

WAS THE LETTER SCARLET, BLACK, OR WHITE ? : THE 1926 SILENT FILM ADAPTATION OF HAWTHORNE'S NOVEL

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(Resumen)

El estreno en 1995 de una fallida adaptación cinematográfica de *The Scarlet Letter* con Demi Moore en el papel principal ofrece una excelente oportunidad para revisar anteriores versiones de la novela canónica de Nathaniel Hawthorne. En 1926 el director sueco afincado en Estados Unidos Víctor Sjöström dirigió una de las tres plasmaciones del texto que se filmaron en Hollywood en la época del cine mudo, una etapa que a menudo parece haber caído en el olvido de la crítica. Obviamente el rodar una película en aquellos años implicaba trabajar con una serie de limitaciones discursivas considerables, teniendo en cuenta que aún no se habían implantando ni el uso del sonido ni el de la fotografía en color. A pesar de que la sugerente adaptación de *The Scarlet Letter* protagonizada por una estrella indiscutible del cine mudo como Lillian Gish es un fiel reflejo de dichas limitaciones, la película logra superarlas de forma convincente al ofrecer en una narrativa tan simple como lírica una atractiva reescritura del texto de Hawthorne en la que afloran algunas de las cuestiones esenciales en las complejas relaciones entre el discurso filmico y el literario.

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In 1995 Hollywood released a new cinematographic adaptation of one of the central texts in the U. S. literary canon, *The Scarlet Letter*. In this new version of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel, the leading role of Hester Prynne was played by Demi Moore, not only one of the highest-paid actresses in Hollywood in the 1990s, but also the undisputed sexual icon of the decade, as her performance in the film *Striptease* clearly confirmed only one year later. This new rendering of Hawthorne's text was poorly received in general both by the critics and the public, since it was a long and tiresome movie which failed not only as an adaptation, but also as a film in itself.¹ Logically, the release of this new version offers a unique opportunity to revisit the previous adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter*.

In his book *Cine y literatura* the Spanish poet and critic Pere Gimferrer asserts that the richer, more complex and ambiguous a literary text, the higher the number of potential film adaptations it will generate (64), and as examples to illustrate this theory he mentions the cases of *Don Quixote* and *Wuthering Heights*. Unquestionably, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet*

1. The negative reception of film critics was generalized: the review published by Kenneth Turan in *The Los Angeles Times* did not differ much in tone from the one Angel Fernández-Santos wrote for *El País* under the explicit title of "Burdo destrozo del talento ajeno."

Letter also belongs in this list, since a total of six different film versions of the novel have made throughout the twentieth century.

In 1972 the German director Wim Wenders shot in Galicia a modest and rather cold production of the novel,² which had already been adapted in 1934, and –surprisingly enough– three times in only 15 years during the silent era of Hollywood: in 1911, 1917, and 1926.³ One of the defining features of Hawthorne’s text is its focusing on the internal life of the three central characters and exploring their psychology in depth, while external action is reduced to a minimum. Therefore, it would seem that such a text would especially resist being adapted to the screen. How can one explain the insistence on facing the challenge of filming the same novel so many times during the early days of cinema? Perhaps the most logical explanation to this enigma lies in the fact that –as several film critics and historians have pointed out– in its very beginning cinema often had to rely on adaptations of literary classics in order to earn a certain degree of respectability. Interestingly enough, a second reason has also been suggested:

‘classic literature’ was not being ignored by the industry. It had a double role. Firstly it was used as a weapon to resist pressures on the film business by those middle-class reformers who held the cinema to be an evil influence on society. . . . Secondly, . . . it was hoped that adaptations of ‘good’ literature would do more than reassure the middle classes that cinema was not a dangerous new social disease, and would actually entice them through the turnstiles. Thus, adapting literary classics was part of the industry’s strategy to gain for itself both a clean reputation and new business. (Izod 96)

Moreover, in her overview of the issue Lupack quotes a critic who in 1911 stressed the potential educative role of adapting texts like *The Scarlet Letter*: “It is the masterpiece of the ages that especially invites filming, and the reason for it is very plain. . . . After all, the word ‘classic’ has some meaning. It implies the approval of the best people in the most enlightened times. . . . It is the business of the moving picture to make them known to all” (4).

