

**Beware of the Sorceress: Perceptions of Otherness in
Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*
and Joanne Harris' *Chocolat*
Emma Domínguez Rué
*Universitat de Lleida***

Abstract

Freud's psychoanalytical theories of fear of castration and penis-envy transformed woman into not-man, and hence associated her with the concepts of "lacking" and "other". Taking as a starting point the popularised version of Freud's theories on the topics of womanhood and motherhood, plus a number of reactions to this patriarchal construction of the feminine from more recent feminist theoreticians, this article explores the concept of alterity in relation to the issues of womanhood and motherhood. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* offer different versions of the notion of alterity, particularly the rejection of single mothers as emblems of otherness: both Hester Prynne and Vianne Rocher arrive in the new community as young women in a society that venerates the authority and wisdom of ageing males. "The Other" is an acknowledged rival without which a community cannot shape its identity, be it seventeenth-century New England or twentieth-century Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, and both protagonists are thus marked as "other", either by means of a scarlet letter or by a campaign against chocolate in church sermons.

"A sorceress and a hysteric –that is, a displaced person– everywoman must inevitably find that she has no home, no *where*" (Meaney, 1993: 7). According to Gerardine Meaney in *(Un)Like Subjects* (1993:18), Freud's psychoanalytic theories of fear of castration and penis-envy transformed woman into not-man, and hence associated her with the concepts of "lacking" and "other". Taking as a starting point the popularised version of Freud's theories on the topics of womanhood and motherhood, plus a number of reactions to this

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patriarchal construction of the feminine from more recent feminist theoreticians, this article will explore the concept of alterity in relation to the issues of womanhood and motherhood. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Joanne Harris' *Chocolat*, though written in a lapse of one hundred and fifty years, offer different versions of the notion of alterity, though I will particularly concentrate on the community's rejection of single mothers as emblems of otherness.

"The Other" is an acknowledged rival without which a community cannot shape its identity, be it seventeenth-century New England or twentieth-century Lansquenet-sous-Tannes. Both Hester Prynne and Vianne Rocher arrive in the new community as young women in a society that venerates the authority and wisdom of ageing males. The Puritan magistrates in *The Scarlet Letter* and Curé Reynaud in *Chocolat* mark the female protagonists as "other", either by means of a scarlet letter or by campaigning against chocolate in church sermons.

One of the main conflicts in both novels arouses when both women refuse to be marked as evil. In *The Scarlet Letter* Mistress Hibbins, the town witch and Governor Bellingham's sister, accepts her status and rejoices in it, sharing the same roof with her brother as if they were two sides of the same coin. Hester, on the other hand, always maintains the belief that her relationship with Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale was not wrong but "had a consecration of its own" (1994: 166). In *Chocolat*, Armande Voizin is the official renegade in the village, whose geographic self-margination in the shanty area of Les Marauds parallels her position as an acknowledged outcast. Vianne, unlike Armande and like Hester, rejects her status of outsider but is even bolder in doing so: she opens La Céleste Praline in the village square just opposite the church and organises a chocolate festival on Easter Sunday.

Gerardine Meaney's reflections on motherhood, which she quotes partly from the French feminist theoretician Luce Irigaray, identify the figures of mother and daughter as almost interchangeable. In Irigaray's words, the daughter is the mother's "non-identical double" (1993: 21-26), mirroring her experience as discriminated and "lacking". Hester and Vianne are single mothers with illegitimate daughters, and both experience the contradictory emotions that motherhood under such a system brings about. Hester is absolutely devoted to Pearl; she becomes the sole object of her affections, except for her latent love for

Dimmesdale. However, the girl's wild behaviour and the fact that she becomes her reminder of the scarlet letter in her bosom transform her in "not-I, that which is not me" (1993: 197), reminding us of the Kristevan concept of "abjection", as this dialogue between mother and daughter shows:

'Thou art not my child! Thou art no Pearl of mine!' said the mother, half playfully; for it was often the case that a sportive impulse came over her, in the midst of her deepest suffering. 'Tell me, then, what thou art and who sent thee hither?'
'Tell me, Mother!' [...]
'Thy heavenly Father sent thee!' answered Hester Prynne. [...]
'He did not send me!' cried she, positively. 'I have no heavenly Father!' (1994: 82-83)

Pearl is Hester's non-identical double, that part of herself which is not herself but whom she cannot separate from her being. Pearl's wild beauty and freedom are the outward mirror of Hester's inner life, wild and free beneath her exterior appearance of submission and resignation, just as the forest operates as the only setting where the expression of inner life is possible. Pearl is the embodiment of the scarlet letter, which both tortures Hester and provides her with a new source of freedom. What the Puritans had meant as a punishment actually constitutes the way through which Hester can create her own inner world, according to her own rules. As Hawthorne writes, "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" (1994: 170). Paradoxically, and as Nina Baym contends, inner life is constructed in what the Puritans consider "the outside", the margins of darkness and otherness: "the alien world of the forest, the dark, the Other, something that comes upon them from the outside and tempts them away" (1986: 55).

