

Amorce : 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 Hawthorne found a paradoxical equivalent much closer to home: New England in the age of Puritan theocracy.

Présentation du texte : Attention à ne pas confondre écriture et publication !

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

Annonce du plan: In the first part of this commentary / First, I will analyse ... In the second part / Then I will take a look at ... In the third part / Finally ... / The first part of this commentary focuses on ... / The second part examines ...

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

Conclusion partielle / Transition : 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. A theatrical scene

1. spectacular judicial retribution
2. an allegorical morality play
3. a political theatre framed by a dramatised narrative

Conclusion partielle / Transition : The theatrical machine of Puritan justice proves precarious as it produces potentially unexpected results: through the narrative: the places of performer and spectator are reversible; moreover the show is allegorical and didactic in intention, so that its meaning, its symbolism is essential, but it may reveal and mean something else than what Puritans plan.

III. Revelation through unstable signs

1. the revelations of the pillory: does the punishment reveal the iniquity of criminals or that of Puritan society?
2. unstable signs: polysemy of the letter, image / language conflict → subversion of sanction
3. Hester and her child as ambivalent pictures

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.