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**KEEPING WOMAN'S SEXUALITY IN CHECK: A STUDY ON SLUT-SHAMING IN  
*THE SCARLET LETTER* AND *EASY A***

**GUARABIRA - PB  
2016**

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado à  
Coordenação do Curso de Licenciatura em  
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como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de  
licenciada em Letras – habilitação em língua  
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Área de concentração: Humanas.

Orientadora: Prof<sup>ª</sup>. Ms. Eveline Alvarez dos  
Santos

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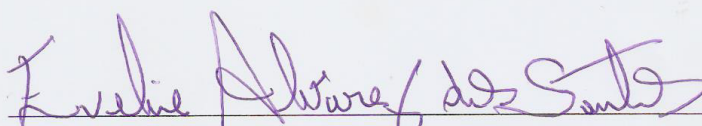
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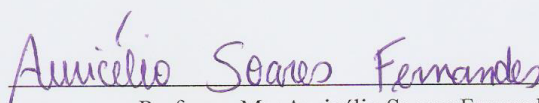
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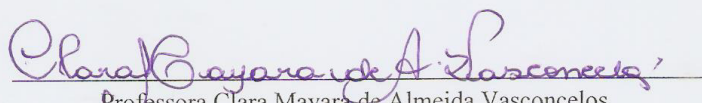
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## KEEPING WOMAN'S SEXUALITY IN CHECK: A STUDY ON SLUT-SHAMING IN *THE SCARLET LETTER* AND *EASY A*

Aurielle Gomes dos Santos<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

More than three centuries have passed since the severe Puritan society forced Hester Prynne to wear on her bosom the token of her sin. Inspired by Hawthorne's book *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, the 2010 American filmic production *Easy A*, directed by Will Gluck, depicts how modern society continues to deem as highly improper when a woman behaves in a way thought of as deviant. One of the mechanisms used by patriarchy to restrain women's autonomous choices is the so-called slut-shaming, which is the act of depreciating a girl or a woman by attaching to her the derogatory slut label. This study, developed through the analysis of the aforementioned works, is going to examine, therefore, the role of slut-shaming in keeping women's sexuality in check. In both the literary and cinematographic works, the main female characters cross the line of what is sexually acceptable, which leads to public humiliation and ostracism as forms of punishment. We conducted our research through the theoretical framework of intersemiotic translation, adaptation theory, and gender studies.

**Keywords:** Literature and Cinema. Gender Studies. Slut-shaming.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Society has always placed a lot of weight on women's choices when it comes to her sexual life. A fitting example is Nathaniel Hawthorne's acclaimed work *The Scarlet Letter*, a narrative that takes place in 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial America. Published in 1850, the story essentially depicts how Hester Prynne has to deal with the severe consequences of adultery, a behavior regarded as unacceptable by Puritan moral standards.

Nearly four centuries later, one would imagine that things have drastically changed; and one of the questions that sparked the idea for the present study was: what would it be like if Hester lived nowadays? Would she be less judged on account of a personal decision? The 2010 cinematographic production *Easy A* gives us an idea on where we stand in terms of how society deals with a woman deemed as sexually deviant. The film, directed by Will Gluck and with Emma Stone in the starring role, is a teen comedy that gives a modern interpretation to Hawthorne's romance. In the film, Olive Penderghast, a sort of modern Hester Prynne, is harshly judged by her peers when a girl spreads some rumors about her sexual life. This kind

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of harassment that both Hester and Olive went through matches the concept of slut-shaming, which is the practice of humiliating girls or women because the way they look, the way they act, or what they do is considered sexually transgressive. So when a girl or woman decides to do something that goes against accepted sexual standards she is labeled as a *slut*<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate how slut-shaming operates both in Hawthorne's narrative and Gluck's adaptation, and how it restrains women's individual choices. To that end, in the first part of our work we are going to analyze the relations between literary and cinematographic systems. To do so, we are going to explore the concept of intersemiotic translation, a term coined by Jakobson in 1959; in this connection, a key theory that is going to be examined is the sign theory developed by Peirce (1998), and we are going to specifically see how his interpretant concept is substantial in our understanding of how book and film are connected; then, some aspects regarding the fidelity idea and culture are going to be made based on adaptation studies, with the aid of names such as Stam (2000), Hutcheon (2006), Cartmell (1999) et al. We are not going to examine image and word per se, but rather how they converse and change through time. This paper also aims to provide an understanding on why woman is judged in a negative way for the same attitudes man is praised for; is woman's inferior condition something naturally attached to her being? What does it mean to be a woman? Some considerations based on gender studies (Beauvoir [1997]; Kate Millett [1990]) in the second section of our discussion will hopefully throw some light on these issues. Then, in the last part of the research we are going to identify and compare some scenes of the film and parts of the book in which the main characters are victims of slut-shaming and assess how this kind of intimidation affects both of them. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the sexual shaming, Hester and Olive are ostracized, so we are also going to discuss how it happens to them. Our research is relevant because once people become aware of the mechanisms behind practices perceived as natural but are in fact potentially harmful, such as sexual shaming, possibilities of change become real since this knowledge might foster a modification of behavior.

## **2 FROM BOOK TO SCREEN – TRANSFORMATION RATHER THAN TRANSPORTATION**

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<sup>2</sup> The word slut has a broad range of senses. But it is usually used in a derogatory way to refer to a girl or woman who is, or is thought of as sexually promiscuous.

In order to understand how literary work and film are related, our study will be initially grounded in the theoretical framework of intersemiotic translation. But firstly let us consider some aspects of the translation process itself on the basis of target-oriented studies, so that we might get a solid grasp of the intersemiotic translation concept.

As reported by Diniz (2003, p. 34) translating a text does not match the idea of transporting or incorporating the source text into the target text, but instead, both are somehow related and affected by each other. The author put it this way: “As a product resulting from a process, translation is a text alluding to another text (or texts), which maintains a certain relation to it or which still represents it in some way.”