Pearl's symbolic function as living emblem of the scarlet letter is visually conveyed through her splendid scarlet clothes but, more significantly, as Richard Fogle posits (1952: 142), it consists in keeping Hester's adultery always before her eyes and preventing her from

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escaping its moral consequences. In the forest encounter between Hester and Dimmesdale, Pearl refuses to approach them because Hester has taken the letter off her dress and does not come back to her until she wears it again, as this excerpt from the novel highlights:

When the dreary change was wrought, she extended her hand to Pearl.

‘Dost thou know thy mother now, child?’ asked she reproachfully, but with a subdued tone. ‘Will thou come across the brook and own thy mother, now that she has her shame upon her – now that she is sad?’

‘Yes; now I will!’ answered the child, bounding across the brook, and clasping Hester in her arms. ‘Now thou art my mother indeed! And I am thy little Pearl!’ (1994: 180)

Pearl’s reaction is logical, as a rejection of the letter is a rejection of herself. Granted that her origins do not conform to the laws of the community but to those of nature, it is there where Pearl feels more comfortable. Being born an outcast of the community, she does not recognise the Puritan authority and tells Governor Bellingham that she has no heavenly Father, but her mother plucked her out of a rosebush by the prison door.

Vianne’s daughter Anouk also functions as the emblem of her illegitimate origins. She dresses, like her mother, in bright clothes and a scarlet coat. Vianne also prides in her daughter, but goes a step further and does something that Hester could have never done overtly: she points out to Curé Reynaud that she is not ‘Madame’ but ‘Mademoiselle’ Rocher. Anouk is Vianne’s non-identical double as well, mirroring not only her (m)other’s unconventional views on life but continuing the chain of the unusual mother-daughter relationship she had with her own dead mother, whose ashes she carries everywhere in a box. From her mother Vianne inherited her ability to see inside people’s hearts, a quality she shares with Hester, and a certain gift for witchcraft, which her mother exercised through cards and spells but which Vianne has redimensioned in chocolate making.

Anouk, like Pearl, is most at home in the dark wildness of the forest that mimics her personality, nature being in *Chocolat* –as in *The Scarlet Letter*– that part which the community has marked as “outside” and “other”. Like Pearl, Anouk finds in *Les Marauds* a fitting environment for her solitary wanderings, substituting the trees, flowers and bushes that Pearl endows with life with a single defined imaginary playmate, a rabbit she calls *Pantoufle*. At first discriminated by the other children in *Lansquenet* due to the improper behaviour of her mother, she overcomes this status of marginality and gains her classmates’ friendship through the magic of her mother’s chocolate mice and *marrons glacés*.

Anouk’s unconventional ideas of religion, which put the Pope, Quetzalcoatl, and Eostre on the same bag, are in many ways analogous to Pearl’s statement that she has no heavenly Father. This globalising multi-cultural conception of the divine scandalises the village gossips, but is quickly accepted by Anouk’s friends and seen by her mother as a token of the child’s intelligence, as the following extract illustrates:

Listening wide-eyed to her charming apocrypha, with tales of Mithras and Baldur the Beautiful and Osiris and Quetzalcoatl all interwoven with stories of flying chocolates and flying carpets and the Triple Goddess and Aladdin’s crystal cave of wonders and the cave from which Jesus rose after three days, amen, abracadabra, amen. (2000: 114)

Like Hester, Vianne Rocher creates a space for herself and her daughter where the free expression of inner thoughts and feelings is possible, but Vianne also welcomes all those who need warmth and cosiness: Armande Voizin, Guillaume Duplessis, Joséphine Muscat, and Luc Clairmont. Vianne manages to create this haven with all the brightness, colour, and scent of *La Céleste Praline*, not in the darkness of the forest but in the midst of the moral uprightness of *Lansquenet*. Thus, both Vianne and Anouk Rocher manage to break the circle of marginalisation and ignominy that encloses Hester and Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* and become accepted in the community in spite of their evident discordance with their members.

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According to Luce Irigaray, and as quoted by Gerardine Meaney in *(Un)Like Subjects* (1993: 18), Freud's "construction of feminine identity in terms of castration and penis-envy" denies feminine difference and places women in a position of otherness and inferiority which repeats itself in the relationship of mother and daughter as we have been discussing so far. As Meaney quotes from Hélène Cixous (1993: 23), women are dispossessed of their bodies and voices through the oedipal complex by which, according to Freud, girls come to blame their mothers for their absence of a penis, this absence functioning as an emblem of castration and a mirror of their own fate as powerless not-men. Linking these statements with the patriarchal displacement and appropriation of the creation myth, women become, as Cixous contends, decapitated Medusas, with their petrifying powers stolen by those who symbolically castrated them.

