

HESTER PRYNNE AND ISABEL ARCHER:  
TWO WOMEN SEEKING FREEDOM TO BE THEMSELVES

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— UFMG —

Nathaniel Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter depicted Hester Prynne as a woman whose suffering was as great as her strength, and whose dignity overcame the shame to which she was exposed before her neighbors and townspeople. In The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James portrayed Isabel Archer as a young woman whose strong character and independent nature very much reminded us of Hester Prynne. Isabel's main characteristic was, as James himself pointed out, "her markedly individual view of herself and of her relation to life, and her painful fidelity to the ideal she has set for herself."<sup>1</sup>

Hester Prynne's story happened in the late 1700's in Boston, then a small New England town. At that time the laws of Puritanism, which were the laws of God, controlled people's lives and behavior. According to the Puritan point of view, the woman was in a position inferior to man. Fidelity was a solemn obligation, which resulted directly from the marriage contract. Adultery was considered the worst of sins, and the person who committed such sin was exposed to public shame, rejected, and severely punished by society. Hawthorne began his story later in Hester's life, after her unfortunate marriage to Roger Chillingworth. Hester had not been prepared for marriage. She was still an absolutely innocent girl when she left her parents' safe and happy home. Roger was much older than she was, and unable to make her happy. The first years of their married life were spent in Europe, "a new life, but feeding

itself on time-worn materials."<sup>2</sup> Roger did not seem to care much for Hester, since he stayed in Europe and sent her back to Boston, leaving her alone for two years. The result was that she fell in love with another man and committed adultery. The consequences were that she was exposed in the market-place and confined in a prison. With no compassion at all, she was condemned by society.

More than a century separated the worlds of Hester Prynne and Isabel Archer, but the conventions of society concerning the institution "Marriage" changed very little. The woman was still expected to depend upon the husband, who was the head of the family. Marriage was considered not a means to achieve happiness and realization, but an end in itself. Isabel was no exception to this rule. She was at an age when she had already received enough education to follow the common fate of girls — get married and devote her beauty, her knowledge, her entire life to a husband. Her two sisters had already followed the convention. Edith, with her beauty, "formed the ornament of those various military stations, chiefly in the unfashionable West, to which, to her deep chagrin, her husband was successfully relegated."<sup>3</sup> Lillian, considered "the practical one," was "a young woman who might be thankful to marry at all... and seemed to exult in her condition as in a bold escape" (p. 38). Neither of them had "brilliant" marriages, but they conformed to the situation they had accepted. Isabel did not want for herself a fate similar to that of her sisters, and in this respect she was luckier than Hester Prynne. When Isabel's father died, she met her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, who opened up a new perspective to her life. She was invited to follow her aunt to Europe, leaving her limited world in New England for the supposedly exciting "Old World."

Like Hester Prynne, Isabel also went to Europe anticipating

that a new and better life would be offered to her. Unlike Hawthorne, however, James described in detail the experiences of his heroine's life in Europe. Isabel was also disillusioned with her new life, as Hester was, but she was in a much better position than Hawthorne's heroine. First of all, she was still single and independent when she left. Next, she was more than a century ahead of Hester. Although the woman was still in a position inferior to man, she had already taken steps towards emancipation. The circumstances, however, were quite different. Unlike Hester, Isabel had already asserted her independence, and she proved this assertion on the very day of her arrival in Gardencourt. Her cousin, Ralph, told her of his impression of her being "adopted" by his mother, and Isabel immediately reacted and explained her position: "Oh, no... I'm not a candidate for adoption... I'm very fond of my liberty!" (pp. 23-24). Isabel's main motivation to follow her aunt to Europe lay in the fact that she did not want a fate similar to that of her sisters. "What it would bring with it was as yet extremely indefinite, but Isabel was in a situation that gave a value to any change. She had a desire to leave the past behind her and... to begin afresh" (p. 41). It would be much better to learn from personal experience. Therefore, while Hester's going to Europe was more an attitude blindly taken as a result of her innocence and inexperience, Isabel's choice was a more mature decision of a woman who was already climbing the first steps to assure her independence.

