

**Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification:  
A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation***

Radhia Amieur<sup>\*1</sup> ; Fethi Haddouche<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, University of Blida 2 (Algeria),  
e-mail : er.amieur@univ-blida2.dz

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, University of Blida 2 (Algeria),  
e-mail : fethi\_h@yahoo.fr

**Submitted**

05/06/2023

**Accepted**

31/10/2023

**Published**

01/12/2023

**Abstract:** The present paper explores the concept of confession and its genealogical development as articulated by Michel Foucault's work and portrayed in both Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Roth's *Indignation*. By comparing and contrasting confessional practices in the selected novels, this study aims to highlight how the distinct definitions and functions assigned to confession exist within both religious and secular contexts. In particular, this analysis seeks to shed light on how religious confession rites have evolved into an important technology for knowledge production and, ultimately, the exercise of power in the secular age. This study eventually demonstrates the importance of the protagonists' social and cultural understanding of confession, as well as the way these understandings shape both Hester's and Marcus's experience with it.

**Keywords:** Confession; Power Dynamics; Subjection; *The Scarlet Letter* ; *Indignation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Confession, as a concept, has captivated the attention of scholars throughout history. Its multifaceted and ever-evolving nature, along with its profound impact on the individual's life, renders it a fertile subject for scholarly inquiry. While confession is often associated with religious rites, where transgressors admit their wrongdoings in pursuit of penance, limiting our perspective to this narrow lens disregards its enduring relevance in secular settings. Consequently, Michel Foucault has delved deeply into the intricate web of its genealogy across historical epochs revealing its continued presence beyond the ecclesiastical realm. Thus, the following discourse aims to build on Foucault's genealogy of confession by

---

**\*Corresponding author**

## **Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation***

examining its presence and purpose in the religious setting of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (first published in 1850) as well as the secular sphere of Philip Roth's *Indignation* (first published in 2008). The primary objective is to focus on confession as a religious rite and demonstrate how it has been appropriated by the secular society. Through this intricate analysis, our aim is to elucidate how, despite the ever-changing techniques applied in confession, it still functions within Marcus's secular environment the same way it functions in religious settings, as a mechanism of regulatory power exerted over the self.

### **2. Verbalization of Truth: from a Christian Tradition to a Secular Technology of Power**

In his attempt to contextualize and examine the utilization of confessional practices, what he rather calls "truth games" (1988, p. 39) in the social sciences, Foucault outlines the evolution of modern confessional practices, revealing that these practices were introduced in Christianity as a religious rite aimed at obtaining penance. This religious rite was fundamentally used for the confessing of sins, the verbalization of repentance, as well as the performance of acts of reparation or self-discipline. Nonetheless, he argues that the concept of confession in Christianity has its origin in Ancient Greek philosophy.

Although some argue that the moral and ethical values of the first two centuries A.D. are not directly applicable to the contemporary secular Western values (Besley, 2007), Foucault maintains that the two eras are "historically contiguous" (1988, p. 19). His exploration of the hermeneutics of the self underscores the way in which Christianity embraced the Delphic moral principle of "know thyself," elevating it above the principle of "to be concerned, to take care" of the self (p. 19). This latter governed social and personal conduct and served as a cornerstone of Greek philosophy on the art of living. In contrast, "know thyself" served as "technical advice," a rule applied when consulting the oracle, essentially cautioning individual not to "suppose yourself to be god" (p. 19).

Understood as a command to gain self-awareness and insight into one's own nature and behavior vis-à-vis a Deity, Foucault (1988) argues that the Delphic principle of self-knowledge was reinterpreted and incorporated into Christian ethics and spirituality. Since knowledge of oneself was one of Christianity's central preoccupations, self-knowledge within this framework was fundamentally placed on achieving a more profound understanding of oneself in relation to God. The Christian interpretation of "know thyself" thus took a secondary role to asceticism. Thus, asceticism put significant emphasis on self-discipline, self-

punishment, and self-renunciation as the pathway to salvation. Foucault (1988) attests that what sets Christian asceticism apart from the Delphic principle is fundamentally its consistent focus on relinquishing both the self and one's conventional understanding of reality.

Looking at Hawthorne's work from this perspective, one underscores the depiction of how self-renunciation overshadows the importance of self-knowledge in confessional instances within the novel, resulting in a unique conceptualization within Christian spirituality. This theme is exemplified by his portrayal of Hester Prynne's public shaming on the scaffold of the pillory, which serves as a setting aimed at reshaping her understanding of reality by altering her own identity and her relationship to it.

## 2.1 Hester Prynne's Exomologesis and the Theatre of Humility:

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (2008) presents readers with Hester Prynne, the protagonist whose position within the Puritan community is firmly established from the outset as that of a sinner. As Hawthorne notes, she is introduced to the readers as "some noted culprit, on whom the sentence of tribunal had but confirmed the verdict of public sentiment" (Hawthorne, p. 74). The Puritan belief informs this public sentiment in the sinfulness of adultery, which is both legally punishable and morally reprehensible. Building on this idea, Hester is not only subject to the laws of the land but also to the religious authority of the Puritan community, who view it as their duty "to exhort her to repentance and to confession" (Hawthorne, p. 98). To further illustrate, Hester is compelled to acknowledge, publicly, her sinfulness as a form of penance, per the "Scriptures and statute-book" (Hawthorne, p. 75).