The myth of Medusa proves very significant in the context of these two novels, as both deal with small communities anchored to a traditional system of values, which eliminates all elements of discord in order to preserve them. The studies about the Medusa myth carried out by Gerardine Meaney convey the idea that Medusa represents, in Freudian terms, an ontological fear of petrification and engulfment by the maternal. (1993: 17) In relation to this issue, the anthropologist Joseph Campbell significantly identifies Medusa as a "Mother goddess" and as "the womb and tomb of the world" (1993: 26). Apart from the fact that in early accounts Medusa was not fertile, twentieth-century interpretations of this myth shift the attention from the figure of Medusa to that of Perseus. The quest for adult age and identity thus operates in terms of "annihilation of the power of woman" (1993: 28). The story of Medusa therefore becomes the story of Perseus, while Medusa is denied the power of seeing through decapitation. As Meaney writes:

The denial and appropriation of Medusa's power are done with mirrors [. . .] Her glance is not deadly if it is mediated, if it is experienced only as a reflection. Control of her image, her reflection in his shield, allows Perseus to appropriate Medusa's power. The live Medusa killed by *seeing*: the Medusa's head kills when *seen*. She loses the power

of the gaze: Perseus seizes the power of representation. The mirror of representation becomes the site of that displaced ‘feminine’ which renders womanhood impossible. The mirror image is ‘the false woman that prevents the live one from breathing’. (1993: 32)

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the young Puritan community in Massachusetts similarly seeks to achieve political and ideological maturity through symbolically decapitating Hester and depriving her of her moral dignity. The embroidered “A” is the chosen weapon with which the magistrates transform her into a Medusa-like mother-monster and an outcast. The morally sickened community of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes likewise attempts to appear stronger and more powerful in the enforcement of its moral codes by marking Vianne as unchristian and immoral, and by trying to ignore the tempting aroma that emanates from La Céleste Praline. Its representative and spokesman, Francis Reynaud, retains a strong oedipal conflict marked by her mother’s love affair with the preceding curate. Like his predecessor, he tries to reaffirm his identity and that of Lansquenet through exercising his power to expel those he has marked as “other” and who represent a menace to its unity, be it the inhabitants of the shanty area of Les Marauds, the river gypsies, or Vianne Rocher and her illegitimate daughter.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Governor Bellingham and the rest of the Puritan legislators use the scarlet letter to deprive Hester of her sexual attractiveness, which from then on she hides in coarse dresses and austere bonnets, and more significantly to deprive her also of her potential power for change in the community’s moral and religious attitudes. The letter functions as the shield through which they appropriate her power, thus showing the implacability of Puritan laws and making Hester an outcast, frightful when *seen*. This is not the case with Vianne Rocher. Curé Reynaud’s attempts at decapitation/castration not only fail, but he finally succumbs to the temptation of the pagan pleasures of chocolate, falling in a kind of petrifying ecstasy. I would rather call it a chocolate orgasm, if such a thing exists. By eating a chocolate figure of the pagan goddess of fertility Eostre, Reynaud is

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literally petrified and engulfed by indigestion of the maternal. This is how Reynaud himself articulates such an experience in the novel:

The smell of chocolate is overwhelming, the rich fleshy scent of it which drags down the throat in an exquisite trail of sweetness. The wheatsheaf-woman smiles very slightly, as if contemplating mysteries. *Try me, test me, taste me.* [...] I can hear myself making sounds as I eat, moaning, keening sounds of ecstasy and despair, as if the pig within has finally found a voice. (2000: 310-313)

Vianne Rocher hence represents the undecapitated Medusa who feels complete and capable. Like Hester's, Vianne's encounter with the river gypsy Roux lasts also for only one night, but after their separation she does not experience Hester's loneliness but the fulfilment of a second pregnancy. By deciding to stay in Lansquenet, Vianne finally defeats the fear of being separated from her daughter, a fear she inherited from her mother (her former non-identical double), which doomed them to a recurring pattern of homelessness and otherness. Her love for Anouk and her unborn daughter give her the strength to escape what Irigaray calls "the nightmare of repetition" (1993: 20-21): it is thanks to them that she finally puts an end to her nomadic life and creates a permanent home.

As the years pass, Hester secures a happy marriage for Pearl in England, thus ensuring her daughter's acceptance in the community, and goes back to New England to use her experience for the benefit of others. Hence, the symbol that formerly marked her as an outcast, the embroidered "A", has transformed her into an unordained sister of mercy; from "Adulterous" to "Angel". As for Vianne, defeating her fears breaks the innuendo of repetition to which she and her mother had been forced. Her new pregnancy, "not fatherless this time, but a good man's child" (2000: 319), is no longer a motive for marginalization and ostracism but the beginning of a new life as a fully-accepted member in the community of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes:

I could stay here, *Maman*. We have a home, friends.
The weathervane outside my window turns, turns.

Imagine hearing it every week, every season.
Imagine looking out of my window on a winter's
morning. The new voice inside me laughs, and the
sound is almost like coming home. (2000: 320)

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