A Comparative Analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Scarlet Letter* from a Feminist Social Work Perspective

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abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Scarlet Letter* through the lens of feminist social work. Focusing on the themes of social norms, hypocrisy, and Puritanism, the research reveals how conservative moral systems marginalize women and perpetuate systemic inequality. The analysis juxtaposes Goodman Brown's disillusionment with societal virtue against Hester Prynne's resilience in the face of public ostracism, highlighting the gendered double standards of Puritan society. By applying feminist social work principles—specifically the empowerment approach—the study bridges 19th-century literary critique with modern discussions on oppression and gender justice. Ultimately, it argues that Hawthorne's narratives offer a vital historical framework for understanding the mechanisms of exclusion that feminist social work seeks to dismantle.

Keywords: *The Scarlet Letter*; *Young Goodman Brown*; Puritanism; social hypocrisy; feminist social work

1. INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Scarlet Letter* serve as poignant literary reflections on the complex moral and social dynamics of Puritan society. These works not only critique the rigid structures of Puritanism but also explore the deep-seated psychological and social conflicts engendered by this belief system. Historically, Puritanism emerged as a sect seeking to purify the Church of England, intertwining spiritual reform with broader political and social transformations (Hill 1967, cited in Greaves 1985). However, as the movement faced political suppression under the English monarchy—from the erratic policies of Henry VIII to the persecutions under Mary Tudor—it underwent a process of radicalization. This historical trauma of displacement and marginalization played a crucial role in shaping the Puritan worldview, eventually leading to their migration to the Americas to establish a city upon a hill.

Yet, this quest for religious freedom paradoxically morphed into a mechanism of oppression in the New World. The very group that fled persecution in England constructed a society predicated on strict surveillance, moral absolutism, and intolerance toward the "other." This exclusionary mindset was directed not only at the indigenous populations, whom they sought to assimilate through missionary work (Mills 1948), but more intensely toward women within their own communities. As Barriss Mills notes, the Puritans lived with a haunting sense of ancestral sin, a legacy that manifested in an austere morality often weaponized against women (Mills 1948, 84). In this patriarchal order, women were confined to domestic spheres, and any deviation from assigned roles was met with severe social sanctions, arguably culminating in phenomena like witch trials or profound social ostracization.

It is within this repressive context that Hawthorne's narratives unfold. *The Scarlet Letter* dramatizes the resilience of Hester Prynne, who defies the norms of a society that seeks to label and silence her. Similarly, *Young Goodman Brown* exposes the hypocrisy and moral fragility of a community obsessed with outward appearances of piety. Both works transcend mere historical fiction; they offer a rich ground for analyzing how systemic oppression functions. While literary critics like Cella (2002) and Connolly (1956) have extensively analyzed these texts through feminist and allegorical lenses, there remains a need to bridge these literary critiques with the practical frameworks of social justice.

This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing Hawthorne's works through the specific lens of feminist social work. Unlike traditional literary criticism, feminist social work focuses on the intersection of gender, patriarchy, and power dynamics, aiming not just to understand oppression but to identify pathways for empowerment (Buz 2009, 53). Historically, social work has evolved from the philanthropic traditions and the English Poor Laws of 1601 into a professional discipline dedicated to solving individual and social problems (Danış 2007, 60). By applying the core tenets of this discipline—specifically the "empowerment approach" — to Hawthorne's characters, this paper seeks to demonstrate how Hester Prynne's resistance and Goodman Brown's alienation illustrate the enduring struggle of the individual against patriarchal structures. Thus, the following analysis will explore how these literary classics provide a historical framework for understanding the very issues of gender inequality and social exclusion that modern feminist social work seeks to address.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Analysis of *Young Goodman Brown*

Young Goodman Brown is an allegorical short story written by Nathaniel Hawthorne and was published in 1835 in New England Magazine. The novel distinguishes itself from the others while mentioning the Salem Witch Trials, mainly because its writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, had quite the history in the trials. This reason is also a big reason why this book exists, as Hawthorne accepts every action conducted by the people from his family but cannot love this history, so he mentions some of the wrongdoings during a few of the dialogues during the story of *Young Goodman Brown* as if this bloodline belonged to the character himself. With his strong symbolic writing, Hawthorne also talks about the hypocrisy and false doings during the periods of the trials. Of course, while Hawthorne signs his every work with these kinds of allegories and historical mentions, it is very heavy in the story of *Young Goodman Brown*. In *Young Goodman Brown*, the story follows a man named Goodman Brown leaving his house for an unknown task and traveling into the woods of Salem with a companion that resembles so much of him. During this travel into the unknown, Goodman Brown comes across an evil ceremony that is quite nightmare-like, pushing him to question what he deemed truth and shaking his beliefs. In this study, the text will be divided into four main sections, and the allegorical meanings and cultural references in each section will be examined in detail within the framework of feminist social work theory; in addition, a brief overview of the work's overall structure will be provided.

2.1.1. Leaving Home

The first section begins with the act of leaving home, marked by the hero Goodman Brown's departure from his wife. At sunset, despite his wife's persistent efforts to persuade him to stay, Goodman Brown leaves his home and sets out on a journey driven by an unknown mission and purpose. The only force propelling him forward is his belief that he will return to his wife for a warm embrace. In this scene, the setting of the sun functions as a portent of the danger that has yet to unfold. "He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind" (Hawthorne 2011b, 10). The home and his wife represent the comfort zone that Goodman Brown is about to leave behind. Yet what truly renders this scene significant is Goodman Brown's wife, Faith. As her name suggests, she symbolizes the extent to which Goodman Brown values his faith, or the principles he perceives as morally right. "My love and my Faith," replied young Goodman Brown, "of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee. My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise. What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married!" (Hawthorne 2011b, 10).