The fact that there were other women who had the courage to lead their own independent lives might also have influenced Isabel, in the sense that their world was more appealing to her than that of her sisters. After Mrs. Touchett realized that her husband and herself were two completely different individuals, with extremely different tastes and ideas, she decided to have

her own house the way she liked, in a place she liked. Of course she still maintained the appearance of her marriage by going back to Gardencourt regularly. However, what no outsider knew was that she hardly saw her husband while she was there, and those brief and false "visits" were all that remained of that marriage. Henrietta Stackpole, Isabel's oldest and closest friend, was "a woman of the world," in the sense that she had no fixed roots and was independent, both in her private and in her professional affairs. She was, for Isabel, "a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy," (p. 71).

There was a basic difference between Hester Prynne and Isabel Archer. While Isabel learned the importance of independence when she was still free from any compromise with a husband, Hester learned it only after her marriage. Hester was practically "abandoned" by her husband and saw that her free choice of giving herself to a man she really loved was reason enough for her to be cruelly condemned by society. Only then did she start questioning the values of that society and the real meaning of independence. Why should she have to follow a convention that was imposed on her and sacrifice her inner feelings? Her marriage had proven to be a disaster. When she met Arthur Dimmesdale, someone who really cared for her, she was marked as an outcast from society. No one considered her reasons, or her qualities. There she stood on the scaffold, holding her three-month-old baby, and yet with a calm dignity that astonished all who watched her.

Hester was bitterly criticized, especially by those of her own sex. The women of those days were not supposed to exhibit their beauty. On the contrary, they had to hide it, covering as much of their hair and body as they could. On the day of her trial, however, Hester did not hide her beauty, perhaps on purpose. Her sin was stamped on her bosom in the form of the

scarlet letter "A", standing for "Adulteress," but it was "fantastically embroidered" and "it had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" (p. 55). She looked very elegant in "her attire, which she had wrought for the occasion in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy" (p. 55). Affronting the "audience," who mercilessly watched her shameful exhibition, she showed her dark and abundant hair and gazed at them gallantly with her beautiful dark eyes. Her attitude was one of defiance, as if to show that while she might be ashamed of what she had been exposed to, she was not ashamed of what she was, or of what she had done. When the whole town expected her to be humble and pale, she was thus telling them that she would have the courage to face the consequences of her act. She had finally decided that real freedom was faithfulness to her individual concept of freedom, resembling Isabel Archer, who took as her dogma for life the faithfulness to her individual freedom.

Isabel had many chances to assure her independence while she was in Europe. As previously mentioned, she had her aunt and her friend, Henrietta, as models of free women. The attitudes of these two women, however, were somewhat ambiguous. They had apparently changed their concepts of the conventionalized status for women in relation to themselves but, nevertheless, they had plans to marry Isabel according to the conventional common sense. Both women had their favorite candidates for Isabel's hand, and the reasons why these men were their "privileged selections" were not detached from convention. Both Caspar Goodwood (Henrietta's candidate) and Lord Warburton (Mrs. Touchett's candidate) were appointed by them because, first of all, they were wealthy and could provide Isabel with a comfortable life; next, because they seemed to love her; and

finally because they were real gentlemen and occupied privileged positions in society. Neither Henrietta Stackpole nor Mrs. Touchett considered Isabel's inner feelings as a main motif (here they resemble the attitude of the townspeople in The Scarlet Letter, who ignored Hester's sentiments). This puzzled Isabel, who strongly believed that "a woman ought to be able to live to herself, in the absence of exceptional flimsiness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex" (p. 71). By no means did Isabel want to have anything forced upon her. She wanted to become a whole and independent human being, acting according to her own decisions and being coherent to her idea of freedom.