That makes sense since a text is not something stable, immutable, and hermetic, whose meaning can be duplicated. Such line of thought is pointed out by Rosemary Arrojo (1998), who argues that there is no such thing as an inherent meaning in a text that needs to be discovered by the reader, but this meaning is developed through interpretation, which is always conditional and temporary because it is conditioned by context: “if meaning is social and, therefore, inescapably conventional, it is not intrinsic to texts or to any other form of discourse but is, rather, always ideologically and historically produced” (p. 34). And because of that “different groups within societies and cultures will always be inclined towards heterogeneity rather than consensus” (p.35). Simply put, text demands interaction between author, reader, and context.

In accordance with this understanding, Haroldo de Campos (1992, p. 35) argues for a theory of translation as re-creation or parallel creation, as a critical reading of the original work; ultimately, an autonomous creation. He developed the term *transcreation* to refer to the transformational nature of the translation/adaptation activity. Moreover, Hermans (1996) points out: “It is difference and therefore opaqueness and untidiness that are inscribed in the operations of translation, not coincidence or transparency or equivalence in any formal sense” (p. 5). And regarding the question of the translator's supposed non-interference or invisibility in the translated text, Hermans asserts: “My point is that translated texts - like other texts, only more so - are always, inherently, plural, unstable, de-centred, hybrid. The 'other' voice, the translator's voice, is always there” (p. 5). Therefore, up until this point we have analyzed translation as an activity of transformation, critical reading, and instability, instead of transference, reproduction or decodification/recodification, as conceived by traditional approaches.

Let us now consider how the intersemiotic translation field might further our understanding. The author who first used this term was Roman Jakobson in 1959. In his article *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* (2014), the Russian linguist provided the definition of the following three kinds of translation:

1. Intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
2. Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
3. Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

Hence, translation is not just a matter of words, but verbal signs can be translated into nonverbal signs. So how does this type of translation occur? Since we have here two different semiotic systems, is it possible to faithfully reproduce or transport the signs of one system to another? As stated by Jakobson, this process is not about transportation or reproduction; rather, it happens through interpretation. It involves searching for elements whose functions are similar in both systems and thus replacing one for another, as expressed by Diniz (p. 36).

A significant aspect of that process is undoubtedly the sign. According to Charles Sanders Peirce, proponent of the Sign Theory, or Semiotic, the sign is made up by three parts: “I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former” (1998, p. 411). Therefore, a sign consists of a sign, an object, and an interpretant. The sign is something that represents something else – the signifier; the object refers to what is represented – the signified; and as defined by Peirce, the interpretant is the effect that the sign causes upon someone. Regarding the latter, Albert Atkin wrote:

The interpretant, the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce's account, is best thought of as the understanding that we have of the sign/object relation. [...] a sign signifies only in being interpreted. This makes the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that, the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users. [...] it is perhaps more properly thought of as the translation or development of the original sign. The idea is that the interpretant provides a translation of the sign, allowing us a more complex understanding of the sign's object (2010).

The interpretant is, therefore, the understanding, the interpretation, the translation of the sign by someone. So it is only natural that different people are going to produce different



lines of interpretation since each person is inserted in a different cultural and social environment. Consequently, the interpretant is a substantial factor in our journey because in accordance with Sebeok (1986 apud GUALDA, 2010) the filmic version is the result of a mental representation of the sign and functions as the interpretant. In other words, the film is the interpretation of the verbal signs made by the film-maker/translator. That being so, can we really establish the criterion of faithfulness when it comes to the analysis of a cinematographic version of a classic book? Another field of research that might help us draw better conclusions is the area of adaptation studies. So let us take a closer look at it.

According to the theory developed by McFarlane the intersemiotic translation should not be judged in terms of fidelity. He observes:

Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the film-maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with. [...] The critic who quibbles at failures of fidelity is really saying no more than: “This reading of the original does not tally with mine in these and these ways” (1996, p. 9).

And as stated by Robert Stam in *Beyond Fidelity: the dialogics of adaptation* “when we say an adaptation has been unfaithful to the original, the term gives expression to the disappointment we feel when a film adaptation fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative, thematic, and aesthetic features of its literary source” (2000, p. 54). Stam also argues that there is not an “extractable essence” because a “single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings [...] The literary text is not a closed but an open structure to be reworked by a boundless context”. (p. 57). He goes on further to say that the fidelity might be even undesirable:

The shift from a single-track, uniquely verbal medium such as the novel, which ‘has only words to play with’, to a multitrack medium such as film, which can play not only with words (written and spoken), but also with theatrical performance, music, sound effects, and moving photographic images, explains the unlikelihood – and I would suggest even the undesirability – of literal fidelity (p. 56).

Additions, losses, and alterations are thereby inevitable when a work located in the verbal semiotic system is transformed into a work inserted in the nonverbal semiotic system because each system has its own inherent characteristics. That is why we need to analyze the

adaptation as a new and autonomous work, which cannot be judged based on the fidelity criterion.

In view of what has been discussed, let us now examine some aspects that should be considered when it comes to an analysis such as ours. First of all, it is important to highlight that the production of a new work related to a canonical novel is not just about linguistic and imagetic aspects, hence the reason why a discussion only focusing on differences and similarities between original and adapted works would be pointless. As we have seen, the translation activity is infected by historical, ideological, and cultural context. Levefere highlights that “translators do not just translate words; they also translate a universe of discourse, poetics, and ideology” (1992, p. 4). He sees translation as an acculturation process (p. 12), *i.e.*, an exchange between cultures. So the culture of the source text needs to be transformed into something familiar in the text of the target culture. It is clear then that culture and ideology are decisive factors to consider when investigating the procedures involved in translating/adapting.

A concept that might help us to better understand how target and source culture are connected when it comes to the translation process is the indigenization idea used by Linda Hutcheon, another theorist of the adaptation studies field, in her work *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). In anthropology, this term refers to turning a foreign idea into something familiar to a local culture, namely, recontextualizing this idea. According to Hutcheon “the context of reception is just as important as the context of creation when it comes to adapting” (p. 149), so she uses the indigenization idea to refer to these intercultural encounters. Therefore, the impact produced by the original work in its time, in its culture, should be translated, indigenized into the culture of the resulting adaptation.