Another interpretation concerns Faith's pink ribbons, which symbolize her innocence, purity, fragility, and childlike wholesomeness. "And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap, while she called to Goodman Brown" (Hawthorne 2011b, 10). Faith is characterized as naïve, innocent, and pure, which stands in contrast to Goodman Brown's actions within the story. Indeed, she is described in the narrative as follows: "Poor little Faith!" thought he, for his heart smote him. "What a wretch am I, to leave her on such an errand! She talks of dreams, too. Methought, as she spoke, there was

trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done to-night. But, no, no! 'twould kill her to think it. Well; she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night, I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven" (Hawthorne 2011b, 10). The pink ribbon associated with the character Faith, when considered in terms of color symbolism, is culturally linked to femininity, delicacy, and naïveté. The author's choice to represent the ribbon with the color pink suggests a view of womanhood as emblematic of innocence and a purity deemed in need of protection. "The young man seized it, and beheld a pink ribbon. "My Faith is gone!" cried he, after one stupefied moment. "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name" (Hawthorne 2011b, 15).

Although the strict pink–blue distinction mentioned in modern feminist critique is a later construct, the symbolic burden placed on the color pink in this narrative foreshadows such gendered codings. As Uzun (2022, 181) notes, the pink–blue distinction that emerged in the 20th century spread widely under the influence of capitalism — strengthened after the Industrial Revolution — and cultural imperialism. During this period, numerous binary oppositions were constructed by positioning one side as superior and defining the 'other' through this hierarchy, relegating women—associated with pink—to a secondary position. While Hawthorne wrote before this specific capitalist crystallization, the ribbon functions similarly within the text: within the framework of feminist social work theory, this phenomenon is critiqued for reducing colors and genders to narrow stereotypes. Likewise, the fact that the man — Goodman Brown — interprets his own faith, sense of security, and spiritual journey through the presumed innocence of a female character is also subject to feminist criticism. In other words, the character of Faith is not granted any subjective agency as an individual; rather, she becomes a symbolic extension of Goodman Brown's inner journey.

2.1.2. Travelling into the Woods of Salem

In this second part, Young Goodman Brown begins his journey into a deep forest characterized by darkness and dense surroundings, following a path overshadowed by thick trees. The atmosphere unsettles him, prompting him to question his safety as he exclaims, "What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!" (Hawthorne 2011b, 10). At this moment, a new character emerges: the man with the snake staff, who joins Goodman Brown on his path. The introduction of this character is particularly enigmatic. First, he appears immediately after Goodman Brown's fearful utterance. Second, his snake-shaped staff — commonly associated with evil and deceit — further complicates his presence. Third, although described as a man of advanced age, elegantly dressed, his face bears a striking resemblance to Goodman Brown's 'though perhaps more in expression than features' (Hawthorne 2011b, 10). These characteristics collectively suggest that the man with the snake staff symbolizes the devil and embodies forms of evil, while also functioning as a personification of the historical legacy tied to Hawthorne's own ancestry. As they walk together, a revealing dialogue unfolds regarding Goodman Brown's family lineage. Goodman Brown asserts, "My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him'"(Hawthorne 2011b, 11), implying that the forest represents a space inconsistent with Christian virtue and familial morality. Yet the man with the staff contradicts him, claiming familiarity with his ancestors and recalling his involvement in violent Puritan acts: "I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem" (Hawthorne 2011b, 11). His dismissive attitude toward Goodman Brown's supposed purity challenges the protagonist's self-perception. This exchange suggests that Hawthorne may also

have been grappling with the troubling aspects of his own family history, reflected in his decision to alter his surname and distance himself from his ancestors' actions.

Their journey through the dark forest takes an even more intriguing turn when they encounter an elderly woman whom Goodman Brown recognizes. Goody Cloyse appears for the first time at this point in the narrative. The fact that she is seen precisely there and at that moment further startles Goodman Brown, for he has always known her as 'a very pious and exemplary dame.' "...a very pious and exemplary dame, who had taught him his catechism in youth, and was still his moral and spiritual adviser" (Hawthorne 2011b, 12). The brief interval between her initial appearance and her swift acceptance of the devil presents an inherent contradiction. For the text describes her in the following manner: "The devil!" screamed the pious old lady. "Then Goody Cloyse knows her old friend?" observed the traveller" (Hawthorne 2011b, 13). In sum, within the patriarchal order, the transition between the roles assigned to women and the qualities attributed to them is abrupt and lacks consistency or coherence. Being identified as either a woman or a man carries specific meanings within society, and these meanings significantly shape and constrain both genders. Social expectations compel individuals to conform to the gender norms constructed by society, thereby placing them within predetermined frameworks. Consequently, the mental images associated with femininity and masculinity represent reflections of socially produced meanings (Tekin and Demirel Değirmenci 2022, 191). A woman who is regarded as 'pure and exemplary' may, in an instant, find herself confronted with accusations that stand in stark contrast to that characterization. The fact that the first person Goodman Brown encounters from his congregation during the journey is a woman further intensifies his sense of shock. Indeed, the appearance of Goody Cloyse unsettles the traditional patriarchal assumptions that women are inherently pure-hearted. "…after this one night, I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven (Hawthorne 2011b, 10). Ultimately, Goody Cloyse's choice to yield to the influence of the devil symbolizes what Faith—Goodman Brown's wife—might likewise become. Their being depicted side by side during the forest ritual further deepens this symbolism. This is reflected in the narrative as follows: "…these chaste dames and dewy virgins, there were men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame" (Hawthorne 2011b, 16).