This startling feature of Isabel's character was what made her cousin, Ralph, admire her from the beginning of their acquaintance. Ralph was a clever and sensible man. In fact, he had many things in common with Arthur Dimmesdale. Their natural goodness and capacity to understand other people's sentiments were of the kind that developed only through a great deal of suffering. Both of these men's destinies were marked by the inevitable consequences of a serious disease. Arthur's suffering was caused not only because of his feeling of guilt towards Hester and their daughter, but also because of the weak condition of his heart. Ralph's suffering was also caused by the weak condition of his health and, as he had discovered that his illness would kill him soon, he tried to adjust to this fact. Ralph fell in love with Isabel, and if it were not for his disease, he might even have turned out to be Isabel's companion for life. Because of his physical condition, however, he never confessed his love for her. Therefore, she could not even have a chance to consider the possibility. Nevertheless, he was the one who most completely understood Isabel and could

possibly make her happy, if they had gotten married. However, not only was he conscious of his limitations as a sick person, but he was also aware of Isabel's views concerning marriage. They were still in the beginning of their acquaintance, and yet Ralph had already, almost instinctively, understood that she was different from most women in that she seemed to have "intentions of her own" (p. 87). He chose, then, to be a silent observer, and he wanted, most of all, that she meet happiness following her intentions. "Whenever she executes them," he stated, "may I be there to see" (p. 87).

Arthur Dimmesdale also showed that he loved Hester; for instance, when he stood by her side and persuaded the Governor and Reverend Wilson that Hester should be allowed to keep her daughter. Like Ralph, he also renounced his love, but his reasons were quite different from Ralph's. His scruples and cowardice were greater than his love for Hester. He was dominated by the laws of society, and was fearful of his reputation. He was also dominated by what he understood to be the laws of God. It is true that he did beg Hester to cry out the name of Pearl's father at the scaffold on the day of her trial. He might even have been relieved if she had confessed it. But why didn't he do it himself? It is clear that he feared people's judgment and was quite fond of his position. Hester's love for him was much greater, and she would never betray him. She felt sorry for him and chose to sacrifice her own reputation. It is another proof of Hester's capacity and courage to bear suffering. She also kept secret her husband's identity. Roger coldly watched the whole scene pretending never to have seen her before. Hester, then, was denied moral support at the moment she most needed it. She stood alone, having as her close companions only her daughter, fruit of her sin, who gave her more preoccupation than happiness, and the scarlet letter, symbol of her ignominy and of

the sin itself.

Hester was very good at needlework, and that was how she occupied herself, not only during the time she had to stay in prison, but also afterwards, in the seclusion she was forced to live in. Her handiwork brought her some reputation, and she had such good taste that what she made became the fashion of the age. Her only apparent aim in life was to continue living in the town and be able to work for her child and for herself. She actually wanted to stay close to Arthur, and she still had some hope that they would come to terms with each other. It was not easy to remain in the town at first, but because she never complained, never argued with the townspeople, she gradually gained their confidence. Her attitude was humble, but brave. She was always ready to serve and to help the ones in need ("her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one" — p. 160). Although aware of her usefulness and help, Hester never expected any gratitude as reward. She would leave the houses of those she helped as subtly as she had entered them, as a shadow or an angel, bearing only the form of a human being, as a superior entity. Hester was finally assuming her independence and learning its value.

Isabel Archer also assumed her independence, executing her private intentions and being faithful to her ideal of freedom. Her most challenging attitudes were presented through the proposals of marriage she refused. Despite the merits that Mrs. Touchett and Henrietta Stackpole had found in her suitors, there was also the "temptation" that she even liked them and enjoyed their company. Caspar Goodwood was "the finest young man she had ever seen, was indeed quite a splendid young man; he inspired her with a sentiment of high, rare respect" (p. 47). Lord Warburton, on the other hand, was a very charming



gentleman, and Isabel soon "found herself liking him extremely" (p. 91). Both of them proved several times, through their perseverance, the extent of their love for her. Yet, Isabel saw marriage as a limitation of freedom and an unworthy shield for a woman. She was aware that she might have been going too far, but she was firm in her conviction when she told Caspar Goodwood, "I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think is more honourable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me" (p. 229). Isabel's behavior parallels Hester's courage to assume responsibility over her daughter, to assume her position, to assume her freedom.

