>10</sup> alluding thus to a fundamental Baroque topos. The image of a labyrinth, which embodies the vertiginous anxiety the character is doomed to endure in order to preserve and reaffirm his identity,

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<sup>10</sup> Chapter XX, which describes Arthur Dimmesdale’s transformation, is titled, indeed, “The Minister in a Maze.”

is, indeed, one of the crucial symbols within the novel. “There is no path to guide us out of this dismal maze,” asserts Hester during her conversation with Roger Chillingworth, “there could be no good event for him [Arthur Dimmesdale], or thee, or me, who are here wandering together in this gloomy maze of evil” (520). By this bitter statement made in a fit of temper, Hester succeeds in capturing the essence of the blight they struggle with. Marginalized, either explicitly by a blazing stigma or implicitly by a devouring passion, on the fringe of a society which determines cardinal rules of conduct and world outlook, the main characters stray into an emotional and intellectual wilderness and strive to find the way out. In the end, Hester and Arthur manage to extricate themselves, albeit separately, and thus arduously obtain redemption and peace.

The metamorphosis of Rev. Dimmesdale “indicated no external change, but so sudden and important a change in the spectator of the familiar scene, that the intervening space of a single day had operated on his consciousness like the lapse of years” (543). Thrilled with excitement, the clergyman is affected by “unaccustomed physical energy” as he follows the pathway among the woods and as he draws “near the town, he took an impression of change from the series of familiar objects that presented themselves” (543). This “sense of change” the character is experiencing is “importunately obtrusive” and touches even the very core of his macrocosm, that is to say, the church.<sup>11</sup> The clergyman undergoes the sensation of splitting and his mind vibrates “between two ideas; either that he had seen it only in a dream hitherto, or that he was merely dreaming about it now” (543). This image of daydreaming consequently highlights the illusory essence of the outside world and points up the shift from typological hermeneutics, which aims to establish a direct relationship between material and divine, towards the Baroque’s representation of reality perceived as chaotic and elusive.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “A similar impression struck him most remarkably as he passed under the walls of his own church. The edifice had so very strange, and yet so familiar an aspect” (Hawthorne 1850, 543).

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Wellek points out that, according to Leo Spitzer, the perception of life as a dream, an illusion or a mere spectacle is a fundamental trait of the Baroque world outlook (Wellek 1946, 93).



Furthermore, a new “inner man,” the doppelgänger prone to incite “revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling” (Hawthorne 1850, 544), comes to light after the encounter in the woods. “It was the same town as heretofore, but the same minister returned not from the forest. He might have said to the friends who greeted him—“I am not the man for whom you take me! I left him yonder in the forest” (543). Significantly, an allusion to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* might be illustrated by the later apt quotation. In fact, in the comedy by William Shakespeare the forest represents the locus where fantastic metamorphoses occur to the characters.

On the whole, transformation represents a red thread running through the novel, which links its first lines to its conclusion. In particular, while standing on the threshold of the prison Hester Prynne conveys the image that discloses the essence of her first striking transfiguration. She is portrayed as a kind of pagan Madonna shrouded by the scarlet letter and thereafter her child is depicted as a wild heathen, which belongs to the wilderness. Nevertheless, once “the portent ... has done its office” (565), “Pearl—the elf child—the demon offspring” might be reintegrated into New England social fabric. By becoming “the richest heiress of her day in the New World ... little Pearl at a marriageable period of life might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all” (567).

Moreover, another typical feature of the Baroque, namely sharp chromatism, manifests itself on a large scale within the novel. As scholars researching the role of visual arts in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction emphasize, the usage of such artistic technique as chiaroscuro is intrinsic to Hawthorne’s oeuvre and the writer frequently resorts to it in order to establish atmosphere and to add potent evocative registers to his symbols (Gollin 1991, 53).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, at the outset of the novel, when Hester Prynne first comes to light, she is described as emerging from deep shadows of the jail into sunshine, thus accentuating the further clash of shadows and light, which both

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<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Gollin and Idol accentuate that chiaroscuro is crucial to the very theory of the romance elaborated by Hawthorne, since the writer believed that the right mix of the “sunlight of realism” and the “moonlight of fantasy” would enable him to write a romance “acceptable to readers with growing appetites for realistic novels” (Gollin 1991, 53).