Another significant aspect of the character Goody Cloyse is the meaning embedded in her name. Hawthorne drew inspiration from the name of a real woman who had been accused and convicted of witchcraft during the Salem Witch Trials. Sarah Cloyce, along with her two sisters, was prosecuted in 1692 under accusations of witchcraft and maintained her innocence throughout the proceedings. Hawthorne's choice of the name Sarah Cloyce thus offers an additional, layered critique of Puritan values. Both of Sarah Cloyce's sisters were likewise tried following these accusations and were executed shortly thereafter. One of the two judges who presided over the trial of Rebecca Nurse, one of Sarah Cloyce's sisters, was John Hathorne (Lewis 2017). This figure was the great-great-great-grandfather of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author of *Young Goodman Brown*. Owing to the profound shame he felt regarding the dark legacy left by his ancestor, Nathaniel Hawthorne altered his surname by adding an additional 'w.'

The Salem Witch Trials reveal how easily women could be accused, targeted, and prosecuted within the structure of a patriarchal order. In 1692, as a result of a long series of grievances involving land disputes and other civil and municipal machinations, and based on the accusations of a group of

young girls and their parents, Salem officials began arresting women of the village on a charge of witchcraft (McDaniel 2009, 20). At that time, widowed women, elderly women, or those who did not conform to societal norms could be marginalized in this manner. This phenomenon demonstrates that society did not merely serve the patriarchy but, in fact, actively constituted it. Another point concerns the symbolic connection between the character Goody Cloyse and Faith. Goody Cloyse is depicted as the figure into whom Faith might transform were she to stray onto a 'dark path.' "… the whole earth one stain of guilt, one mighty bloodspot. …Now are ye undeceived! Evil is the nature of mankind (Hawthorne 2011b, 17-18). This situation reveals that women are subjected to a lifelong moral test, and that failure to meet its expectations results in social judgment. Here, a woman's identity and morality are defined through her loyalty to her husband and her perceived piety. Consequently, the characters Goody Cloyse and Faith exemplify how patriarchal society positions women in opposition to one another, thereby constructing a dichotomy between the good woman and the bad woman.

Feminist Social Work Theory emphasizes that gender inequality shapes individuals' lived experiences and argues that this issue must also be addressed within the field of social work. In this context, the characters Goody Cloyse and Faith in *Young Goodman Brown* illustrate how a patriarchal perspective confines women's identities to narrow stereotypes and seeks to maintain social control by labeling them as either 'good' or 'bad.' Hawthorne introduces Goody Cloyse initially as the patriarchally sanctioned 'ideal Christian woman,' thereby revealing the fragility of this stereotype through the following lines: "Goody Cloyse, that excellent old Christian, stood in the early sunshine, at her own lattice, catechising a little girl, who had brought her a pint of morning's milk. Goodman Brown snatched away the child, as from the grasp of the fiend himself (Hawthorne, 2011b, 18). From a feminist social work perspective, this phenomenon emerges not merely as an issue of individual responsibility or judgment, but as a form of systemic social pressure. The evaluation of women on the basis of their behaviors, beliefs, and relationships diminishes their sense of self, hinders their empowerment processes, and restricts their opportunities for social participation. In terms of social work practice, this dynamic can be interpreted as a means of understanding how patriarchal ideologies become internalized and how individuals are positioned against one another through these ideologies.

The feminist social work approach advocates for a practice grounded in solidarity, awareness, and empowerment as a response to the "cycle of social accusation" in which women like Goody Cloyse and Faith become entrapped. This perspective asserts that women should be evaluated not through moralistic scrutiny or systems of oppression, but through their right to agency and self-determination. According to several feminist theories, the oppression and inequality experienced by women constitute a structural problem within society. From this perspective, the fundamental source of this oppression is male dominance — patriarchy — which permeates all spheres of social and cultural life (Dikici 2016, 530).

2.1.3. The Ritual

In the third section, Goodman Brown pauses to rest and reflects on what might have transpired had he never left his home. Suddenly, he hears indistinct sounds emerging from the depths of the forest. Concealing himself, he listens attentively and attempts to discern their source. What he

witnesses next is deeply unsettling: the presence of the minister and Deacon Gookin. Through their conversation, Goodman Brown realizes that they, too, are on their way to attend a clandestine communion in the forest. This discovery frightens him, yet simultaneously evokes a sense of resolve, prompting his declaration: "With Heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil!" (Hawthorne 2011b, 16). He then looks toward the sky and begins to follow a foreboding black cloud that appears connected to the gathering mentioned. Upon reaching its destination, Goodman Brown witnesses a ritualistic ceremony of a satanic nature, an event that profoundly disrupts his moral worldview and plunges him into spiritual crisis.

What most profoundly unsettles Brown during this ritual is the participation of individuals he has long regarded as virtuous — respected elders of his community, including the minister, Deacon Gookin, church members, and supposedly devout townspeople. As the ceremony proceeds, the satanic figure summons these individuals to embrace evil. A mist descends, accompanied by a mournful, almost sacred melody. In this moment, the satanic figure reveals the hidden moral darkness of those publicly perceived as good; beneath their daytime personas, their sins are laid bare.