Of all these different versions of *The Scarlet Letter*, the one made in 1926 is extremely appealing for a number of reasons. Although it is far from perfect, this silent rendering can be regarded as an acceptable recreation of Hawthorne’s text on the one hand, and as a remarkable film of great lyricism on the other.

Nowadays, in the age of technology and special effects, it is all too easy to forget that not long ago movies were made in very different conditions. The 1926 adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* dates back to a time when cinema was still a rather new artistic discourse far from consolidated which suffered from severe limitations. Films were silent, so that instead of dialogue there were just intertitles illustrating the most relevant scenes,⁴ and, in addition to that, they had to be photographed in black and white, since color technique was not still

2. Wenders’ film was in fact a Spanish and West-German co-production and part of the cast and the crew were Spanish; the role of Hester Prynne was played by Senta Berger.

3. In addition to these six cinematographic adaptations, in 1979 PBS produced one with Meg Foster in the leading role.

4. For a lucid overview of the origin of the intertitle and the different signifying functions it could play, see Gaudreault and Jost, 75-80.

available; paradoxically, this implies that in this version the letter which appears in the screen is not really scarlet.

Taking all these factors into consideration, it is possible to offer in the present a more accurate and balanced reading of the 1926 film, which in fact has been hailed on some occasion as one of the “neglected masterpieces of the silent era” (Cook 104, 110).⁵ Ironically, the director of this adaptation of one of the key texts in the U. S. literary canon was a foreigner, the Swedish Victor Sjöström, one of the many Europeans who was invited to work in Hollywood in those days. He arrived in 1923, after having built himself a reputation as one of the leading directors of Scandinavian cinema with films like *Körkalen* (*The Phantom Chariot*, 1921), one of his several adaptations of works by the Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf. Before returning to his native country in 1930 frustrated--like so many of the Europeans filmmakers who came at that time--by the strict rules imposed by the Hollywood system, Sjöström left behind works of great simplicity, elegance, and lyricism like *The Scarlet Letter* and especially *The Wind* (1928), often considered one of the highlights of silent Hollywood.⁶

By now it has become all too clear that trying to solve the never-ending debate about the conflictive relationships between film and literature is a rather futile and frustrating exercise. The most accepted views on the subject are that it is almost impossible to adapt a literary work successfully on the screen, and that as an art form cinema is clearly inferior and reductive compared to literature.⁷ These are the prevailing views in Mark Estrin’s article “‘Triumphant Ignominy’ on the Screen”, a very negative reading of the film which discusses its several limitations and overlooks most of its achievements. Estrin’s analysis--which nevertheless offers some perceptive insights on the film--is in many ways a perfect example of what in the “Introduction” to their *The Classic American Novel and the Movies* Peary and Shatzkin label as “elitist position”, the traditional view according to which “[T]he cinema stands suspect. . . . Prevalent among literary-minded critics is the distinct feeling that a lag is permanent. Even at the cinema’s most lucid and profound moments, where is the complexity, the sheer density, of the simplest prose metaphor?” (3). In Estrin’s words “the film misses the mark” (28), although he finds most satisfying those scenes that recreate the static pictorial chapters of the novel that Harry Levin compared to tableaux (21-22).

The views about the relation between film and literature were already polarized at the time the 1926 version of *The Scarlet Letter* was made. The Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovski published in 1923 an essay with an apocalyptic tone entitled ‘Literature and Film’,

5. Gimferrer underlines the fact that none of the great masterpieces of world literature has ever resulted in a cinematographic masterpiece, 80.

6. In 1927 Sjöström was chosen one of the ten best directors in Hollywood because of his rendering of *The Scarlet Letter*. On his U. S. career see Jacobs 365-68, and Cook 104-06, 219-20.

7. In addition to the standard traditional views on the debate offered by critics such as George Bluestone, it is worth considering what Mast, Giddins, Lupack, or Gimferrer have said about it more recently. Carmen Peña-Ardid offers an excellent overview of the problem in the opening chapter of her *Literatura y cine*, entitled “Una tradición de relaciones conflictivas”, 21-49.

in which he passionately rejected any connection between the two artistic discourses. On the contrary, the director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein emphasized in articles like the classic "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today" that films imitated the narrative strategies of the modern novel.