literally and metaphorically unfurl along with her story. Dressed in a humble dark garment, which sets off the embroidered scarlet letter on her bosom, with her white face marked by “impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes” and framed by “dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam” (455), Hester herself represents the personification of converging contrasts emphasised by the chromatic colors she is depicted with. This impression is henceforth intensified in Chapter V, “Hester at Her Needle,” as the author brings up “a terrific legend” created by “the vulgar:” “They averred that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth, tinged in an earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen glowing all alight whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the night-time” (474). In addition, the haunting image of Hester’s thought-burdened face partially illumined by the glow of the scarlet letter in like manner alludes to the bold contrasts of Caravaggio’s intense paintings.<sup>14</sup>

The crucial scenes of the novel are likewise characterized by sharp chiaroscuro that accentuates their dramatic tension. Significantly, F. O. Matthiessen affirms: “the light does not simply remain the dramatic property, but becomes itself a central actor” (Matthiessen 1941, 281).<sup>15</sup> In the key episodes of the novel Nathaniel Hawthorne indeed draws on every possible contrast between light and dark, invariably using colors as a projection of deepest passions of the characters. In fact, the second crucial scene on the scaffold of the pillory, described in the Chapter XII, “The Minister’s Vigil,” represents fanciful interlacement of vivid passions and illusive imagination reinforced by the very interplay of antithetical colors used to paint the picture. First of all, the platform itself is depicted as a spot where antitheses collide, since it is “black ... with ... sunshine of seven long years;” this quite unusual description, doubtlessly, appeals to imagination

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed examination of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s cultural milieu, writer’s aesthetic education and, consequently, knowledge and uses of the visual arts see Gollin and Idol 1991 and Williams 2018. Significantly, Gollin and Idol cite numerous exponents of European Baroque (including Caravaggio) while analyzing the collection of paintings and drawings Hawthorne could view at his leisure at Bowdoin college (Gollin and Idol 1991, 13) and the exhibit of 1836 held at the Boston Athenaeum he frequented (23).

<sup>15</sup> For more extensive analysis of Hawthorne’s manipulation of light and shade see also the following dissertations: Cook 1971, Kaufman Budz 1973, and Dunlavy Valenti 1977.

and foreshadows the further advancement of the plotline. “Walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism, Mr. Dimmesdale” driven almost insane by his guilt ascends the scaffold for self-torture and in the “dark grey of the midnight” he is no more than an “the outline of a human shape” (Hawthorne 1850, 506). “And thus, while standing on the scaffold, in this vain show of expiation, the minister was overcome with a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart” (507). A distorted echo of “good Governor Winthrop’s” (512) words—while the character that represents him is mentioned being on the deathbed—might be heard in this phrase. “For we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us,” *A Model of Christian Charity* states (Winthrop 1630, 1881). Hawthorne’s puzzling tribute to the past is hidden in this midnight darkness, which likewise shrouds the figure of Arthur Dimmesdale when his outcry goes “pealing through the night” (Hawthorne 1850, 507). And once again, the expiation sinks in still waters of ambiguity as his cry is mistaken “either for something frightful in a dream, or for the noise of witches” (507). Only three uncertain lights illuminate the darkness without illuminating the clergyman—a blur of Governor Bellingham’s and his sister lamps and an “illuminated circle” (507) of the Reverend Mr. Wilson’s lantern—whereas Hester approaches through a silent darkness.

Furthermore, as Hester ascends the scaffold, she ceases being a mere spectator of Arthur Dimmesdale’s self-flagellation and turns into a character involved in the play. The transformation of the scaffold into the scene and characters of the novel into actors doubtlessly echoes the famous scene of Hamlet—Act III, Scene II—in which the story of the members of the royal house is performed in front of their eyes. “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women, merely players;” another Shakespearean character states and, significantly, the scene constructed by Hawthorne both alludes to the theatrical representation of reality typical of the Baroque and reflects the Baroque

literary tendency to play on the edge across genres.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, according to Gollin and Idol, the former scene represents an instance of Hawthorne's use of such artistic technique as *tableau vivant* (1991, 54), while already in 1902 George Woodberry observed that *The Scarlet Letter* evolves "in that succession of high-wrought scenes, tableaux, in fact, which was his characteristic method of narrative, picturesque, pictorial, almost to be described as theatrical in spectacle" (Woodberry 1902, 191).