The figure proclaims, "Evil is the nature of mankind, and evil must be your only happiness" (Hawthorne 2011b, 21), suggesting that genuine goodness is unattainable and that even suppressed evil remains ineradicable. The ritual appears to provide these ostensibly righteous individuals a space to express the moral corruption they conceal during the day.

Among the assembled participants, Brown sees Faith — his beloved wife, in whom he has placed unquestioning trust — her pink ribbon lost, caught among the branches, symbolically stripped of its innocence. In a final attempt to save her, Goodman Brown cries out to his "sweet Faith," exhorting her to resist evil: "Faith! Faith! Look up to Heaven, and resist the Wicked One!"(Hawthorne 2011b, 21).

In the narrative, Faith does not appear as an autonomous individual but rather as a figure symbolizing innocence and purity in relation to Young Goodman Brown. Here, the female figure functions as a kind of moral touchstone in the man's spiritual journey. Brown's faith is effectively measured through the innocence he attributes to his wife. From a feminist social work perspective, this dynamic strips the woman of subjectivity and reduces her to a symbolic device for the man's moral and spiritual crisis. Faith's own thoughts or agency never extend beyond Brown's perception of her. This, in turn, reflects a patriarchal mode of storytelling in which woman becomes the bearer and determinant of the man's moral universe — if 'the woman is corrupted,' the man is presumed to fall as well. Indeed, through his allegorical style, Hawthorne reveals Young Goodman Brown's inner disintegration in the following passage: "The young man seized it, and beheld a pink ribbon. 'My Faith is gone!' cried he, after one stupefied moment (Hawthorne 2011b, 15).

2.1.4. Goodman Brown's Loss of Faith

In this fourth section, Goodman Brown abruptly awakens from a troubled slumber, the last moment he recalls being his desperate cry to Faith. Uncertain whether the events he witnessed were a dream or a reality, he returns to his home and to his wife, which had been his sole desire throughout the ordeal.

Yet as he encounters the townspeople, he can think only of how they appeared in his dream, and the memory continues to unsettle him. Upon returning to Faith's embrace, the recollection of the forest encounter overwhelms him; seeing the person he trusts most implicated in an unholy ritual destabilizes his moral foundations and convinces him that even the figure closest to him cannot be trusted. Consequently, Young Goodman Brown spends the remainder of his life in pervasive doubt and suspicion, questioning the integrity of every individual around him, including his wife. At his death, when he lapses into what the narrator describes as yet another long slumber, he remains spiritually isolated and profoundly estranged from the world. Young Goodman Brown's faith and trust in his wife are ultimately lost as a result of the dream he experiences. Yet Faith appears in the scene not through her own agency but through Brown's perception. The fact that the female figure is present within a dream constructed by Goodman Brown's consciousness nevertheless leads to her being blamed — an outcome shaped by gendered norms imposed upon women. The accusation and reduction of the female character to narrow stereotypes are further reflected in the following words attributed to Faith herself: "A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts, that she's afeard of herself, sometimes. Pray, tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year!" (Hawthorne 2011b, 10). Here, Faith's characterization of herself as someone to be 'feared' illustrates how the patriarchal moral system renders women culpable even within the realm of their own thoughts or dreams. Her plea, "Tarry with me this night," functions as a cautionary appeal intended to dissuade the man from entering the forest. Should Brown choose to go, both Faith as a woman and faith as a symbolic construct are placed in jeopardy. At this point in the narrative, the woman is not granted the freedom to exercise her own moral or spiritual agency. From a feminist social work perspective, this dynamic results in the erasure of the woman's subjectivity and her continual reconstruction according to the man's interpretive frameworks. Indeed, feminist thought views the family as a private sphere in which women are subjected to control, and it seeks to transform this structure in order to promote women's liberation (Doğancı and Tuncay 2020, 1338).

2.2. Analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*

This section divides the text into three main parts to examine the allegorical meanings and cultural references in detail through the lens of feminist social work theory, following a brief overview of the work's overall structure.

2.2.1. The Weight of Sin and Societal Judgement

The Scarlet Letter, published in 1850 by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is regarded as one of the most significant works in American literature. Within nineteenth-century literature, it is considered an early and striking example of a new narrative mode characterized by psychological depth. The novel is set in the mid-seventeenth century in the Puritan community of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.At the center of the narrative is Hester Prynne, whose husband is believed to have been lost at sea. When Hester emerges from prison carrying her infant daughter, Pearl, a scarlet letter 'A' is visibly embroidered on her chest. The meaning of this letter is disclosed when a man in the crowd explains to an elderly woman that it signifies the crime of adultery.

Hester's husband, a scholar considerably older than she, had sent her ahead to America. The story indicates, however, that he disappeared and failed to arrive in Boston for a long period.

During his absence, Hester engaged in an 'illicit' relationship, from which Pearl was born. Despite intense social pressure, Hester adamantly refuses to reveal the identity of her child's father. As a consequence, she is condemned to wear the large scarlet letter for the remainder of her life, marking both her transgression and her resolute silence.