Both heroines were courageous and proud. Hester Prynne, for instance, adopted an attitude of apparent humility, changing her physical appearance by keeping her beautiful hair "completely hidden by a cap" (p. 162) and by dressing in a very austere way, perhaps on purpose, to emphasize her good qualities. The contrast of her way of dressing with the elaborate "A" even gave more emphasis to this probable intention of hers. Even if uncsciously, she wanted to teach the townspeople a lesson — that no one is ever capable of judging others without going deep into the matter and analysing every side of the question. And even though the townspeople never professed it, they might have felt guilt for having condemned Hester to such a cruel fate. Hester changed as her position in society changed, and she was thus proving her emancipation. She did harden her feelings, however. As Hawthorne himself stated, "much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be attributed to the circumstance that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought" (p. 163). Hester hardened

her feelings in order to cope with the hardship of her life, and she could thus be excused. Isabel Archer had also hardened her feelings. She was even sometimes shocked with her own attitudes, and wondered "if she were not a cold, hard, priggish person" (p. 157). But she had concluded, after considering all sides of the question, that she did not want to give up the other chances that life had to offer her. What she valued, most of all, was her personal freedom, the impulse she felt within herself to dive into the world, and both Isabel and Hester were alike in this respect; they would risk anything for it. This apparent hardness, however, did not mean that either of them had turned into an evil person. On the contrary, both Hester and Isabel were naturally good-hearted. It was, rather, a way they found to defend themselves and assure their personal freedom. They wanted to be fully respected as human beings.

Hester proved her goodness by taking care of the sick people of her town, as mentioned above. Some people would even point to her and say to strangers, "Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge? It is our Hester - the town's own Hester - who is so good to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!" (p. 161). Like Hester, Isabel Archer also displayed her natural goodness. First, in the way she devoted herself to her uncle during his illness; later, in the way she also stood at Ralph's side when he was dying, and finally through her altruism towards Pansy. Like Hester, Isabel never expected any reward for her good actions. It was, indeed, with real astonishment that she received the news she had been included in her uncle's will, on the occasion of his death. What she did not know, however, was that she had her cousin Ralph to thank for the considerable amount of money she received. Now she could fulfill "the requirements of her imagination" (p. 265), as Ralph always wanted. Yet, she did not know what awaited her.

During the time of her uncle's illness, Isabel met Madame

chance to spend a long time in each other's company, and Isabel immediately liked her. Madame Merle, however, was an "evil" character despite her superficial mask of unpretentious friendliness. As soon as she learned of Isabel's unanticipated wealth, she devised a plan that would solve all her own personal problems. One of her unstated aspirations was to marry Pansy into an eminent family, and, for that reason, Isabel's money and relations would prove very useful. Pansy was actually the daughter born of Madame Merle's carefully hidden love affair with Gilbert Osmond, an American widower who lived in Paris. She soon made arrangements to introduce Isabel to Osmond, and skillfully convinced him to court Isabel. She was a third woman to come up with a candidate for Isabel's husband. Instructed by Madame Merle, Osmond did all he could to give Isabel a good impression of himself, and he succeeded beautifully. Isabel was easily trapped and inevitably fell in love with Osmond. Her so much praised independence was being threatened, but she did not realize that, and gradually let herself be influenced by him. In her eyes, Osmond was different from the other two candidates. She even changed her way of viewing things, with comments such as when she told Osmond once, "I know too much already. The more you know the more unhappy you are" (p. 369). She concluded that "he resembled no one she had ever seen" (p. 376), that "he indulged in no striking deflections from common usage, he was an original without being an eccentric" (p. 276), and she finally decided to accept his proposal of marriage.