In "Literature and Film" Gerald Mast clearly points out what are the three major problems involved in the intensive process of re-writing a novel for the screen: "enclosing it within an approximately two-hour form, converting its purely verbal text into a succession of sights and sounds (only some of which are verbal), and dramatizing its narrated scenes" (289). Of these three obstacles, the first is probably the most basic one, since it is not possible to include all the elements of a novel in an average film. In fact, the most legendary illustration of this problem also dates from the mid-1920s, since in 1924 the German director Eric von Stroheim--another eminent European invited to work in Hollywood--filmed *Greed*, a monumental version of Frank Norris' novel *McTeague* (1899) which originally lasted up to eight hours, but was cut down by the studios to two hours and twenty minutes. Therefore, in most adaptations a process of selecting and rejecting material from the original becomes unavoidable.

This double process was even more restrictive in the case of the 1926 version of *The Scarlet Letter*, since the film only runs a mere 79 minutes. Obviously, neither the director, Victor Sjöström, nor the scriptwriter, the talented Frances Marion,⁸ nor anyone else, could have properly recreated in such a short time the immense richness and complexity of Hawthorne's original text. As a result, some of its most interesting aspects had to be left out inevitably.

But this crucial problem had even deeper implications, since--in what can be regarded as a rather unexpected strategy--the entire first half of the film deals with events which are not present in the novel, thus providing the whole background for the adultery and making explicit what Hawthorne never cared to explain.⁹ As in other texts by him, the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* begins 'in media res' and explores the consequences of a sin which has been committed previously. In this first part of the two central ideas are developed in depth: the sharp contrast between Hester Prynne and the Puritan community, and the growing mutual attraction felt by Hester and Reverend Dimmesdale.

The severity of the Puritan mentality--which Hawthorne had perfectly captured in his text--finds a valid counterpart in the film from the very beginning. As it happens in the very symbolical first chapter of the novel, the opening shot of the film focuses on the elements that will play a crucial part in the story: after a quick medium close-up shot of the rosebush, the camera successively focuses on the prison, the church bells, and then on the scaffold, that

8. Frances Marion illustrates Francke's assertion that women played a major part in silent cinema, 66. She won Academy Awards in 1930 and 1931 and collaborated with Sjöström in *The Scarlett Letter* and *The Wind*. In her 1926 article "Why Do They Change the Stories on the Screen?" she admitted that screenwriters introduce all kinds of alterations when adapting, 75.

9. This same strategy has also been used in the new version, but with a crucial difference regarding the central gap in Hawthorne's text: whereas in 1926 the sexual intercourse between the lovers was obviously not reproduced, in 1995 the naked bodies of Demi Moore and Gary Oldman are generously show making love in a barn.

“contrivance of wood and iron” (1938: 70) which announces the severe punishing codes of Puritanism. This idea is immediately reinforced when the members of the community make their appearance as they go to church: if their austere faces are quite revealing, even more so are the clothes they wear. They are all dressed in dark colors, mostly in the sombre black and grey tonalities that abound in Hawthorne’s text.

Another element that helps in the definition of the Puritan society is the sound of the church bells, which is heard from the very beginning in an intermittent monotonous cadence; this persistent sound obviously functions as a reminder of the oppressive nature of Puritan religion. As the presence of these bells clearly indicates, so-called ‘silent films’ were not always silent, since, although it is true that characters never uttered a word, after a few years a pianist was hired to play some background music. Later, when the First World War finished, it became increasingly common for films to have a musical score to be played now by an entire orchestra in the theatre: “during the twenties all features, regardless of quality, were accompanied by cue sheets suggesting appropriate musical selections to be played at designated points in the film” (Cook 240). Therefore, in the 1926 version of *The Scarlet Letter* music plays a significant part, since it is constantly used to set the mood of the scenes: a solemn tune associated to the Puritan community, a lyrical love theme which is played out every time the lovers get together, or a shrill music in moments of tension. Throughout the film, music functions as a motif connecting different characters, ideas, and situations, and as a result compensates in part for the absence of dialogue.¹⁰

Surprisingly, having to shoot the film in black and white had a positive effect too. The director of photography Henry Sartov, who was Lillian Gish’s personal photographer and cameraman since her Griffith days and had followed her to MGM, created a very powerful and suggestive atmosphere, and reinforced the sharp contrast between some of the moral dualities that dominate in what Hawthorne defined at the end of chapter I as “a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (61): good and evil, sin and forgiveness, guilt and innocence, or love and hate, among others. In a sense, the stark dramatism provided by this use of black and white functions as the perfect cinematographic equivalent to the moral digressions that appear scattered throughout the novel. In his analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*, Leslie Fiedler specifically refers to “the black-and-whiteness of its world,” later adding that “black and white are not only the natural colors of the wintry forest settlement in which the events unfold, but stand, too, for that settlement’s rigidly distinguished versions of vice and virtue” (509).¹¹

Similarly, the film also reproduces with great ability the interplay between light and shadow that Hawthorne had created in certain moments of the novel, and which reminded F.