Hester is brought before the town on the public scaffold to have her punishment formally announced, where she is harshly rebuked by the community's religious and political leaders. Nevertheless, she displays remarkable fortitude in protecting her secret. "I will not speak! ...My child must seek a heavenly Father; she shall never know an earthly one!" (Hawthorne 2011a, 103-104). In this regard, Suzan Last argues that Hester does not conform to an acceptable model of womanhood that reflects the man to whom she might belong; she belongs to no man in her community and thus projects her own meaning. "She is simply Hester Prynne, wearer of the scarlet letter." (Last 1997, 360).

She is compelled to live with her daughter Pearl under the community's scornful gaze and exclusionary attitudes. Hawthorne articulates this social ostracism as follows: "This morning she had endured all that human nature could endure, and her seducers formed a circle, looking intently into her eyes, as if the woman who had once been so gentle was to them a thing of horror and terror, and they looked as if they would cry out against her with their voices..." (Hawthorne 2011a, 55).

The burden Hester carries is not limited to the community's condemnatory judgment; she also lives under the weight of her own internal conflicts and sense of sin. The scarlet 'A' she is condemned to wear is not merely a mark imposed by the Puritan society but becomes a sign that continually resonates within her conscience, rendering her transgression ever visible to herself. "Meanwhile Hester Prynne was standing beside the scaffold of the pillory, with the scarlet letter still burning on her breast!" (Hawthorne 2011a, 372). As Hester raises Pearl, she must fulfill her responsibilities as a mother while simultaneously preserving her dignity amid societal norms and judgmental gazes. This circumstance forces her to confront the weight of her transgression anew each day. "The child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence a great law had been broken; and the result was a being whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder, or with an order peculiar to themselves, amidst which the point of variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be discovered (Hawthorne 2011a, 135). Over time, however, she begins to perceive this emblem not solely as a mark of her sin but also as a symbol of her resilience and independence. In this way, the 'weight of sin' gradually transforms into a source of personal strength, enabling Hester Prynne to cultivate an identity that develops independently of societal judgments and norms. "Such helpfulness was found in her — so much power to do, and power to sympathize — that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Abel; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (Hawthorne 2011a, 242–243).

2.2.2. *Symbolism and Character Significance*

Hester's quiet humility and benevolent conduct gradually temper the community's hostility toward her, leading some townspeople to adopt a more sympathetic attitude. The scarlet A — initially understood solely as a marker of Adultery — comes to be reinterpreted by many as standing for Able. For Hester, however, such reinterpretations do not constitute full absolution; the letter

continues to signify both transgression and endurance. Thus, the emblem functions not only as a symbol of personal sin and shame but also as a reflection of the community's moralizing response to perceived wrongdoing. When Reverend Dimmesdale witnesses a meteor forming the letter A in the night sky, he interprets it as a divine omen foretelling the exposure of his concealed guilt, whereas many townspeople perceive it as an 'Angel' honoring Governor Winthrop. Pearl, described as the living scarlet letter, embodies both the consequence of sin and a persistent moral reminder. Although she brings vitality and joy, she continually compels Hester and Dimmesdale to confront the guilt they attempt to suppress.

The novel's use of character names is likewise symbolically significant. Chillingworth's name connotes coldness and calculated vengeance, while Dimmesdale evokes dimness or concealment, suggesting a respected minister gradually debilitated by hidden guilt and moral conflict. Although Hester Prynne's surname does not etymologically relate to sin, her socially imposed identity — mediated through the scarlet letter — demonstrates how communal judgment reshapes the individual. The letter's vivid color evokes both the burning stigma associated with forbidden desire and the intensity of conscience tested within a rigid moral order.

2.2.3. Societal Hypocrisy and Double Standards

From a feminist social work perspective, Hester's stigmatization by the community demonstrates how the patriarchal system places the burden of 'moral responsibility' almost entirely on women, while men often benefit from broad social absolution. Indeed, Dimmesdale's confession below reveals the extent of this inequality: "Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!" (Hawthorne 2011a, 288). By contrast, society's perception of men is markedly different; the community's attitude in the novel is described as follows: "They deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness" (Hawthorne 2011a, 214).

This situation illustrates that women are controlled through mechanisms of shame, stigmatization, and exclusion, and that no genuine sense of justice exists within the framework of gender equality. "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers— stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss" (Hawthorne 2011a, 300). Moreover, Hester's resilience and defiance highlight the importance of recognizing and empowering women's subjectivities. The significance of this is articulated in the novel through the following lines: "…she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air as if by her own free will" (Hawthorne 2011a, 80).

This, in turn, aligns with feminist social work's commitment to challenging systemic oppression and advancing gender equality. Gender is a fundamental concept for understanding the roles assigned to women and men by society and the power relations embedded within those roles; feminist theory employs this concept to make visible the forms of oppression and inequality that the gendered order imposes on women (İçli 2018, 135).

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF FEMINIST SOCIAL WORK

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This section provides a comprehensive examination of the theoretical approaches that constitute the analytical foundation of the study. It first evaluates how Feminist Theory explains gender relations, the continuity of patriarchal structures, and the multiple forms of oppression experienced by women. Subsequently, Feminist Social Work Theory and Practice are explored, with particular attention to how empowerment, consciousness-raising, and transformation-oriented intervention models developed within the social work discipline contribute to the analytical process of this study. In doing so, the feminist theoretical framework is clarified in terms of the conceptual dimensions it renders visible in the comparative analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* and *Young Goodman Brown*, as well as the interpretive direction it provides for examining both texts.