Of course Isabel was strongly advised by all her friends that she was being precipitous, but she was blindly convinced that Gilbert Osmond was not at all the "fortune hunter" he seemed to be. She did not even want to justify her sudden change of opinion towards marriage and towards her ideal of freedom. In a frank conversation with Ralph, when he tried to

open her eyes, he reminded her, "you're going to be put into a cage... you must have changed immensely. A year ago, you valued your liberty beyond everything. You wanted to see life."<sup>4</sup> To which she simply replied, "If I like my cage, that needn't trouble you... life doesn't look to me now, I admit, such an inviting expanse" (p. 65)... "I've only one ambition — to be free to follow out a good feeling. I had others once, but they've passed away" (p. 73). Ralph exhausted all his arguments, even more objectively than the others had tried, but also in vain. He even regretted the fact that he had been the indirect cause of her falling into the abysmal mistake he could foresee. And Isabel's persistence impressed him: "she was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours" (p. 75). Isabel even told Ralph, "I shall never complain of my trouble to you" (pp. 75-6).

Isabel's attitude was ambiguous at this point. Considering that she stood alone against the others, and sustaining her belief in her independent choice, she was being coherent in her search for personal freedom. However, considering the way she switched the facts to maintain her position, added to Henry James' descriptions of Osmond and Madame Merle, Isabel's faithfulness to her ideal might be doubtful. The reader knows not only that she was actually making a mistake, but that she was specifically being wrong in telling Ralph that she would never complain to him. She deserves sympathy because the unmasking of her illusion will be difficult for her to face.

Isabel painfully faced the consequences of her marriage, which she was forced to admit as a mistake. Like Hester Prynne, she was also disillusioned with her marriage, even though she

was not as innocent and inexperienced as Hester when she married. Isabel had already seen much of the world when she met Gilbert Osmond. Yet, like Hester, she also married the "wrong" man. Ralph was, after all, correct in his judgment of Osmond. He was indeed a very selfish, narrow-minded, evil person. In fact, several features of Osmond's personality resembled Roger Chillingworth's. Both were domineering, conventionalized, insignificant men, who placed their ego above everything else in the world. Both Osmond and Roger only showed their real "evil" character after their marriages. It was previously mentioned how coldly and cynically Roger watched Hester's suffering at the scaffold. His later attitudes were disgusting. It was soon apparent the reason why he asked Hester not to reveal his identity. He had a good excuse to remain anonymous, because only then would he be completely free to carry out his plans of revenge. As Hester herself noticed, even Roger's appearance had changed - "there was something ugly and evil in his face" (p. 127), he was even compared to Satan himself. With the excuse that he was taking care of Arthur Dimmesdale's health, they developed a friendship that ended up by bringing the two men to live under the same roof. When Hester realized how much harm Roger's companionship was doing to Dimmesdale, she bravely faced Roger and told him all she felt, thus showing again how independent and courageous she had become. But nothing could soften the man's heart, not even his own misery that Hester showed to him and made him conscious of. Only then did she decide to tell Arthur the truth about Roger. She gave Arthur a new hope by convincing him that they should go to Europe, where they could start a new life together.

This attitude of Hester's was similar to Isabel's behavior. Like Isabel, Hester makes it doubtful whether she was really being faithful to her ideal of freedom. When she found herself

alone with Arthur in the forest, she changed her previous conception of freedom. Such change of attitude was not stated by Hawthorne, as it happened with James, but it was implied. Hester felt so excited about their plans to start all over again, that she took the scarlet letter off her bosom and threw it away, while she also took off the cap that hid her beautiful hair. And she did have a new feeling of freedom which did bring her relief. Arthur's attitude was also changed in this scene. He changed from evading her to being anguished at hearing about Roger, to accusing Hester, and finally to asking her for help. He even pointed to her scarlet letter and confessed: "Mine burns in secret!" (p. 101). Because of her daughter's strange behavior, Hester was forced to put on the scarlet letter and the cap again. Was Pearl's reaction only a child's jealousy, or was it some supernatural force that took possession of her and banished her mother's dream of a free and happy life together with the man she loved? Anyway, Hester continued acting as she had those past seven years. Hester was even more disappointed when she found out about Roger's intentions of following her and Arthur to Europe. The "devilish" manipulator seemed to have no heart at all. How could she ever have married such a man?