10. The music was composed by William Axt and David Mendoza, the tandem that in the mid-1920s wrote the score for other major MGM films like *The Big Parade* (1925) or *Ben Hur* (1926); Valls and Padrol discredit their music for being grandiloquent and rather predictable, 69.

11. Sartov was “a specialist in mood lighting and soft focus, or ‘impressionistic’ photography”, Cook 96. Lewis Jacobs points out that photography experimented great technical improvements in 1924 and 1925, mainly because of the introduction of panchromatic film, so sensitive that it “made possible revolutionary changes in photography, lighting, and settings”, 332.

O. Matthiessen of Rembrandt's paintings (281). This is what happens, for example, in chapter VIII, "The Elf-Child and the Minister", in which Hester remains in the shadows while visiting the Governor's house: "The shadow of the curtain fell on Hester Prynne, and partially concealed her" (132). Although this was one of the several episodes omitted from the film, the adaptation still made a bold use of this strategy, especially in one scene full of Expressionistic overtones in which the two lovers meet secretly at night by the fireplace in Hester's house, and their shadows are projected on the wall in an ominous way which seems to anticipate their forthcoming tragedy. This scene--one of the most visually striking in the entire adaptation--was already in 1926 a clear sign of the enormous potential inherent in cinema for creating or re-creating certain moods and atmospheres, and for overcoming its discursive limitations.

Finally, the stark black-and-white photography is also used to establish from the very beginning the opposition between Hester Prynne and the community, since in this first part of the film she is always wearing very vivid white clothes that stand out powerfully amid the sombre background of the Puritans.

In the 1926 adaptation the role of Hester Prynne was played by Lillian Gish, one of the great female stars of silent Hollywood together with Mary Pickford. Gish had established her reputation working for Griffith, but in 1925 she joined Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer when her economic demands became too high for the director to afford. Her status as a star was unquestionable, given that when she joined MGM she earned \$4,000 a week and had the right to choose director, partner and even crew; however, with the arrival of sound her films failed and the studio soon replaced her with a new emerging star: Greta Garbo.¹²

She acted in the two great films that Victor Sjöström made for the studio: *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Wind*. Years later, the actress openly acknowledged the tremendous influence that the Scandinavian filmmaker had on her acting career: "His direction was a great education for me. In a sense I went through the Swedish school of acting. I had got rather close to the Italian school in Italy. . . . The Italian school is one of elaboration; the Swedish is one of repression" (Jacobs 332). These words explain one of the most remarkable features of Sjöström's adaptation, the restrained acting of the performers, which stands in clear contrast to the dramatic exaggerations so frequent in the early days of cinema.

In the first part of the film the character of Hester Prynne is presented as a playful and immature girl who behaves in a rather childish way, in opposition to the seriousness that presides over the community. In a scene which is both candid and visually powerful, Hester is portrayed as vain and coquettish, since she enjoys looking at herself in a mirror that she has hidden in one of the walls of her house.

Such a characterization offers an excellent opportunity to introduce a symbolical element that was not present in the original text, but which fits perfectly in the story and stresses its lyricism. It is the white bird that Hester keeps in a cage, whose singing disrupts the solemnity of Puritan life. In what is clearly a reaction that preludes Hester's future, the bird manages to escape from the cage and flies free to the forest; she runs after it with her long beautiful hair loose. Just like the animal, Hester cannot bear living imprisoned amid the

12. On the meaning and symbolism of the notion of stardom in Hollywood see the different essays in Gledhill's collection.

extreme solemnity imposed by the Puritan community. The inclusion of this new element reinforces the links between the film and a novel as heavily symbolical as *The Scarlet Letter*.¹³

Hester's childish and playful nature is never more manifest than in the way she acts during her first encounters with Reverend Dimmesdale. After the initial encounter, their friendship derives into pure sentimental melodrama, into what from his perspective Mark Estrin negatively summarizes in the "boy-meets-girl" formula (25). The lovers often embrace and kiss passionately while a musical love theme sounds in the background; at one point--and before embarking on a long trip to England--Dimmesdale asks Hester to marry him, but he is shocked when in a fully dramatic scene the camera shows a close-up of Hester's wedding ring in the palm of her hand accompanied by a violent music.