3.1.1. Feminist Theory

Feminism is a field of thought and struggle that aims for the liberation of women, the elimination of oppression and domination, the recognition of women's rights, and the assurance that women possess equal rights with men in both public and private spheres of action and participation. In other words, it is possible to include within the scope of feminism the demands and political, social, or everyday practices directed toward addressing situations such as the non-recognition of women's legitimate rights, their exposure to discrimination, subordination, oppression, or the restriction of their freedoms. Feminism emerged as an approach that challenges discrimination between women and men and advocates economic, political, socio-cultural, and social equality between the sexes. Moreover, feminism possesses a multidimensional intellectual structure shaped through its interaction with various disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, political science, and ethics. In general terms, the goal of the feminist approach is to establish the rights that will secure women's liberation and to dismantle the structures that maintain the patriarchal order. The areas of concern within feminism range widely from ensuring gender equality in matters such as education and childcare, to access to health services, the right to abortion, developments in women's health, the prevention of violence against women, and the strengthening of efforts against sexual assault and harassment, as well as the recognition of lesbian and sexual orientation rights (Taş 2016, 165).

3.1.2. Feminist Social Work Theory and Practice

Feminist social work theory and practice is an inclusive intervention approach that seeks to transform the subordinate position of women in society and the forms of oppression to which they are subjected by critically analyzing these structural conditions. The fact that the majority of both social work professionals and service users are women positions this approach at the center of the profession by its very nature; for a feminist perspective renders visible the structural inequalities and gender roles underlying individuals' personal difficulties. This approach aims not only to empower women but also to liberate all members of society from gendered assumptions and imposed roles (Payne 2021).

In practice, feminist social work rejects the traditional hierarchy between practitioner and client, instead establishing an egalitarian relationship grounded in the principles of empowerment and partnership. One of the primary tools used in this process, 'consciousness-raising,' enables clients to reinterpret their experiences within a political and social context, allowing them to recognize that the difficulties they encounter do not stem from personal inadequacies but from systemic forms of oppression. Similarly, the use of 'dialogue' functions as an open-ended and developmental communicative process in which both parties acknowledge each other's perspectives and work toward building a shared understanding.

Possessing a theoretically rich background, this approach has undergone an evolution that extends from the struggle for women's legal rights, to critiques of exploitation within the private sphere, and further to contemporary postmodern and intersectional debates. Postmodern feminist critiques and the ethics of care, in particular, challenge rigid binary gender categories such as 'woman' and 'man,' emphasizing the fluidity of identity and the ways in which different forms of oppression (such as class, race, or disability) intersect with one another. In doing so, feminist practice moves beyond treating women's issues as an isolated 'ghetto,' offering instead a broad social justice–oriented project that seeks to reconstruct gender regimes and care relations on a fairer and more inclusive basis for all members of society, including men.

3.2. Comparative Analysis

In this section, the themes of Women's Representation, Patriarchal Domination and Religious Discourse, and Individual Response and Subjectivation will be examined through a feminist social work perspective; these themes will then be comparatively analyzed through *The Scarlet Letter* and *Young Goodman Brown*.

3.2.1. Women's Representation

Nathaniel Hawthorne's works *The Scarlet Letter* and *Young Goodman Brown* reveal two distinct yet interconnected approaches to the position of women in society. From a feminist social work perspective, these differences illuminate how the patriarchal system represents women and how such forms of representation either constrain or enable female subjectivities.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is portrayed as a figure who is judged, condemned, and socially ostracized for violating the community's imposed moral norms. Yet the narrative is not merely an account of social exclusion and stigmatization; it also reflects how, under conditions of patriarchal oppression, women struggle to construct their own subjectivities. Although society attempts to confine Hester within the stereotype of the 'sinful woman,' her resistance and defiance against these accusations mark the beginning of her empowerment process. Indeed, the concept of empowerment — central to feminist social work — aims to enable women and other marginalized groups, historically rendered powerless, to regain agency and control over their lives (Özçatal 2024, 355). Thus, Hester's experiences reveal that patriarchal systems of exclusion can also render visible women's resilience and their efforts to resist.

In contrast, the female character Faith in *Young Goodman Brown* has lost her subjectivity and is constructed primarily as a symbol of the male protagonist Goodman Brown's crisis of faith. Her presence in the narrative functions merely as the symbolic extension of the moral dilemmas

experienced by the male character. From a Feminist Social Work perspective, this representation reflects a patriarchal mode of depiction that frames women through men, reducing moral agency and responsibility to a narrative function centered on the male figure. Gender norms, drawing on presumed biological differences, confine women to domestic roles and motherhood. Deeply entrenched social assumptions regarding women's bodily fragility and the 'naturalness' of motherhood relegate women to a secondary status within hierarchical structures. Such positioning prevents women from emerging as autonomous subjects guided by their own will and desires, reducing their existence to that of a mother and a faithful wife, identities understood primarily in relation to the continuity and moral order of the community (Yeter 2015, 197).

Therefore, when these two works are examined comparatively, *The Scarlet Letter* allows the female character to realize her own existence and develop her subjectivity, whereas *Young Goodman Brown* portrays woman as a passive, symbolic figure subordinated to the male protagonist. This contrast is critically significant from a feminist social work perspective, as it highlights gender-based inequalities and underscores the importance of supporting women's subjectivities.