While standing on the scaffold, the minister, Hester and the child are floodlit by a meteor "burning out to waste, in the vacant regions of the atmosphere" (Hawthorne 1850, 510). As "the great vault brightened, like the dome of an immense lamp," it revealed "the familiar scene ... with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light" (504). This passage that describes the effect of the physical phenomenon foreshadows the spiritual revelation of the clergyman, who having undergone the encounter in the woods struggles to recognize familiar objects which surround him: "And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart; and Hester Prynne, with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between those two. They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendor" (504).

A dense network of interconnections thus emphasizes a complex structure of the novel, which being symmetrically designed around the three key scenes on the scaffold of the pillory, progress in a spiral while the author, due as well to skillful use of chromatic elements, adds a little with each thematic repetition.

At last, the author states that, looking upward to the zenith and guided by guilty imagination, Arthur Dimmesdale discerns "an immense letter—the letter A—marked out in lines of dull red light" even though eyes burdened with "another's guilt might have seen another symbol" (511). The sense of uncertainty is subsequently reinforced when in the end of the chapter another spectator of this atmospheric phenomenon

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<sup>16</sup> This scene is cited as an instance of what suggested by Erich Auerbach: the division of literary genres is typical for the Renaissance and dissolves with it, while the Baroque Age is rather known for its fondness of the "border" genres (Auerbach 2003).

interprets it as “a great red letter in the sky—the letter A, which ... stands for Angel” since “good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night” (512). Once again Hawthorne exploits the twofold essence of the symbol and ties together the two extremes of its meaning.

Another crucial scene described in the Chapter XIX, “The Child at the Brookside,” is in like manner crafted by skilled disposition of lights and shadows and the insertion of the image of the “double.” The passage describes Pearl standing still “in a streak of sunshine” on the margin of the brook she lingers to cross and “gazing silently at Hester and the clergyman, who still sat together on the mossy tree-trunk” (538). Quiet water reflects “a perfect image of her little figure, with all the brilliant picturesqueness of her beauty, in its adornment of flowers and wreathed foliage, but more refined and spiritualized than the reality” (538). On the whole, Hawthorne replicates the pattern he uses to settle key scenes while filling in the framework with different contents.

Furthermore, bipolar structure of the scene invokes another fundamental symbol of the Baroque Age, that is to say the ellipse (537).<sup>17</sup> One of its focal points is represented by Pearl adorned by “the mother-forest”<sup>18</sup> and hence the sphere of intellectual and moral wilderness sealed by the scarlet letter “in which she and her mother dwelt together” (539), while the other one corresponds to the possibility to “undo it all, and make it as if it had never been” (536). Ironically, neither of the two alternatives is truly achievable since the reality is mutable and shifts under characters’ feet.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In *Dal Cerchio all’Ellisse: dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, Battistini, relying, *inter alia*, on theses of Calcaterra analyzes how the seventeenth-century ideological fluctuations between carnal and spiritual, senses and intellect, natural and supernatural led to “the breaking of the circle,” which represents the idea of perfection and of a cosmic order, and made the ellipse the real emblem of the Baroque Age (Battistini 2000).

<sup>18</sup> In the article *The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship*, Wellek, analyzing Baroque “in more general terms of a philosophy or a world view or a merely emotional attitude toward the world,” states that according to Eugenio d’Ors “pantheism a belief in the naturalness of the supernatural, the identification of nature and spirit” represent the fundamental trait of the epoch (Wellek 1946, 93).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Bell underlines that Hawthorne does not share “the Romantics’ valuation of ... movement from civilization to nature, or at least their confidence that such a return is possible,” which reveals his “paradoxical” relation to romanticism (1988, 426). On the other hand, Morpurgo-Tagliabue affirms that, although restless and bewildered, Baroque characters often “abandon themselves” to a rather “tempered” catharsis, thus avoiding drastic outcomes (1987, 87).

Be that as it may, the image of the ellipse is likewise one of the essential elements from which the structure of the novel arises. It reemerges in one of the final scenes, in which Hester Prynne tries to attend Arthur Dimmesdale's last sermon. "An irresistible feeling kept Hester near the spot" and "she took up her position close beside the scaffold of the pillory" (557), which indeed represents the center of her being. In fact, "if the minister's voice had not kept her there, there would, nevertheless, have been an inevitable magnetism in that spot" and therefore "during all this time, Hester stood, statue-like, at the foot of the scaffold" (558). "It was in sufficient proximity to bring the whole sermon to her ears, in the shape of an indistinct but varied murmur and flow of the minister's very peculiar voice" (557-558). This voice "breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated" (558). But its sound was "muffled ... by its passage through the church walls" (558). Another focal point of the scene is thus embodied by the figure of the church, which both literally and metaphorically shrouds the minister from Hester's eyes. Split double essence of the episode is therefore revealed and, in a sense, the figure of the ellipse represents a double mirror Nathaniel Hawthorne uses in many instances in order to create ambivalence and strengthen a network of hidden meanings within the novel.