Undoubtedly this whole aspect constitutes one of the major departures of the film from the original text.¹⁴ As it has been nicely phrased, in this rendering of *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne's idea of the Romance with a capital 'C' (based on the presence of the supernatural and the mysterious) disappeared, and was replaced instead by Hollywood's conception of the romance with lowercase 'c', a rather innocent love-story which conformed to the conventions of melodrama. It is worth recalling that, as David Cook comments in his book *A History of Narrative Film*, one of the defining factors of cinema in the 1920s was "a homegrown American tradition of sentimental melodrama and rural romance" (218).¹⁵

In addition, the 1926 adaptation also eliminated most of the supernatural elements that were central in Hawthorne's notion of the romance: the haunting presence of 'the Black Man of the Forest' is never felt, while Mistress Hibbins is no longer a witch, but one of the most respected members of the community. Therefore, the narrative strategies of the film are inscribed within a more realistic tradition, with only one significant exception, Dimmesdale's revelation of the letter branded on his chest, which, paradoxically, in the source text was merely suggested by Hawthorne, but which in the film is clearly shown in a close-up.

On the contrary, the second half of the film deals exclusively with the events presented by Hawthorne, but, since it only amounts to about 40 minutes, it is impossible to compress the entire plot of the novel. As a result, only its major elements are recreated after an extensive process of re-elaboration of the original material, which includes omissions, changes, and innovations. Such a process roughly corresponds to what the playwright and scenarist Sidney Howard labelled as "dramatizing by equivalent"--reducing novelistic events to a fewer number, consolidating several characters into one" (Peary 5).

Among the several central elements of Hawthorne's text that are absent from the film are the gradual changes of meaning of the ever-present letter 'A' (the central symbol in the

13. In Hawthorne's text it was Pearl who was compared several times to a bird, so that the inclusion of the animal at the beginning of the film could also be said to indicate the future birth of the child, who in turn will be mostly dressed in white, like her mother. A red bird was introduced in the 1995 adaptation to reinforce its marked sexual overtones.

14. This circumstance is made manifest in the Spanish title of the film, which was not the logical and predictable *La letra escarlata*, but the more melodramatic *La mujer marcada*.

15. The film adaptation also introduces several moments of humor that function as 'comic relief'.

novel), which signals how Hester's position in the community is transformed with the passing of time as she goes from being considered an adulterous woman to being regarded as an angel. This is the most evident manifestation of the 'multiple choice' technique used by Hawthorne throughout the novel to explain certain events or even to leave the question of their meaning open and ultimately for the reader to decide. However, the adaptation does include one element that had been revealingly left out from Hawthorne's text: explicit references to the most crucial act of the novel, the adultery itself. In the powerful scene of the film when Hester comes out of prison to face her punishment on the scaffold amid an angry crowd, she is repeatedly insulted with the word 'adulteress', as the intertitles make clear.¹⁶

Another relevant episode of the novel which is completely omitted in the film is that of the midnight vigil, which corresponds to chapter XII and which provides the novel with a symmetrical structure, in which the scaffold functions as the linking motif. It is on this special night only that mother, father and daughter can hold their hands together for the first time openly in a symbolic union, forming what Hawthorne defines as "an electric chain" (184).

A third crucial element that was also eliminated on the screen was one of the most ambivalent and debated aspects of the novel, Hester's trip to Europe, her final return to the community, and her death, since (as it will be discussed later) the 1926 adaptation closes powerfully with Dimmesdale's demise on the scaffold. Thus, the film was forced to leave completely aside the deep moral considerations that dominated the end of Hawthorne's text and which throughout the years have given way to differing critical interpretations, like so many other aspects of a strikingly ambivalent novel.¹⁷

Among the many modifications introduced in the script, the most significant one has to do with the character of Roger Chillingworth, a central element in the novel whose presence in the film is quite limited. He hardly appears on screen, he only does it in the last 20 minutes, when Pearl is already a grown girl. Therefore, as Mark Estrin rightly points out in his article, the tragic love triangle which articulated the original story practically vanishes in the film (24-25).¹⁸

The theme of what the critic James Miller defined as Chillingworth's 'unpardonable sin', that is, his slow painful revenge on Dimmesdale (which Hawthorne had carefully

16. The decision to 'erase' in the film this crucial textual gap is quite meaningful, since, as Peter Rabinowitz has pointed out, "it is often more useful to look not at the assertions about the issues at hand but rather at those places where the novel is silent. . . , what is *not* said is as important as what is", 409.