Therefore, in view of what has been examined in this topic, our study will be mainly carried out through the lenses of culture and ideology; we are going to try to understand how the cultural background in *The Scarlet Letter* was translated, indigenized into the cultural context of our times in *Easy A*. For now, let us underline that a culture of intolerance towards women’s sexuality in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was quite fostered by puritanism, and we still have a culture of intolerance towards women’s sexuality nowadays strongly fostered by sexism; and we are going to explore the element of indigenization used by the filmmaker/translator, namely, slut-shaming.

As it has been noticed, the terms adaptation and (intersemiotic) translation have been interchangeably used in order to identify the screen version of the novel. Just as a matter of

clarification concerning the said terminology, some authors such as Stam (2000) expressed the idea that adaptations might be viewed as translations. He reasons that “the trope of adaptation as translation suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation” (p. 62).

Another important name within the adaptation studies field, Deborah Cartmell, presents three categories of adaptation in *Adaptations: from text to screen, screen to text*: “transposition, in which the literary text is transferred as accurately as possible to film [...]; commentary, in which the original is altered [...] and analogy, in which the original text is used as a point of departure” (1999, p. 24). The object of our analysis, *Easy A*, falls in the third category - analogy, because there is not a clear-cut proximity with Hawthorne’s canonical novel. As remarked by Cartmell, the written source is a point of departure, that is, in the American filmic production the essence of *The Scarlet Letter* was culturally, ideologically, temporally, and geographically adapted.

In the case of an analogy, does the reader need to have prior knowledge of the canonical work? Sanders (2006) points out that “while it may enrich and deepen our understanding of the new cultural product to be aware of its shaping intertext, it may not be entirely necessary to enjoy the work independently [...]” (p. 22). And then she quotes examples such as Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*, a modern adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*. So the comprehension of the film is not necessarily affected if there is not a prior knowledge of the literary work; but the experience of watching it may be enriched if we know the source text.

### **3 A SITUATION OF SUBJECTION THAT IS NOT NATURAL**

In order to grasp the nature of the oppressive sexual double standard here analyzed, we need to get to the bottom of the issue and come to an understanding of what it means to be a woman. According to *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, there are two positions regarding the concept of gender within feminist literary criticism field: the essentialist position conceives gender as a reflection of a natural and biological difference between man and woman. In other words, essentialists believe that there is an innate essence in woman that differentiates her from man. Conversely, the constructionist perspective holds that gender is a social construction; it is “the product of conditioning under patriarchy” (RIVKIN; RYAN, 2004, p. 766-768). Since we aim to show possibilities of change, as stated at the outset of this paper,

we are going to adopt a constructionist line of research; and to change something that is inherently natural is certainly beyond one's grasp. In this regard, Talbot underlines that "before change can even be wanted, what appear to be natural aspects of the everyday lives of women and men have to be exposed as culturally produced and as disadvantageous to women. This means beginning with an understanding of how gender is socially constructed" (1998, p. 149). And that is what we are going to discuss from now on.

An outstanding name who adopted this line of thought was Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). In her acclaimed work, *The Second Sex* (1997), Beauvoir set out to show how the inferior condition of women in society is not something natural. It must be pointed out that her study was based on an existentialist perspective<sup>3</sup>, an intellectual current whose substantial principle is that true facts are only manifested through existence. So there is no such a thing as an essence that precedes existence; people live, they make choices based on a context, and they build who they are. Beauvoir explains that the main goal of our existence is to achieve transcendence, which means to be free to make your own choices and "engage in freely chosen projects" (p. 29). But is achieving transcendence an easy road for women?

The Other – that is how Beauvoir describes woman's secondary position in society: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he in reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (p. 16). Such words still hold true to this day; being a woman still means to be the other.

When we think of ourselves we naturally take a stand as subjects, not as objects. But that is not what happens in practical reality when it comes to woman – man has taken over the position of the subject, of the One; and the relation between the Self and the Other is in no way symmetric or reciprocal: "the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the subject" (p. 17). Such assertions have proven to be true throughout history. While women have been kept in a situation of immanence or stagnation, men's lot is characterized by superiority and transcendence. But it is not easy to change the state of things. For one thing, there are advantages in being the other. The French author remarks that under the yoke of man, woman has material protection and moral justification of her existence; in other words, there is someone to take care of her and to tell her who she is, to give a meaning to her existence, that

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<sup>3</sup> "Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe" (MASTIN, 2008).

is to say, man himself. For another, being the subject gives the man a sense of superiority, and sure enough, he does not want things to change. In the second chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, Virginia Woolf employs a powerful metaphor to describe this male sentiment. She explains that life calls for courage, strength and confidence in oneself, and man attain these features by regarding woman as inferior to him, by feeling that he has “some innate superiority” over her: “Hence the enormous importance to a patriarch who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself” (p. 30). Then she compares women to mirrors:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. [...] That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge (p. 30).

How can this otherness be explained? Is there a mysterious feminine essence that dooms woman to be passive, submissive, pure, docile... the so-called eternal feminine? Is it because ‘some masculine innate superiority’? As we have seen, under an existentialist point of view, that is not possible. Beauvoir argues that women are kept in a situation that was not chosen by them, that is, a situation of inferiority. She explains that “when an individual (or group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior” (p. 24). But women are inferior to men not in the sense of a natural condition, but in the sense that they are in a situation shaped by social forces that “affords them fewer possibilities.” (p. 17). And this state of things is not something static, it can change. That is something interesting in Beauvoir’s study – it shows that even within this situation women are not determined and doomed to an unchangeable destiny, in other words, they are still free to make choices, and by doing so, they can gradually reach their independence. So let us try to understand what brought about woman’s situation.