3.2.2. Patriarchal Domination and Religious Discourse

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne's position within society is shaped directly by the patriarchal religious and moral norms that govern the community. The scarlet letter inscribed upon her body symbolizes not merely an individual transgression, but the broader domination that the social order imposes upon the female gender. Within this context, the female body becomes constructed by religious authorities as the locus of both sin and redemption. From a feminist social work perspective, the stigmatization Hester experiences reveals the extent to which mechanisms of exclusion and othering can entirely envelop female identity. Experiencing stigma over time leads individuals to a deterioration of self-esteem and subsequently to the emergence of feelings of guilt and shame. This emotional process significantly hinders one's ability to develop healthy adjustment within their social environment (Akçay et al. 2020, 17).

In *Young Goodman Brown*, by contrast, religious discourse is inscribed not upon the female body but within the male protagonist's mind. The symbolic role embodied by Faith portrays woman as one who both signifies sin and leads toward it. The idealized female figure that exists in the male character's mind — one who conforms to social norms — allows the woman to exist and appear pure. When such expectations are disrupted, however, a woman's perceived virtue and innocence collapse alongside the dismantling of these internalized schemas. This dynamic exposes the deeply judgmental and exclusionary foundations of patriarchal structures and the gendered roles they impose. Within the narrative, woman becomes the passive object of the man's internal crisis.

From a comparative perspective, both narratives demonstrate how patriarchal religious discourses take shape within society. While *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates the direct control exerted over the female body, *Young Goodman Brown* reveals how, within the male psyche, symbolic expectations regarding women's behaviors and emotional states are constructed — showing how stereotyping and religious paranoia can transform woman into a symbolic threat. Thus, each narrative reflects a different mechanism through which patriarchal structures regulate and define femininity.

3.2.3. Individual Response and Subjectivation

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne's story demonstrates that social exclusion not only produces negative consequences but can also generate certain transformative outcomes. Rather than submitting to the reactions of the community or resigning herself to fate, Hester constructs a new life grounded in her own labor and independence, despite being marginalized and stigmatized by societal norms. Her emergence as a subject reveals, from the perspective of feminist social work theory, the significance of resistance and alternative modes of social existence within women's empowerment processes. The empowerment approach conceptualizes power across individual, social, and political dimensions; it positions itself against all forms of powerlessness and directs critical inquiry toward structures that generate oppression (Erbay 2019, 49). In this context, the social stigmatization and exclusion Hester faces do not merely wound her but instead create an opportunity for heightened subjectivity and the development of resilience in the face of condemnation.

In contrast, the individual response in *Young Goodman Brown* follows a markedly different trajectory. Goodman Brown's confrontation with religious authority leads not to empowerment but to psychological disintegration. The paranoia produced by religious and patriarchal discourses generates distrust, isolation, and despair in his life. The collapse of the mental schemas — roles effectively assigned to him by society — drives the character into profound disappointment. At this point, the fragility of the male subject becomes evident: the moral dilemmas imposed by the patriarchal system push him toward passivity and hopelessness. The female character Faith, meanwhile, functions solely as a symbolic element within this dissolution and is granted no possibility of subjectivation. What emerges here is a narrative that exposes how the female gender is subjected to oppression, expected to internalize prescribed roles, and positioned as incapable of existing independently.

When compared, *The Scarlet Letter* emerges as a narrative of resistance against societal norms, whereas *Young Goodman Brown* reveals the fragility of the male subject through an inner journey shaped by his perceptions of the female gender. In Hawthorne's first narrative, the female subject gains strength through experiences of exclusion and stigmatization, while in the latter, the male subject undergoes disintegration under similar forms of pressure. This contrast exposes the gendered double standards embedded within societal structures and the forms of domination they sustain.

4. CONNECTING CONTEMPORARY REALITIES THROUGH A SOCIAL WORK LENS

As seen in both texts, the stigmatization of women through religious and social norms marginalizes them not only at the individual level but also in terms of their broader social position.Hester's exclusion through the scarlet letter in *The Scarlet Letter* is directly related to the processes of stigmatization and labeling frequently discussed in contemporary feminist social work literature. When women deviate from established norms surrounding sexuality, motherhood, or family structures, they continue to face both implicit and explicit forms of stigmatization — an issue that requires careful consideration within social work practice. The social work profession positions the suffering individuals experience, the difficulties they encounter, and the processes through which they struggle to cope with these challenges as central areas of intervention. While the long-

standing 'problem-focused' approach still maintains its presence, the 'empowerment' perspective — which seeks to provide holistic explanations of human behavior by acknowledging both strengths and limitations and offers new assessment frameworks — has increasingly gained prominence (Arıkan 2011, 42). Although disadvantaged circumstances may negatively affect an individual's life, social workers provide psychosocial support aimed at enabling individuals to overcome such disadvantages by planning and implementing intervention programs at the individual, group, and community levels.

Nevertheless, Hester's resistance and her efforts to reconstruct her life constitute an exemplary illustration of the empowerment approach emphasized in feminist social work. The strategies women develop — such as forming solidarity networks, gaining access to economic and social resources, and preserving their own subjectivity — also lay the foundation for broader social transformation. This principle can be applied across a wide spectrum of social work practices, ranging from individual counseling to community-based empowerment initiatives. In this regard, the solidarity networks, groups, and organizations women establish contribute to the emergence of a collective identity of solidarity. Through this collective identity, it becomes possible for the next generation to grow into a more conscious and more socially responsive cohort, which can in turn be considered an outcome of social transformation. One of the responsibilities of the social work profession and discipline in this process is to engage in macro-level interventions while sustaining their impact down to the individual level through a deductive approach. Regardless of the perspective from which it is examined, all activities carried out by social workers are inherently action-oriented. Practitioners position themselves in a constant state of readiness to act within intervention processes. In other words, they possess a strong internal motivation at both personal and professional levels that enables them to take effective steps in social work practice (Kırlıoğlu 2019, 2267).