17. The 1926 rendering ignored the "Conclusion", which critics have long deemed unnecessary. Similarly—and for more obvious reasons—"The Custom House" has been omitted in all adaptations of the novel.

18. The role of Chillingworth was performed by Henry B. Walthall, who would also play the same part in the next version of *The Scarlet Letter*, the sound adaptation released in 1934; Reverend Dimmesdale was Lars Hansen, who also co-starred with Gish in Sjöström's *The Wind*.

elaborated), is also omitted.¹⁹ In the novel Chillingworth is presented not only as a 'leech' whose victim is the Reverend—as the titles of chapters IX and X openly indicates—, but, more importantly, as a human being whose complete obsession with the idea of revenge gradually turns him into a diabolical creature whose main features are his evil smile, his powerful gaze, and his physical deformity:

It seemed to be his wish and purpose to mask this expression with a smile, but the latter played him false and flickered over his visage so derisively that the spectator could see his blackness all the better for it. Ever an anon, too, there came a glare of red light out of his eyes, as if the old man's soul were on fire. . . . In a word, old Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil. (204)

All these revealing features are also absent in the film. There is only one moment when Chillingworth's satanic nature can be traced, and that is only at the very end, when he is shown by the camera standing behind Dimmesdale with a frightful look trying to keep the Reverend from confessing the truth; this episode occurs right after their only conversation in the film, when he has said threatened his wife's lover with the following words: "Dost thou shalt ever have happiness? *I shall always follow thee!*"

One of the main examples of condensation is the meeting of the two lovers in the forest, which in the novel occupied four chapters (XVI-XIX) and which in the adaptation is resolved in a very brief but effective manner. As it happens in the novel, the forest is presented as a benevolent and liberating setting of Romantic overtones where the two lovers experience "the sympathy of Nature" (245); here they can meet and discuss their situation away from the oppression of the community.²⁰ By this moment in the film, Dimmesdale has clearly become a weak and tormented character who requires Hester's support and strength, as the corresponding intertitle laconically makes clear: "I am too ill – too broke".

Arguably, one of the most problematic aspects of the 1926 adaptation is that Hester has been totally transformed by now into the proud self-sufficient woman in grey Hawthorne had depicted early in his novel: "She was ladylike, . . . characterised by a certain state and dignity (67). If, on the one hand, this dramatic change can be considered as unbelievable and inconsistent, on the other, it could also be interpreted as a clear sign of how deeply affected has Hester been by the severe punishment imposed on her by the community.²¹

19. Borrowing from Hawthorne's own words, Miller defines "this supreme evil" as "a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul resulting in a separation of the intellect from the heart", 91.

20. In the novel Hawthorne combined this Romantic view of nature with the Puritan one, according to which the forest was an evil Satanic domain, but the latter is not present in the film.

21. Another relevant aspect of the novel which the adaptation also left out is Hester's intellectual life as a result of her isolation. When comparing film and literature is commonly asserted that it is very difficult for the latter to recreate states of mind, a problem Ingmar Bergman has famously overcome in his films.

In the film the scene of the forest meeting includes some memorable moments. The crucial episode when--after planning the escape to Europe--Hester experiences a sudden liberating impulse of liberation when she lets her long black hair down and, especially, when she takes the letter off is beautifully reproduced. The intertitle (almost literally taken from the original text) serves to verbalize Hester's emotional state: "With this symbol I undo the past and make it as if it had never been!"²²

But the feeling soon vanishes as Pearl playfully gives back to her mother both the letter and the cap to put them on again. This is possibly the most evident manifestation of what Hawthorne calls Pearl's role "as a messenger of anguish" for her mother and her father (309), a constant reminder of their adultery through her unpredictable behaviour, questions and comments.