Anti-feminists have tried to provide an explanation through biology, stating that woman’s body and her physiological characteristics are responsible for her state of inferiority. As aforementioned, only through existence facts are manifested, and our bodies certainly influence our existence and the way we experience things – “it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world” (p. 65), and we must recognize that woman’s body curbs the assertion of her individuality. Beauvoir describes this predicament as a kind of alienation by overwhelming

forces; woman is limited by the reproduction of the species and other biological characteristics:

Crises of puberty and the menopause, monthly ‘curse’, long and often difficult pregnancy, painful and sometimes dangerous childbirth, illnesses [...] In comparison to her the male seems infinitely more favoured [...] woman is weaker than man, she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood corpuscles, less lung capacity [...] Her grasp upon the world is thus more restricted; she has less firmness and less steadiness available for projects that in general she is less capable of carrying out (p. 64, 66).

But do these physiological facts place before woman an unchangeable condition as the Other? Just as our bodies affect the way we live in society, society affects our bodies as well; social forces determine which physical characteristics are important or not. For example, the concept of weakness depends on the social value society places upon it (BEAUVOIR, p. 67). Therefore, it is not just a body, is a body subjected to ‘customs, taboos and laws’; nature does not control the individual, it is the other way around (p. 68). Consequently, biology cannot determine woman’s secondary position. The fact that someone is born a female does not account for the oppression that she lives as a woman.

That leads us to the concept of gender in Beauvoir’s theory, expressed by her famous statement: “One does not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, and she proceeds to explain:

No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature [...] which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other [...] If, well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy, she seems to us to be already sexually determined, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry, maternity; it is because the influence of others upon the child is a factor almost from the start (p. 295, 296).

Since her childhood, the female is fed with the idea that she must act as a ‘true woman’ – submissive, passive, immanent, frivolous... – the other. Gender is then a product of external forces that place woman in a restrictive situation.

Some of Beauvoir’s thoughts influenced many feminist literary works. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1990), for example, shows how patriarchy is built on three ideological distinctions between male and female (p. 26): the first item, temperament, refers to characteristics of personality that are assigned to the subordinates by the dominant group according to its needs and values: female traits in this stereotyped division are passivity, ignorance, docility, etc. The second factor is the sex role, which determines how both male

and female are expected to behave in society: “domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male” (p. 26). The third item, status, guarantees the male superiority to the detriment of woman. The American author underscores that these three patriarchy pillars do not stem from human nature: “many of the generally understood distinctions between the sexes [...] have in fact, essentially cultural, rather than biological, bases” (p. 28). She constantly emphasizes how the “overwhelming cultural character of gender” (p. 24), which is shaped by external forces – family, peers, media... powerfully reinforce sexist gender roles. Because there is no differentiation between male and female besides biology-wise, the upbringing of children is such a decisive stage: “Every moment of the child's life is a clue to how he or she must think and behave to attain or satisfy the demands which gender places upon one” (p. 31).

Then there is not an inherent essence that justifies male oppression; it is not natural to be inferior and to be judged on a basis of a sexist double standard; biology is not destiny, as expressed in the idea of the binary gender system. Such concept of woman was forced upon us. But the bright side is that we, as individuals, can change social values. That being so, we can reformulate the idea of what it means to be a woman, and one of the ways to do so is through our choices. Beauvoir envisaged that new idea of woman: “To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man [...] let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an *other*.” (p. 740). Returning to Virginia’s mirror metaphor, she remarks that if woman were to tell the truth, *i.e.*, if she were to assert her value as an equal being, the male figure in the looking-glass would shrink, and maybe then both would have the same size.

#### **4 KEEPING WOMAN’S SEXUALITY IN CHECK: A STUDY ON SLUT-SHAMING IN *THE SCARLET LETTER* AND *EASY A***

The analysis of both works revealed a pattern or a sequence of facts involving the main female characters: to begin with, they are held accountable for a deviant behavior, that is, a behavior considered to cross the line of what is normal or acceptable. Such improper act is judged on a basis of a sexist double standard, which means that what is deemed to be out of line for women is accepted as perfectly normal when it comes to men; the criteria of judgment are not the same for both genders. Next, Hester and Olive are slut-shamed as a form of punishment, and a tendency we identified is that women are the main initiators of insults. And

then they are ostracized. Yet, both characters react differently throughout the whole ordeal, so we are also going to examine their mindset and the choices that they made in the literary and cinematographic narratives.

#### **4.1 A DEVIANT BEHAVIOR BASED ON A SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARD**

Hester Prynne lived at a time when “religion and law were almost identical” (HAWTHORNE, 2011, p.41). So adultery, her deviant behavior, was not only regarded as a sin under the severe Puritan standards, but also as a serious crime. How did Hester get into such a predicament? The narrator does not actually report how the ‘evil deed’ (p. 76), that is, her adulterous relationship with Dimmesdale, that unleashed the following events, happened: “We, the readers, are invited not so much to involve ourselves in a narrative action, as to contemplate the consequences of that action” (GRAY, 2004, p. 204). The pieces of information that we can gather about what happened come from the account of a townsman. Through his speech we learn that she was married to an English learned man, who sent her ahead to Boston in order to tie up some loose ends in Amsterdam, where they lived. But after two years of Hester being settled in Massachusetts, this Master Prynne did not show up, “and his young wife, look you, being left to her own misguidance...” (HAWTHORNE, p.53), at this point his account is interrupted by Chillingworth, whom he was talking to, because what followed was quite obvious.

