11. Read lines 41 to 45.

a. What comparison does the narrator make? What is the effect of this comparison?

The narrator compares the pillory to the guillotine, and therefore New England Puritan theocracy to the reign of terror during the French Revolution. The effect of this comparison is to discredit the theocracy by pointing out its similarity with a political regime generally associated with fanaticism, intolerance and violence.

b. What happens?

Hester Prynne walks to the pillory and exhibits herself there.

c. What image is conjured up by the phrase 'knowing well her part'?

This phrase conjures up the image of an actress acting in a play: it highlights the theatricality of the passage.

d. Find other elements and aspects of the text that point in the same direction.

Content elements:

- The passage above highlights the scripted nature of the scene taking place: like actors performing a play, the beadle and Hester Prynne follow a pre-established script. The judicial ritual narrated therefore appears as a theatrical performance.
- The beadle's role and Hester Prynne's are indicated by their costume and accessories, which have a symbolic function (the staff of office, the sword, the letter A). Although there is no inner focalisation (as in theatre) and Hester Prynne does not speak a word, her psychology is accessible to the reader through her body language and facial expression, in the way an actress communicates her character's inner life to the audience.
- The elements quoted above (costume, body language) hinge on sight, which is the medium of theatre, and theatricality in the text may be a consequence of the importance of vision. Indeed, Hester Prynne is made to stand on a "scaffold" and the narrator uses the metaphor of an actress to describe her. The beadle praises Massachusetts for "dragg[ing inequity] out into the sunshine". Hester Prynne's punishment is to be visible (everyone "may have a fair sight" of her, she must "show" her scarlet letter) through a theatrical performance on a pillory which looks very much like a stage.

Stylistic elements: The narrator enhances the theatrical dimension of the narrative by dramatising it.

- He uses of lighting in the second paragraph, contrasting light and shade to stage the beadle's appearance.
- He shapes the syntax of the key sentence of the passage to dramatise the first mention of the scarlet letter.

More in-depth analysis: the specific type of theatre evoked by the scene.

An allegorical drama that looks back to medieval theatre.

- The scene does not stage individual personalities but symbols for ideas, behaviours (Hester Prynne represents sinful activity) or social functions (the

beadle represents society, law, law enforcement).

- Hester Prynne is made to exhibit herself wearing a sign of what she is: the theatrical performance staged by Puritan justice does not have a plot, a story-line; it does not tell a story but makes visible an essence, a type (the sinful woman) or idea (sin).

Nevertheless, the text stages a confrontation between this archaic drama where people are reduced to a type or function and the life of the soul: the beadle's robotic performance is contrasted with Hester Prynne's behaviour, which manifests her feelings.

Additionally, Hester Prynne looks at the Bostonians who are looking at her: the positions of actor and spectator are reversible. Furthermore, the judicial theatre is embedded in the narrative drama so that for the reader the Puritans are actors who play the role of spectators. The theatrical performance cannot take place as it was scripted.

e. What question(s) does this theme raise?

The theatricality of the passage jars with the Puritans' rejection of theatre: the justice that they have established appears like drama. This makes Puritanism appear as marked by contradiction.

Problématisation à partir de l'analyse linéaire

Question raised by the text:

Was the Puritan theocracy a step forward, away from the Catholic Middle Ages, or a step back towards Medieval obscurantism and violence?

Devices used in the text to raise this question:

- Narratorial intervention: comments, comparisons; it frames the reader's perception.
- Theatricality: it suggests contradiction within Puritanism.

Plan d'un commentaire composé

Introduction
4 paragraphes : voir la fiche méthode

Développement
Reprise des idées issues de l'analyse linéaire dans un ordre cohérent, progressif et permettant de passer d'une sous-partie à la suivante et d'une partie à la suivante

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Gothic fiction explored the dark corners of the human psyche through stories set in supposedly medieval, benighted, Catholic Southern Europe, a natural home for the supernatural and the horrific. For *The Scarlet Letter*, the American Hawhtorne found a paradoxical equivalent much closer to home: New England in the age of Puritan theocracy.

This passage set in the early years of the Massachusetts theocracy tells a story of judicial retribution where a young mother is made to wear a letter referring to her crime in public, in a highly dramatised narrative characterised by frequent narratorial intervention.

The text is constructed as an imaginary theatrical performance filtered by a narrator who uses the combined resources of drama and narratorial privilege to produce a twofold revelation, by introducing a woman condemned by Puritan justice in a way which reveals the underpinnings of that justice.

In the first part of this commentary I will analyse the text as a retelling of the Puritan black legend. I will then turn my attention to the way the narrative dramatises the dramatisation of justice by the Puritans. I will finally address the issue of revelation performed, but compromised, by unstable signs.

I. The black legend of Puritan theocracy
1. a rigoristic and punitive patriarchy
2. a perversely legalistic society which uses the law as an instrument of oppression
3. a failed attempt at reformation
→ Hawthorne shows Puritan New England as a paradoxical society: its attempt to accomplish the Protestant reformation and create the modern world by cleansing Christianity of any traces of medieval Catholicism results in a society which is reminiscent of the (Catholic) Middle Ages, not least in its reliance on theatrical devices, despite Puritan condemnation of the theatre.

II. The theatrical device of Puritan justice subverted by the theatrical device of the narrative
1. spectacular judicial retribution in the form of an allegorical morality play
2. a conflict between two modes of drama: impersonal allegory / psychological theatre
3. a reversible theatre where everyone plays a role
→ The theatrical machine of Puritan justice proves precarious as it produces potentially unexpected results: it is intended to produce a transparent, unambiguous meaning but this meaning is subverted by the narrative or by its own contradictions.

III. Revelation through unstable signs
1. the revelations of the pillory: the punishment reveal the iniquity of Puritan society rather than that of criminals; the people considered criminals by Puritans appear as victims to the reader
2. the polysemy of the letter, which reveals Hester's sin but is illegal itself
3. a conflict between image (the visual language of theatre) and language (the abstract sign written on Hester)

Conclusion : Hawthorne raises questions about the nature of the Puritan plan and of New England theocracy, suggesting they were fundamentally flawed. However, the text is not a documentary record of Puritan Boston (long dead when he wrote) but a piece of imaginative writing set in a time and place which offered him fictional opportunities. By making Puritan justice a complex and multi-layered drama subjected to different points of view, he asks timeless questions about social institutions and the relationship between the individual and society.