In fact, the treatment of Pearl is one of the major examples of how condensation often succeeds in the 1926 adaptation. In very few scenes, Sjöström managed to convey much of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the character created by Hawthorne. Pearl's mysterious 'elfish' nature is another feature of the original story that it was solved on the screen in an economic inventive way. Quite revealingly, the very first time Pearl appears on screen as a girl, the camera shows her playing happily drawing a big letter 'A' on the sand and pointing wildly at the bosom of her mother, who sits in agony by her side. This single scene seems to offer a perfect demonstration of one of the central theories developed by Hawthorne, the idea that Pearl was "the scarlet letter in another form: the scarlet letter endowed with life!" (1938: 124). As in the case of the brook, this is another excellent demonstration of how cleverly the film manages to present in a short precise way some elements that in the novel were more elaborated.

In relation to Pearl, there is a brilliant shot that demonstrates the tremendous expressive power inherent in silent cinema. In chapter XVI, Hawthorne compares Pearl to the brook: "Pearl resembled the brook, inasmuch as the current of her life gushed from a well-spring as mysterious, and had flowed through scenes shadowed as heavily with gloom" (224). This analogy, which Hawthorne fully elaborates during the forest meeting, is cleverly established in the film in a single shot of great lyricism which shows Pearl looking at her own reflection on the water, so that she has literally become one with the brook and the identification is complete. Thus, Hawthorne's original portrayal of Pearl as 'a natural child' is captured on the screen in the double sense of the expression: on the one hand she is the result of an adulterous relationship, and on the other she feels at home in the natural world.

The film closes with a climactic ending, an extended rendering of chapter XXIII of the novel, "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter"; two of its central aspects are perfectly recreated. First, the presence of a large crowd in the procession organized to celebrate the successful delivery of the Election Day sermon by Reverend Dimmesdale, whose eminence has just reached its peak among the community: "He stood, at this moment, on the very proudest

22. On the other hand, one of the most celebrated sentences in the novel--and in all U.S. literature--was regrettably omitted from the script, the words that Hester uses to explain her view of the adultery: "What we did had a consecration of its own", 235. This absence was probably due to the fact that--as opposed to the novel--in the film the moral implications of the adultery are hardly explored at all.

eminence of superiority, to which the gifts or intellect, rich lore, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England's earliest days" (301). The use of sound proves once again fundamental, since the martial drum taps reinforce the solemnity of the occasion among the Puritans, all of whom wave their hats cheerfully as a sign of respect for their minister.

The second aspect of Hawthorne's text that finds a valid counterpart on the screen is the paradox inherent in the fact that the Reverend finally resolves to confess his adultery exactly when his social prestige is highest. Terrified after talking to Chillingworth, Dimmesdale can hardly walk, and his tremendous internal suffering is reflected both in the paleness of his face—which stands in sharp contrast with his black outfit—and in his repeated taking his hand to his heart. After an impressive low-angle shot of the scaffold, he manages to ascend it and shocks the entire community by means of a double revelation: not only his adultery, but also the letter branded on his chest.

Finally, in the long and dramatic closing scene, Dimmesdale dies in Hester's arms in a medium close-up shot whose power is reinforced by a mournful tune; after many years, she has finally been able to hold him in public for the first and last time. That the prevailing tone in this ending is one of tragic romance becomes obvious taking into account that Pearl is significantly absent from the scaffold in this scene, so that the symbolical conciliating kiss she gives her father in the novel vanishes. Perhaps to compensate for this gap, the film closes with an interesting addition since, as Dimmesdale dies, his hand touches Hester's letter, which then falls right on his branded chest, as if he were finally carrying in public the blame for his action and at the same time releasing Hester from her burden after years of enduring her punishment in isolation.

It is undeniable that the 1926 film version of Nathaniel Hawthorne's canonical text *The Scarlet Letter* is far from perfect, since it suffers not only from the logical technological restrictions of the silent days of cinema, but also from several limitations of its own. Nevertheless, and especially after the release of the latest cinematographic adaptation of the novel, the 1926 rendering still remains—decades after it was made—a fresh and powerful lyrical film. At the same time it stands today as a perfect demonstration that the cinematographic rewriting of a literary work does not necessarily have to be absolutely faithful to the original text in order to be remarkable both as an adaptation and as a film in itself. Even though the letter is not actually scarlet in this case, viewing the 1926 silent *The Scarlet Letter* is undoubtedly a rewarding and unforgettable experience.

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