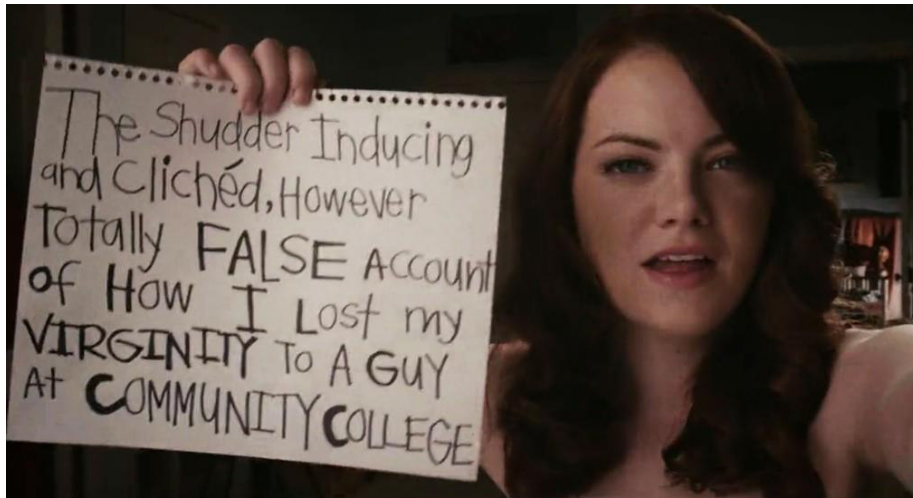
Was adultery committed by a man measured with the same scale of severity? That is not quite how things worked: “It is worth mentioning that adultery in a man was not judged strictly as it was in a woman. [...] it was considered a husband’s duty to ensure his wife’s fidelity by preventing all situations that could awaken her sensuality” (BRABCOVÁ, p. 23). This double standard is consistent with woman’s role as the other: “Marital infidelity in our civilization, where patriarchal traditions survive, still seems much more heinous for the wife than for the husband” (p. 565), so stated Beauvoir. And she explains that the economic reason behind such inequality is that private property could not fall into the hands of an illegitimate child (p. 115). As a result, the wife is to remain faithful and brush aside her husband’s escapades. What happened in Hawthorne’s work is a clear example, therefore, of the relation subject-other between man and woman, in which there is no reciprocity at all.

With regard to Olive’s case, the rumors about her sexual life are responsible for touching off the slut-shaming. The fact that people thought she was having several sex



partners was the deviant element of her situation and because of that, by the standards of our sexist culture, she deserved to be punished. But what exactly happened?

“The rumors of my promiscuity have been greatly exaggerated” (*Easy A*, 2010) – that is how Olive, the film narrator, starts her account through a webcast in her room, as we can observe in the image <sup>4</sup> below where she is framed within a medium close-up shot, in which her head and shoulders are captured. As highlighted previously, besides words, the filmic adaptation can also play with photographic images; therefore, we are going to go through some of them from now on.



**Image 1**

She claims that she will tell the whole truth about what actually happened and she is going to do so in five segments. In the first part – “The shudder-inducing and clichéd, however totally false account, of how I lost my virginity to a guy at a community college” – the director employs the flashback technique and we start to follow the lie that opened the door to Olive’s reputation as a slut. The main character does not want to spend the whole weekend with her best friend’s parents because they are fairly eccentric, so she makes up a story about having a date with a college guy named George. On Monday, when questioned by Rhiannon (her friend) how was the weekend with George, Olive tries to act nonchalant about it. But the blonde was having none of it and excitedly implies that Olive had lost her virginity and did not want to reveal it. Olive tries to tell the truth but she feels pressured to do otherwise because to be totally sexually inexperienced is not something to be proud of in our culture, thus she lies. That is an aspect that deserves our attention; there is a pressure toward girls to act in a sexual way, but there is a blurred line that cannot be crossed. Who draws such

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<sup>4</sup> All images were captured by us through print-screen.

line? What is the limit? Concerning that point, American author Tanenbaum states: “Caught between the conflicting pressures to have sex and maintain a ‘good’ reputation, they are damned when they do and damned when they don’t” (1999, p.7). Olive then becomes the talk of the school, and at first she sort of likes the attention since she was definitely not popular. But things start to spiral out of control when she accepts to pretend to have sex with Brandon, a homosexual guy who wants to get rid of his gay reputation because he could not stand the bullying anymore. And as if that was not complicated enough, Olive develops a ‘habit of helping the downtrodden’ (*Easy A*, 2010) – she starts accepting gift cards so boys could say that they had sex with her, which in turn would help them to boost their popularity.

Hence, her false promiscuity was the trigger for her slut label. One may object that events that did not actually occur cannot be analyzed as deviant. Granted, she lied about everything, but that is beside the point. The point is that people perceived her as a person who freely expressed her sexuality, and they fancied such conduct as unacceptable. Furthermore, “the ‘slut’ label doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with sex; very often the label is a stand-in for something else: the extent to which a girl fails to conform to the idea of ‘normal’ appearance and behavior” (p. xv), as underlined by Tanenbaum.

And were boys who expressed their sexuality regarded as deviant as well? Quite the contrary actually. Every guy who said that they had slept with Olive was praised and, consequently, climbed on the school social ladder. So it stands to reason that the double sexual double standard still survives, even three centuries after *The Scarlet Letter* story. Tanenbaum also discusses this aspect in her book *Slut: Growing up females with a bad reputation*: “Girls and women must act one way, boys and men must act another way. Girls and women are expected to lack sexual desires; boys and men are presumed to be ruled by them” (p. xvi). And in the same book, the words of a young woman who experienced slut-shaming sum up well how bigotry works in our society: “Men are not held responsible for their actions the way that women are. [...] When we talk about sex in our culture, it’s all about how women are to blame, women get pregnant, it’s all women’s fault, women are bad” (p. 86).

What happened to Olive pointedly shows woman’s otherness. In the psychoanalytic understanding man is viewed as the human being and woman as a female; so when she tries to act like a human being she is accused of imitating the male (BEAUVOIR, p. 83). So that’s why she cannot express her sexuality just as man does; he is standard whereas she is exception; she cannot have desires like man and much less act on them because it would be

deviant, it would be an attempt of asserting herself as the subject, and that is certainly not an idea patriarchy is fond of:

Patriarchal civilization dedicated woman to chastity; it recognized more or less openly the right of the male to sexual freedom, while woman was restricted to marriage. The sexual act, if not sanctified by the code, by a sacrament, is for her a fault, a fall, a defeat, a weakness; she should defend her virtue, her honour; if she 'yields', if she 'falls', she is scorned; whereas any blame visited upon her conqueror is mixed with admiration (p. 395).

