INTRODUCING THE (MAIN) CHARACTER: N. HAWTHORNE'S HESTER PRYNNE AND M. SADOVEANU'S STEPHEN THE GREAT

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Abstract*: The paper analyses the ways in which Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mihail Sadoveanu introduce their main characters Hester Prynne and Stephen the Great (Ştefan cel Mare) in the novels "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Brothers Jder" ("Fraţii Jderi") respectively. Both writers avoid presenting these characters directly, but use rumours and stories about them to create suspense and expectations until their actual appearance.*

Keywords: rumours, justice, punishment.

There are many techniques from which writers can choose when introducing their characters to their readers. Some introduce them directly, from the very first sentence. Others present them for the first time later on in the novel. Some present them one at a time. Others gather all their characters in a scene, using this scene as an opportunity to write about them and their motivations extensively. In *The Scarlet Letter* and in *The Brothers Jder* (*Fraţii Jderi*), Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mihail Sadoveanu use a similar technique in order to introduce their main characters, Hester Prynne and, respectively, Stephen the Great (Ştefan cel Mare): they avoid the direct presentation of these characters, preceding their appearance in the novel by rumours and stories about them that create suspense and give them the aura of extraordinary personalitites.

The character Stephen the Great is drawn after a real personality. Ştefan cel Mare ruled Moldavia between 1457 and 1504. Due to the fact that he was victorious in wars with the Tartars and the Turks, defending not only his country, but also the rest of Europe against their invasion, he has become a symbolic figure, a defender of Christianity. His positive, but also negative traits are presented in *Istoria lui Ştefan cel Mare* (*The History of Stephen the Great*) published in 1904 by Nicolae Iorga. The book, the most complex and documented monograph dedicated to the ruler, presents him mostly as brave, honest, hard-working, forgiving and wise, but also mentions his cruelty, considered necessary for a good ruler in those agitated times. Sadoveanu himself dedicated a biography to the voivode, *Viaţa lui Ştefan cel Mare* (*The Life of Stephen the Great*), published in 1934, but in it he reinvents the past, treating it more like a novelist than like a historian. The first volume of *Fraţii Jderi* (*The Brothers Jder*) appeared in 1935, being followed by two other volumes, in 1936 and 1942. Here, Stephen the Great appears like the ideal ruler, and his reign as presented in this trilogy, is an ideal, a moment of maximum stability and development, to which all good rulers in Sadoveanu's historical novels aspire.

Hester Prynne seems to be a fictional character, though Nathaniel Hawthorne would like us to believe that she also existed in reality. He tells us in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) that he found her story and a piece of red cloth cut in the form of capital letter A and exquisitely embroidered among the papers of a late Mr. Surveyor Pue (actually a real person) while he was working at the Custom House in Salem, Massachusetts. The novel is supposedly based on these papers.

Both novels begin with a group scene, but while Sadoveanu's characters are gathered for a celebration, on a happy occasion, Hawthorne's ones are there with a serious, sad business. The action of *The Brothers Jder* opens on May 20, 1469. It is the

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Ascension Day, the dedication day of the Neamțu Monastery. Hundreds of people, from all over the country, are present. Some have come for the service itself, others for the blessings and for the holy bread, others still because the priests and the icons are supposed to help their ill relatives cure of various diseases. But above everything, they have come knowing that they will eat and drink plenty of food and wine. Suddenly, the bells start ringing to let the people know that the voivode will come too to attend the religious service to be performed at the monastery on this special day. Finding out this piece of news, the Moldavians become agitated and talkative. The action of *The Scarlet Letter* opens in June, probably 1642. It is a day when the inhabitants of Boston are gathered in front of the local prison, their eyes being fastened on its door. They are dressed in sad-coloured garments. From the grim rigidity of their faces, one can deduce that a terrible punishment is about to be inflicted, though for what crime it is difficult to tell. Because "in that early severity of the Puritan character (…) the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful." (2003: 47)

The only reference to nature made in the opening chapters of Sadoveanu's novel – that there were some apple-trees that were still in blossom in the orchards of the monastery - stresses the idea of happiness and plenitude. It is as if nature itself were celebrating the holiday. Hawthorne's few references to nature made at the beginning of his novel match the general atmosphere. In front of the prison, there is a grass-plot, overgrown with burdock, pigweed and other ugly, useless plants like these. Still, on one side of the portal, rooted almost at the threshold, there is a wild rose-bush, with flowers, as a symbol of moral blossom or of hope that does not perish even in the worst of circumstances.