Additionally, diverse minor topoi typical for Baroque literature tradition are likewise present in the novel. First of all, a sort of death obsession as a recurring element in the story is built on three crucial encounters between Hester Prynne and the pastor, all contaminated by nearness of malady and death. In fact, the image of the "good Governor" (512) Winthrop's deathbed weights upon the couple during the first meeting on the scaffold; this image becomes almost tangible when the scarlet *A* caused by the meteor is later interpreted as *Angel*. In a like manner, the encounter in the wilderness is planned by Hester "while attending a sick chamber, whither the Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale had been summoned to make a prayer" (525). Finally, Arthur Dimmesdale himself dies in Hester's arms near the pillory. On the whole, the obsession with death is continually revealed by numerous minor cues that appear in the course of the novel. For instance, the window of Arthur Dimmesdale's chamber opens onto the "the adjacent burial-ground" (499) as if alluding to his fate, and while narrating about Pearl "in the flush and

bloom of early womanhood” the author surprisingly muses on “whether the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave” (567). Finally, the novel ends with the image of Hester’s tomb on the burial-ground beside King’s Chapel.

The descriptions of physical deformity<sup>20</sup> and decay are likewise recurrent in *The Scarlet Letter*. For example, Roger Chillingworth, eloquently called a “leech,” fitted with a “glare of red light out of his eyes, as if the old man’s soul were on fire and kept on smouldering duskily within his breast” is not only “a striking evidence of man’s faculty of transforming himself into a devil” but also an emblem of disfigurement and decay caused “by devoting himself ... to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture” (518). Another disturbing presence, embodied by the “ugly tempered lady, old Mistress Hibbins ... the same who, a few years later, was executed as a witch” (489). Her lamp lights up when the minister utters the cry on the scaffold, and her “ill-omened” face “cast a shadow” (489) over the joy Hester experiences when she is allowed to keep Pearl with her. Furthermore, “Mistress Hibbins” encounters the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale in the moment of spiritual crisis when he returns from the forest: “... old Mistress Hibbins, the reputed witch-lady, is said to have been passing by. She made a very grand appearance, having on a high head-dress, a rich gown of velvet, and a ruff done up with the famous yellow starch” (546). This portrait of lavishly embellished old woman, so typical of the Baroque, reappears in the final part of the novel as a presage of collapse of the hopes Hester is cherishing: “Mistress Hibbins, who, arrayed in great magnificence, with a triple ruff, a brodered stomacher, a gown of rich velvet, and a gold-headed cane, had come forth to see the procession” (556).

In conclusion, it might be stated that numerous echoes of European Baroque, filtered through the peculiar prism of the sixth-generation New Englander’s worldview, constantly reverberate in *The Scarlet Letter*. Furthermore, retracing that “touch of Puritanic gloom” (Melville 1853, 1427) flourishing in the novel and its vivid Baroque

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<sup>20</sup> Andrea Battistini stresses that during the course of the seventeenth century the canons of Petrarch’s poetry regarding the ideal of female beauty are distorted and even subverted, thus giving rise to the *Kitsch* and intentional disfigurement (2000).

equipoise, we can affirm that the bedrock of “Hawthorne’s Baroque” is forged in a manner analogous to its European counterpart, that is, in response to the crisis of patterns and myths, which formerly bound together the society and shaped its imagery (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 79). Indeed, Hawthorne’s fondness for Baroque topoi might be explained by the author’s consciousness of irreversible disruption of former endoxa and, at the same time, by awareness of clout it still exercises. In fact, in the present essay the Baroque substrata of Hawthorne’s literary work is taken up, among other things, in relation to the momentous Puritan legacy the author is struggling with. Additionally, the aforementioned phenomenon is analyzed according to the theoretical framework drawn up by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* and is considered the “residual” element of Hawthorne’s poetics. Being a rather unique revision of European literary tradition, this “residual” component allows the author to examine his contemporaneous milieu by threading its relation to the past and thus plays a fundamental role in the construction of *The Scarlet Letter* and represents one of the axes the novel is built on.

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