On the whole, it all comes down to the idea of a feminine essence, of how women are innately chaste, modest, and well-behaved. These are the gender expectations in our culture, and if you are a woman and step outside of the boundaries you have to be punished.

#### **4.2 SLUT-SHAMING (WOMEN SLUT-SHAMING WOMEN)**

As has been noted, if a woman does not behave as a “true woman” – chaste, demure, meek – she is deemed as deviant, and as such she must be humiliated as a reminder that she should get back on the right track. Slut-shaming is then employed to that end – to constrain women’s sexuality, to show her that she cannot cross the line of what is decent; a line nearly always inexistent to men. In Tanenbaum’s study, we understand that slut-shaming or slut-bashing is a “form of sexual harassment” as a result of the constant evaluation of women’s sexuality, and it is proof that sexism stands still (p. xvii, xix). Is there a specific kind of behavior that qualifies a woman as a slut? Tanenbaum explains that such label has a wide range of uses, but in essence, it refers to any women “who appears open and carefree about her sexuality” (p. 88).

How was Hester slut-shamed? Adultery was so serious in her days, as we discussed above, that it warranted death penalty. But the magistrates decided that it would be an extreme measure in her case, so they determined that she had to stand three hours on the scaffold or platform of the pillory – “where evil-doers are set up to public shame” (p.138) – facing all those judging eyes and wear the scarlet letter for the rest of her life. The narrator describes such ordeal as a “spectacle of guilt and shame” (p. 47) “where she was made the common infamy, at which all mankind was summoned to point its finger” (p. 67); she also is described as an “object of severe and universal observation” (p. 51), and as a “statue of ignominy before the people” (p. 63). She was publicly exposed as a symbol of guilt and shame. It was a harsh punishment indeed: “The culprit sustained herself as best as a woman might, under the heavy

weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom. It was almost intolerable to be borne” (p. 48). What was there on her bosom that attracted so much attention? Yes, the main vehicle of her shame, the scarlet letter. In the book, it is described in several ways. For example, the narrator describes it as the token of her infamy, the mark of her shame, an ignominious brand, a red infamy, an emblem of guilt and torture, a burning letter, a scorching stigma. The letter was undeniably a heavy burden. In a certain occasion, when Hester got a chance to take it off, she felt immensely relieved, as if she had been freed and could finally breathe (p. 179).

What about Olive? How did she acquire the slut label? As we have seen, after she lied about losing her virginity, word got around really fast. To show “the accelerated velocity of terminological inexactitude”, which is how she peculiarly words the idea that rumors travel fast, the director employs the fast or accelerated motion effect. As a result, she is branded as a “bimbo”, a word that also connotes sexual promiscuity; in Olive’s words: “That’s the beauty of being a girl in high school. People hear you had sex once and, bam, you’re a bimbo” (*Easy A*, 2010). Additionally, after the rumors that she would sleep with boys for money spread, she definitely earns a reputation: the school slut. Gossip plays an important role in that process – it is a way of promoting homogeneity of thought and cohesiveness: “When teens unite to criticize a fellow student, their underlying purpose is to create a harmonious sense of camaraderie and to distinguish themselves from the person they’re gossiping about” (TANENBAUM, p. 169). There is a scene in which a group of students gather around Olive with signs displaying insulting words like slut; that is a moment that emphatically symbolizes the struggle she had to deal with, as showed in the next figure.



Image 2

In order to get an idea of how sexually active women, or perceived to be sexually active, are judged, several expressions that have a derogatory connotation are used in the movie: slut, whore, tramp, bimbo, skank, twat, floozy, trollop, and harlot. Meanwhile, the only word used to refer to a sexually active man is stud – a word that has a positive connotation.

Through Hester and Olive's experiences we come to understand how oppressive and unfair slut-shaming is. It restrains women's self-assertion and holds her back in the place of otherness. One of the aspects behind sexual shaming is that society regards women's body and sexual lives as something of public concern. In this connection, the sexual lives of the women here analyzed were unrelentingly scrutinized; that is patent when Hester is publicly exposed and compelled to reveal the identity of Pearl's father for instance. The fact that a sexually active woman's body is treated as a public matter leads, in its turn, to sexual entitlement, which means that man feels as if he has control over her. We can see the truth of that in Olive's case; for three times boys dealt with her as a public property. First, a guy insinuates that he does not need her permission to claim that he had sex with her; then, without Olive's permission, another boy not only asserts that he had slept with her, but also lied that she had given him Chlamydia, a STD; another boy also feels entitled over Olive's body and actually tries to have his way with her without her consent, as though she did not have the right to say no since she was a slut. Indeed, "for many men, woman equals sexual being, and sexual being means sexually available all the time" (TANENBAUM, p. 116).

Another effect of slut-shaming is that victims are adopted as personified symbols of improper behavior; they become the epitome of infamy. They need to be degraded so that other women might see the consequences of not following the rules. Hester, for example, served the purpose of being "a living sermon against sin" (p. 53). She was viewed as the personification of the sin:

[...] she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of women's frailty and sinful passion. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast [...] as the figure, the body, the reality of sin (p. 68).

Hence, through her example it was possible to control other women's conduct as well.

Another noteworthy tendency identified in both works is that women and girls, instead of defending each other since they are on the receiving end of sexual shaming, are quite often the initiators of the insults and end up helping with the reinforcement of their own condition

of others by tearing each other down. Why is that so? Beauvoir clarifies that one of the reasons why women continue in the condition of otherness is that they are not united; rather, they have a strong bond with their oppressors (p. 19). Kate Millett also elucidates that one of the characteristics of groups that are held in a position of inferiority is an internalized disesteem; so women undervalue both themselves and their fellows of the same gender (p. 55, 56). Because girls assimilate the idea that they are inferior, they do not “gravitate toward each other to create a support system [...] As a result many girls disavow their entire gender” (TANENBAUM, p. 192).