In both novels, the women show the most vivid interest in what is about to happen. The Moldavian women pretend to be scared because if Stephen himself appears all sorts of catastrophes may happen, from a flood to a war. They have problems home and they should return there, not before seeing the voivode, though. They fill their waiting with questions, wondering whether he is terrible to see, as it is said, whether he really has a certain sword with which he beheads the disobedient boyards or whether they, as ordinary people, will be able to stand his supposedly terrible appearance. Stories start then circulating about the Hungarian king who had to lie in bed for three months after an encounter that he and his army had with Stephen and his soldiers on the battlefield, or about the fact that his father, Bogdan, had him blessed at a church in Mount Athos when he was a boy, in order for him to be always victorious in the wars with the pagans. It is due to this reputation of his as a great warrior and ruler that his subjects should not go anywhere, but should stay, watch, listen and welcome him. However, as nobody knows the route of his suite, the women doubt that he will come after all. Still, they talk about his physical appearance as well. He is rumoured to be not tall, but terrible. Then, they try to anticipate his behaviour. He definitely has no reasons to be so terrible when coming to a holy monastery. He should look around and try to know all his subjects and their families, especially the women because he is a widower and has to admire the beauties around from time to time. If he does not, at least his soldiers and courtiers should. So these women are curious, light-hearted and gossiping. Seen through their eyes, the voivode appears endowed at the same time with the exaggerated, almost supernatural powers of a god and with the problems and weaknesses of an ordinary man.

The Bostonian women are strong, of a coarse fibre, with broad shoulders and round, ruddy cheeks. They have no reason or inclination for being light-hearted. On the contrary, they are very serious and stern. They voice their complete dissatisfaction with

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the punishment that a certain Hester Prynne has received from the authorities of the town. They think it would have been better if they had been allowed to deal with "malefactresses" (2003: 48) like her. They would have put the brand of a hot iron on her forehead at the very least. One of them even suggests the death penalty, otherwise she will become a bad example for the community, inviting other women to do the same as her. It is a man in the group that tells them to show more mercy and to become silent, for Hester herself is coming out of the prison. For the moment, we do not find out what Hester looks like, what she has done and what her punishment is.

There is also a man that stands out of the crowd in *The Brothers Jder*, but not to contradict those around by suggesting they should be more merciful. Stephen does not need such protection. Nechifor Căliman, the huntsmen's chief, offers those who are interested a story about the ruler and about the reason why he is coming to the monastery. The reason, he thinks, is to settle Nechifor's own troubles with those who, in his absence, took possession of his lands. The story speaks much about the character of the voivode. It began 16 years before the present events, at a wedding party where Stephen's father, Bogdan, who was then ruler, was betrayed and killed by some of his boyards. It was Nechifor who warned Stephen and then accompanied him out of the country, where they stayed until it was safe for the latter to return and occupy the throne again. Coming back, Nechifor himself found other people mastering his plots of land. He went to Stephen for justice and found him a good ruler, well guarded, intending to keep order in the country, fighting instead of partying. Stephen remembered his old friend and rewarded him for his services, but also promised to help him take back what was rightfully his. Nechifor's appearances at the trial alternate with the wars in which the Moldavians win. On this day there is another one.

In *The Scarlet Letter* we also have a story about the main character and the story is also told by a man, though not to the crowd, but to another representative of his sex. The latter is Hester's husband, but nobody knows this. At the beginning he is shocked to see his wife on the scaffold, but then he calms down and makes her a sign to keep his identity secret. The one whom he asks about her identity and about the reason why she is punished offers her biography anterior to these events. Thus, we find out at the same time with the alleged stranger that Hester is the wife of a learned man, English by birth but living in Amsterdam. Deciding to leave for Massachusetts, he sent his wife there before him, giving then no sign in the two years that passed. Left all by herself, his wife committed adultery, the "result" being the baby she holds in her arms. The speaker does not know who the baby's father is, as Hester refuses to divulge this information. Still, taking into account that the woman is young and beautiful, therefore tempted, and the husband is probably dead, the magistrates decided against the death penalty, which would normally have been the right punishment for such an offence. Instead Hester was sentenced to stand for three hours on the platform of the pillory and to wear the letter A (standing for "adulteress") on her gown for the rest of her life.