On the other hand, the dissolution of the male protagonist in *Young Goodman Brown* in the face of religious discourse illustrates the importance of addressing not only women but also men through a gender-informed lens within feminist social work. While patriarchal structures stigmatize and render women passive, they also produce different forms of destruction for men, such as crises of masculinity, insecurity, and social isolation. Therefore, feminist social work should aim to make visible the ways in which men, too, bear the burdens imposed by the patriarchal order, as well as the forms of damage this produces within social relationships.

Scholars argue that gender equality offers significant benefits for men, extending beyond improved cross-gender relationships to include healthier interactions with male peers. Rigid masculine stereotypes often correlate with adverse health outcomes for men, including higher rates of substance abuse, accidental death, and suicide, driven by societal pressures to exhibit toughness and risk-taking behavior.

Consequently, dismantling these restrictive gender norms is essential not only for individual male well-being but also for community safety, as it reduces violence and fosters an egalitarian environment for future generations. Ultimately, gender equality is not a zero-sum game of power transfer, but a mutually beneficial framework for both sexes (Ruxton and van der Gaag 2013, 171-172).

In conclusion, a reading of these two literary texts from a feminist social work perspective reveals that gender constructs multilayered and often destructive experiences for both women and men.

Therefore, social work should focus not only on alleviating experiences of victimization but also on developing empowerment and awareness strategies — at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels — that can prevent the ongoing reproduction of patriarchal structures.

5. CONCLUSION

American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Scarlet Letter*, when analyzed through the lens of feminist social work, provide a pivotal framework for understanding how the patriarchal system reinforces rigid gender roles and impacts individuals. In particular, these works reveal how societal norms condition human behavior and highlight how marginalization poses a critical problem, especially for women. Simultaneously, the works critically examine how male characters perpetuate and assimilate into these patriarchal systems.

With the character of Hester Prynne, *The Scarlet Letter* dramatizes the double standards and social hypocrisy inherent in being a woman under patriarchy. Hester is ostracized by Puritan society and forced to wear the letter 'A' as a symbol of moral punishment within a system that judges her without mercy. However, amidst this ostracization, Hester undergoes a profound transformation, cultivating a distinct individual identity and defying patriarchal norms. Hester's resistance correlates directly with the empowerment approach, a cornerstone concept of feminist social work.

The empowerment approach is predicated on the strengths and potential of the individual. In this context, social work practices seek to foster development across personal, social, and political dimensions to enable individual transformation. Within this framework, by transcending traditional gender roles, Hester not only redefines her self-worth but also catalyzes opportunities for structural change within society. She vividly demonstrates the potential for women to recognize the social roots of their personal struggles and to challenge these systemic issues.

Similarly, *Young Goodman Brown* explores the male character's internal conflict with the moral hypocrisy of the patriarchal order. Goodman Brown is compelled to question the fundamental moral roots of his society, experiencing profound alienation as a result. This narrative illustrates that the restrictive effects of patriarchy extend beyond women, entrapping men as well. The fact that male characters appear as both perpetrators and victims of these oppressions underscores the significance of examining the interaction between individuals and norms. Consequently, both works extend beyond mere storytelling to invite a critique of societal norms. The feminist social work perspective emphasizes the necessity of linking individual problems to broader social and structural causes. While Hester Prynne's narrative elucidates how individual resistance can drive structural change, Goodman Brown's conflict reveals the corrosive and exhausting toll of patriarchal systems on the human psyche.

To fully grasp the depth of gender oppression depicted in these works, it is essential to consider the diverse theoretical underpinnings of feminist thought that inform social work strategies. These perspectives range from liberal frameworks focusing on equal opportunity to radical analyses that locate oppression within systemic control over women's reproductive and social roles. By integrating these perspectives, the analysis highlights how patriarchal structures intersect with broader social marginalization and power imbalances. The analysis also recognizes the importance of intersectional approaches, which establish that factors such as race and socioeconomic status are fundamental to understanding the multifaceted nature of women's oppression. Collectively, these theoretical lenses provide the necessary foundation for the social work strategies used to address

the complexities of gender-based injustice. By synthesizing these diverse feminist perspectives, the study demonstrates that addressing individual problems requires a comprehensive understanding of broader social, historical, and structural causes

Within the scope of the empowerment approach, the ultimate objective is for individuals and communities to attain equality in power relations, specifically focusing on the needs of marginalized groups and addressing life-long injustices. This empowerment manifests through personal, social, educational, economic, and political domains, where personal growth fosters self-awareness and social empowerment seeks equitable roles within the societal framework. In this study, Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Scarlet Letter* serve as vital instruments for raising awareness regarding gender assignments and the individual's interaction with patriarchal systems. By examining how norms dictate lives and pave the way for systemic inequalities, these works illuminate human reactions to structural pressure. Specifically, Hester Prynne's defiance stands as a quintessential example of the empowerment approach; by refusing to accept imposed norms despite social exclusion, she proves that individual resistance is a vital component of social change. Meanwhile, Goodman Brown's alienation highlights the multidimensional and often corrosive effects of social structures on men. Ultimately, both narratives provide a profound context for understanding the mission of feminist social work: to empower the individual and construct a more egalitarian society.

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