When Hester is about to leave the prison to go in the direction of the market-place, where she would be exposed, a group of women engages in a round of demeaning insults against the scarlet letter wearer. One of them lashes out: “This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!” (p. 43). After that, a man, yes, a man defends Hester. The narrator also makes mention of “dames of elevated rank” that “were accustomed to distill drops of bitterness into her heart” (p. 73). In a similar manner, most of the attacks Olive was subjected to came from other girls. The one who spreads the rumors about Olive losing her virginity, for example, is Marianne, a very religious girl, president of the “Cross Your Heart Club”, which was, as stated by Olive, “a club dedicated to shoving their beliefs down people’s throats” (*Easy A*, 2010). She is constantly calling Olive names. Then a girl named Nina, who is also part of the aforementioned club, slut-shames Olive and even Hester Prynne herself during a class about *The Scarlet Letter*, and suggests that Penderghast should embroider a red A on her wardrobe just like Hawthorne’s protagonist. Here, it is important to remember that *Easy A* is an adaptation that constantly evokes its source. And surprisingly, even Olive’s best friend, Rhiannon, bails out on her when she becomes the school slut, and does not hesitate in humiliating her whenever possible.

Beauvoir wrote that women see themselves through men’s perspective (p. 169), namely, as the other, as objects; that being so, they want to please men – whom they are raised to regard as their way of fulfillment and scape (p. 332). The result is a rivalry sentiment between women and girls; they feel that they need to compete with each other over men’s attention: “This concern is often destructive of feminine friendships. The ‘best friend’ loses her place of honor. The young girl sees rivals rather than allies in her companions. [...] The impatient hope for a man [...] narrows the young girl’s horizon” (p. 390, 391). So when some

women see that another one is attracting men's attention because she is not ashamed of behaving in a sexual way, they feel the need of degrading her; and stigmatizing her as a slut is a common way of doing so.

The fact that women are the ones who mainly engage in the slut-shaming is an important aspect in patriarchy's maintenance because it keeps them in an inferior condition since both subject and other are involved in maintaining the state of things; so there is no chance of a counterattack.

### **4.3 OSTRACISM**

The modern use of the word ostracism comes from an ancient Greek practice of banishing an individual who was considered a threat to the democratic state. In a broader sense, it refers to the act of excluding a person from a community by avoiding any contact with them; the shunning might occur because the person has displayed a deviant behavior (WILLIAMS, 2001, p. 7). When it comes to sexual shaming, ostracizing the slut is a way of protecting the ostracizers because the status-quo is maintained. People do not want to swim against the tide, so conformism gives impulse to ostracism (TANENBAUM, p. 154, 166). Therefore, the woman with a tainted reputation is marginalized in order to preserve the "purity" of the community.

What happened to Hester is a remarkable example of how that process occurs. The fact that she was compelled to wear the scarlet letter, a visible reminder of her deed, reinforced the ostracism. The red token "had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself" (p. 45). Throughout the book, Hawthorne makes several references to his protagonist isolation; let us consider some of them. She is described as an outcast woman (p. 140), lonely and without a friend in the world (p. 70). In the following passage, Hawthorne skillfully words Hester's situation:

In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind (p. 72).

Then she is compared to a ghost that cannot be seen or felt. Her only companion was little Pearl, who was, by extension, also secluded from society (p. 81). She was “alone in the world, cast off by it” (p. 97). Since people avoided any contact with the “fallen woman”, the narrator reports that a kind of magical circle would form wherever Hester stood so that they could keep distance from her – “It was a forcible type of the moral solitude in which the scarlet letter enveloped its fated wearer” (p. 207). And it is also narrated that only a few people would dare to engage in a conversation with her in public (p. 213).

Olive’s experience was similar to Hester’s. As we have seen, there are multiple references to *The Scarlet Letter* in *Easy A*; and one of the elements discussed in Hawthorne’s text that is alluded in the movie is the ostracism Hester suffered. We need to remember that Olive goes along with the lies about herself because, in the first place, she wanted to blend in. But it ends up having the opposite effect. While the boys that used her to boost their popularity got what they wanted, Olive was debased as a bad influence; even her best friend shut her out. The frame at 1:02:55 is a fitting example of Olive’s ostracism.



**Image 3**

Expressions such as “I had never felt more alone” and “how shitty it feels to be an outcast” (*Easy A*, 2010), uttered by Olive, show how challenging it was for her to be ostracized.

In fact, ostracism causes profound effects on the victim. According to Williams (2001), it threatens four fundamental human needs: the need to belong, because the person loses her or his connection with the group; the need for self-esteem, once it is a punishment for something considered wrong; the need for control, since the victim loses control over her or his interaction with the community; and the need for meaningful existence, because the



targets are reminded of their frail and ephemeral nature (p. 60-63). And throughout the book and the film, we can see such effects on the female characters ostracized.

Beauvoir stresses that the misbehavior of a man does not interfere with his relation with the community; he continues to belong to it because his flaws are indulgently dealt with; he offers “no profound menace to the order of society.” On the other hand, if a woman misbehaves, chaos is unleashed since “fear is always mixed with the blame attached to woman’s licentious conduct” (p. 221, 222). Therefore, she cannot be part of the group anymore lest she taints the rest of it. One more time, the double standard is evident; hence, if you are a woman and step out of line, chances are that you will be ostracized.

#### **4.4 THE CHOICE**

Naturally, society has changed a lot since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and so has the way women have chosen to deal with slut-shaming. With this in mind, how did Olive and Hester choose to deal with the humiliation they went through? What choices were they allowed to make?

As we have considered, woman is in a situation in which her possibilities are limited. But she is not determined or doomed to a changeless destiny; she is still able to make choices, which is certainly not easy because, unlike man, she is conflicted between the role society imposes upon her – of object, of Other – and the assertion of her autonomy (BEAUVOIR, p. 83). Even though she yearns for transcendence, as any human being does, external forces restrain her quest for liberty. Therefore, “there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female” (p. 359). So how did Hester and Olive deal with such dilemma?