Stephen's arrival is preceded by that of his soldiers, who, in a very organized manner, occupy strategic positions, surrounding the place and taking the keys of the monastery. Hester's appearance is preceded by that of the town-beadle, who comes out of the prison "with a sword by his side and his staff of office in his hand" (2003: 49). He uses his staff to draw the young woman forward, but on the threshold she repels him and goes out as if by her own free will, thus proving to be a strong nature.

Stephen is welcomed by the important clergymen and by some boyards, while the other people are asked to step aside to let him pass to the church. Hester is not welcomed by anybody, but the town-beadle also asks the people to make way and let

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her pass to the scaffold in the market-place. Over the scaffold, there is a kind of balcony appended to the meeting-house. There, Hester is awaited by Governor Bellingham with his guard, several of his counselors, a judge, a general, reverend John Wilson and reverend Dimmesdale, dignified, just and wise men, but at the same time stern and merciless when it comes to mistakes of any kind.

The Moldavian ruler is accompanied by his son, Alexandru, and by the important boyards. When seeing him, the people kneel and, not daring to look at him directly, they glance furtively. However, when he allows them, they stand up and look at him and at Alexandru. He wishes them all the best and assures them that he will always do justice. A woman gets so excited about the voivode's presence, that she gives birth to a child while he is talking. Stephen offers to become the child's godfather.

Hester is accompanied by some stern-browed men, several unkindly-visaged women, and by a crowd of school-boys who do not quite understand what is happening, but are curious and stare at her from time to time. She does not talk.

The physical portraits of both Hester and Stephen also reflect their personalities. Stephen is forty years old, has a grey moustache, green searching eyes, tightly pressed lips. He is clear shaven. Though he is short, those around him seem to be looking up at him, thus implicitly recognizing his superiority. Hester is a tall, young, elegant figure. She has dark, abundant, glossy hair, beautiful and regular features, and rich complexion. Her eyes are deep and dark, her brow marked. She has a certain state and dignity, being lady-like according to the tastes of the period.

Stephen behaves like a master and is treated like a master. The priests sing and meet him. He does ritual gestures: crosses himself, kisses the Bible and the hand of the abbot, who, in turn, kisses the voivode's hand. However, even though he is supposedly among friends, he feels for his sword and dagger. Hester is very scared by what is happening to her, but is, at the same time, too proud to show it. She blushes, but has a haughty smile and a glance that is unabashed. When seeing the people, her first reaction is to clasp her baby closely to her bosom, as if to hide the letter A that was wrought or fastened into her dress. Then she realizes that it would be useless to try to hide one image of her sin with another. The letter A, however, which was supposed to identify her as an adulteress, and to lower her in the eyes of the people, "was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore." (2003: 50) It has almost the opposite effect to the one intended, being like a spell, "taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself." (2003: 51) She is supposed to feel and appear humiliated, but she has never looked more lady-like, to the great astonishment of the people. However, a more sensitive observer could have perceived her despair. There appears to be no such observer in the crowd, though, even if one of the women considers that she felt the stitches in the letter in her heart. All the other women, however, think that the letter is like a laugh in the faces of those who meant it as a punishment, due to Hester's extraordinary talent at needlework.

The voivode's intention is to go in the church, then to judge, then to celebrate. So after praying at the tombs of his ancestors, disturbed by the fact that they killed one another, he does justice to Căliman and meets Ionuț Jder, whom he allows to become his son's friend. Then, they pray and eat. Nicodim is called to tell the voivode about the meaning of some lines in the Apocalipse, and the monk speaks about a war with the pagans. The people feast, but the voivode is worried.

Hester has no confessed intention but she is strongly determined to keep the identity of her child's father secret. Though she fears the people in the balcony and they

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insist that she should speak and give a father to her child, she does not do it, much to the apparent admiration of reverend Dimmesdale, who attributes her refusal to the "wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart." (2003: 64) After a sermon on sin from reverend Wilson, Hester returns to prison.

Though we have no information regarding Sadoveanu's being familiar with Hawthorne's novel, we can notice that the waiting, the appearance and the discussion are the three successive moments in the unfolding of the action in both literary works. Despite the similar technique used, however, there are, as we pointed out, many differences in the presentations of the two characters, due to their different background, social status and role in the future development of the action.

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