Like Hester, Isabel Archer also saw the error of her choice of marrying Osmond. He proved to be, like Roger Chillingworth, a devilish manipulator. The way Osmond controlled his daughter's life was repugnant. Poor Pansy was a puppet in his hands, and he tried to make the same thing of Isabel. It was not easy, however, to force something upon Isabel, who was so used to having her own point of view. Thus, she rebelled against her husband's wish to put an end to her old friendship with Henrietta Stackpole. But only when she saw Madame Merle's and Osmond's machinations concerning the matter of Pansy's marriage did she realize how wrong she had been, thinking that

her money would help her husband. Only then could she see Osmond as he really was: "Under all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers" (p. 196). More and more the divergencies between Isabel and Osmond made her come to the conclusion that she had "thrown away her life" (p. 203). However, as she later confessed to Henrietta, she did not want "to publish her mistake." She was too proud to do it.

It was also for self-pride that Isabel decided to disobey her husband and go to England to stay with Ralph, who was dying and wanted to see her. Her sister-in-law had told her the whole truth about Pansy's origin and about Madame Merle's influence on her marriage with Osmond. Madame Merle, too, could be placed, together with Roger and Osmond, in the group of the evil manipulators. Isabel was shocked. She had failed, but she would never submit to the point of confessing it. Thus, she pretended to ignore everything, but defiantly packed her clothes and went to Gardencourt. The only persons whom she told the whole truth were Henrietta and Ralph. They were her only real friends, and she admitted only to them that she had been used. After Ralph died, she remained in Gardencourt for a while, facing the various options that were open to her as to what to do with her life. Caspar Goodwood returned to offer her a new option. Isabel, however, was not the kind of woman who submitted, who embraced any kind of escape. Most of all, she had to be faithful to her own conscience, and her conscience told her to go back to Rome, not specifically to Osmond, who had already been defeated at the death of Ralph, but rather to Pansy, whom she considered her real daughter then. She finally concluded that she had a daughter to be "freed" for normal life. She decided to go back. She knew what awaited her, but she would

face the consequences of her act.

Hester Prynne's story had a tragic end. Arthur Dimmesdale was unable to conceal his guilt any longer. As he was afraid to die before he told the truth, he decided to confess everything during his Election sermon. Only when he finally gave up his cowardice was he relieved from his remorse. And he was so sure of his salvation now, that he did not hesitate to say farewell to Hester as he closed his eyes and died. Roger Chillingworth, like Gilbert Osmond, was also defeated at the death of his rival, though in a different way. It seemed that Roger had lost his own purpose for living when Arthur died because he soon followed him to the grave. His eagerness for revenge was ended on earth. Would it continue after death? Hester, however, was in a different position after that day, at least to the townspeople's point of view. Like Isabel, Hester was also faced with a couple of options as to what to do with her life, after the deaths of her lover and of her husband. The only difference in Isabel's case was that when she lost her true love, her husband was still alive, although it was implicit that he was dead for her. Like Isabel, Hester also had a daughter to be "freed" for normal life, and there was evidence that she succeeded. And like Isabel, Hester also decided to return to her earlier life. After many years, she went back to Boston, put the scarlet letter on her bosom again and wore it for the rest of her life.

This last attitude of Hester's was the result of her own free will. It might have contained some pride in it, but it also contained courage. In the same way that Hester Prynne freely chose to return to the town that had condemned her, Isabel Archer also chose to return to Rome. The real value of their choices was that they did not take the easiest roads. Both of them had been trapped, but they were equally proud and brave.



Their early conception of freedom had changed, and they returned as a kind of self-punishment for having failed. Yet, they were still being faithful to their own conscience in the sense that what they finally chose to do was the result of their own free will. These two major American novels are finally different in their handling of the importance of recognizing one's involvement with evil and then making the corrective choice, but both focus on the career of a strong and attractive young woman faced with society's conventional opposition to independence and freedom.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Millet. "Introduction," in: Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady. (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1951), p. XXV.

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter. (Boston: Riverside Editions, 1961), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady. (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1951), vol. 1, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady. (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1951), vol. 11, p. 65.