The public exposure Hester had to face, although almost unbearable, was not enough to take her down; she put up a brave front and ‘sheltered her spirit beneath a stony crust of insensibility’ (HAWTHORNE, p. 59). But the whole predicament was definitely not easy; it took a big toll on her. The effect of the letter was so strong that the narrator sometimes associates it with physical pain. Anguish, dreadful agony, and torture are some of the words used to describe her ordeal. She underwent a deep transformation because of the position the red letter put her in – a transformation on her mind, on her personality, on her appearance. The narrator even claims that she ceased to be a woman (p. 144). To be a “true woman” in our society has also a lot to do with appearance; once Hester loses her considered feminine traits, she ceases to be a woman to social standards. One of the choices that reinforced her role of

Other was protecting Dimmesdale by concealing his share of the blame so that she continued suffering alone. Moreover, she kept a stance of resignation: “She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage” (p. 141). And as a result of such attitude, people began to view her, and by extension the letter, with new eyes. The token of her sin became to many people a symbol of her willingness to help; people even gave a new meaning to the letter – it began to stand for Able (p. 142).

Hester chose immanence; she chose to accept the role of Other. But there was only so much she could do alone in that society. As a matter of fact, there was no other choice. At a certain point, she even contemplates what her life would be like hadn’t Pearl come to the world, and she understands that more roads would be open to her; perhaps she could reach transcendence. But “everything was against her” (p. 145). Woman’s grasp upon the world is limited because she is the one responsible for the reproduction of species (BEAUVOIR, p. 84). Hence, because of her situation as a woman, all doors were closed to Hester Prynne.

On the other hand, Olive at first appreciates the attention, although negative, she receives from her peers when Marianne spreads the rumors about her sexual life. But when matters get out of hand, and even Rhiannon slut-shames her, she decides to deal with her slut reputation by defying her slut-shamers: “People thought I was a dirty skank? Fine, I’d be the dirtiest skank they’d ever seen” (*Easy A*, 2010). So she starts to act like the slut people thought she was; she does so by wearing provocative clothes with an A embroidered on them, and acting in a provocative way. Tanenbaum points out that this is one of the ways slut-shamed girls find to cope with the harassment:

While many girls crumble, some muster their strength to defy the slut label. Faced with rejection by their peers, they in turn reject the values of their peers. They come to believe that being known as a slut may not be so bad after all. It may even have liberating possibilities. These girls flaunt a proud, rebellious persona (p. 23).

However, her defiant attitude engendered an even worse reaction by her peers. It is worth noting that because Hester meekly accepted her reputation and conformed to the rules, people freed her from her stigma; that is reflected on the new meaning many began to attach to the letter A – Able. Olive, on the other hand, once society nowadays allows for more possibilities of choice, chose to go against the rules, which enhanced the slut-shaming. The message is clear: there is a place allotted for women, and if she tries to defy the conventions and assert her freedom she has to be put back in her place.

Nevertheless, as time goes by and insults get harsher, Olive feels the need to prove that she is not a slut; she wants her good girl reputation back. Society forms of repression are indeed effective. So she decides to reveal her version of the facts through a webcast, which wraps up the story. But what if she had really done the things she confirmed she did? Would she be less deserving of respect? Would the humiliation she went through be justifiable? One of her last thoughts in the film conveys an interesting message concerning these points: what she does or will do is nobody's business.

## **5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

At some point, every woman has either witnessed slut-shaming or has been called herself a slut – a pervasive and hurtful label. And whenever she is slut-shamed she has a choice; either she will try to defy the stigma or conform to it. It is not an easy choice because, as we have seen, she is divided between the assertion of her freedom as a human being and the role forced upon her as the Other. Furthermore, it is a choice influenced by external forces. Did Hester want to reach transcendence? Sure she did. Was it allowed to her to reach it? It seemed as if everything was against her. There is a point in the book in which Hester ponders over the womanhood question. She conjectures that in order for women and men to have an equal standing in society the whole social system, man, and woman herself would have to be transformed.

Even though Olive tried to assert her liberty, she is constantly reminded of her place as a woman – a place she did not choose; she was not born a woman, rather she learned to be one. She should not be scathingly judged on account of a sort of behavior by which man is praised for because women expressing their sexuality is not something shameful per se; society determines what is shameful. And that is the reason why she felt the need to defend herself and prove that she was a good girl. Ultimately, the film collaborates with the perpetuation of the idea that a girl who expresses her sexuality is a bad girl.

But as we have discussed, we can reshape the concept of woman since we make up society. One of the ways we can do so is by rethinking the way we use language; every time we call a woman a slut we are reinforcing the sexual double standard. Moreover, women need to stop seeing each other as enemies; they need to realize how many more possibilities would be open to them as long as they work together.

At the end of the day, we all have different scarlet letters, but it seems as if society purposely fails to notice man's. It is always her mistake, always her responsibility, and she is the one to always be condemned.

## RESUMO

Mais de três séculos se passaram desde que a rígida sociedade puritana obrigou Hester Prynne a levar no peito o símbolo de seu pecado. Inspirada no cânone de Hawthorne *A Letra Escarlate*, a produção americana *Easy A*, lançada em 2010, retrata como a sociedade continua a encarar como inapropriado quando uma mulher adota um comportamento desviante. Um dos mecanismos usados pelo patriarcado para restringir a autonomia sexual feminina é o que tem sido chamado de *slut-shaming*, termo que designa a prática de humilhar uma garota ou mulher por rotulá-la pejorativamente de *slut*. O presente estudo, desenvolvido através da análise das obras já mencionadas, examinará, portanto, o papel do fenômeno *slut-shaming* em policiar a sexualidade feminina. Em ambas as obras, as mulheres centrais do enredo cruzam a linha do que é tradicional, o que culmina em humilhação pública e ostracismo como formas de punição. Nossa pesquisa foi conduzida com base nos estudos de tradução intersemiótica, de adaptação e de gênero.

**Palavras-Chave:** Literatura e Cinema. Estudos de Gênero. Slut-Shaming.

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