Given that Hester has failed to conform to the Puritan's strict religious codes, she is perceived as the embodiment of "unholiness, fittiness, and vileness" (Paden, 1988, p. 74) in a community that has often described itself as the "Bible Commonwealth" (Eusden, 1960, p. 1). In essence, Hester has not only estranged herself from her community, but also from divine grace. What is particularly significant here is the particular way to attain her penance, which fundamentally adhere to "the way of grace alone" (Paden, 1988, p. 64).

Consequently, Hester is expected to recognize her culpability as a first step in her quest for penitence. However, given her community that is made of devout Calvinists who unwaveringly adhere such doctrine, Hester's moral and spiritual transformation is far from easy, as it relies solely on the grace of God. This serves as a benchmark for understanding the expectations placed upon Hester as well as the challenges she encounters throughout the novel. These challenges do not

## Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation*

---

solely arise from the doctrine itself but, more precisely, from the resolute adherence to it.

To further illustrate the impact of religious doctrine on the community, there is a scholarly consensus that Puritan culture is characterized by strict self-discipline, stringent moral codes, and constant self-examination, which significantly influence the Puritan way of life. It has been said that pursuing self-renunciation is fundamental to Christian asceticism, which entails the abandonment of earthly desires and attachments in favor of a higher spiritual state. This spiritual practice emphasizes discipline and sacrifice as indispensable elements for achieving penance. Nonetheless, Paden asserts that the Puritans have fervently embraced “this myth and worked out its severest applications” (p. 64). In this context, it becomes evident that Hawthorne depicts how Puritans take self-renunciation to an extreme level while dealing with Hester. His portrayal of Hester's community underscores not only their pervasive emphasis on sin and atonement, but also their intolerance and unaccepting of anything that deviates from their religious norms. This is evident in their treatment of Hester and her child as Hawthorne posits that they are perceived as “something outlandish” and “unearthly” (p. 141). These statements depict the mother's and the child's alienness to the conventional standards of the community.

Since “Christianity is a confession” (Foucault, 1997, p. 200), Hester's community puts so much emphasis on salvation and on confessing sins, which is integral to their religious praxis. In essence, religious morality forms the foundation for their behavioral norms and confession becomes mandatory, particularly concerning “sins against the Sixth Commandment” (Foucault, 1996, p. 165). To further connect this to the previous point, this practice enables the Church to exert substantial authority over Hester's and everyone else's intimate lives, thus attesting to the influential role of religious institutions in shaping society's ethical and moral landscape.

Considering the importance of Hester's public spectacle, it is essential to emphasize that this spectacle morphs beyond its simplistic aim of extracting a verbal confession. When analyzing the first chapters of the novels, it is revealed that Hester's public penance serves a multifaceted purpose. Hawthorne's language articulates that the consequences of her transgression are palpably evident through the presence of both the scarlet letter as well as her illegitimate child. To further illustrate, Hawthorne poignantly underscores that “one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another” (p. 80), suggesting that “the flesh always confesses, even if it doesn't speak” (Foucault, 2021, p. 10).

Delving deeper into the nature of the spectacle, it becomes evident how it

functions as an exposé of Hester's "sinful being" (Foucault, 1988, p. 42). It is fundamentally a "spectacle of guilt" (Hawthorne, p. 84) that goes beyond the mere verbalization of the committed sins. Instead, it seeks "to do the truth" and not merely "to tell the truth" (Foucault, 2014, p. 102). Building upon this idea, Hester's moral transformation hinges on her initial recognition of the truth that she has sinned, which is fundamentally the translation of the word "exomologesis" (Foucault, 1988, p. 41). Foucault elucidates that one must "sacrifice the self to discover the truth about ourselves, and we have to discover the truth about ourselves to sacrifice ourselves" (1993, p. 221).

In the light of these insights, Hester's exhibition before her community takes a deeper significance as it is not merely to vocally confess her sins, but to humbly and genuinely acknowledge her penitent status. This acknowledgement, marked by remorse, shame, and humility serves as crucial precursor to potential redemption (Foucault, 2021). Deciphering herself and acknowledging herself in this manner, Hester unlocks the door to her "second penance" (Foucault, 2021, p. 36) and, consequently, is restored as a member of the Church.

It is clear by now that Hester's confession necessitates a more comprehensive act of self-exposure, coupled with a profound recognition of her need for absolution and spiritual guidance. This internal process of self-reflection and spiritual metamorphosis is of paramount importance as per Foucault's elucidation (1988) that the self is a principle of the soul rather than the body. Within this framework, Hester's repudiation of material and sensual desires becomes imperative, giving way to a more ascetic approach that serves as a catalyst for her spiritual advancement and the cultivation of a closer communion with the divine grace.

In the light of the preceding discussion, Hester's exomologesis becomes her rite of passage and a potent tool of persuasion. Consequently, the disapproval shown by the spectators of Hester's penance becomes intelligible. Notably, when Hester stands before the crowd, her demeanor conveys strength and defiance. Hawthorne states that her bearing is "marked with natural dignity and force of character" (p. 79). However, this outward display of strength suggests a reluctance to align her volition with the divine, as true alignment requires self-renunciation. Instead of conforming to the will of the divine through self-renunciation, Hester's "haughty smile[s]" and "glance[s] that would not be abashed" (p. 80) appear to yield to self-centered tendencies. Consequently, she comes to be viewed as an adversary to God, akin to the "Antichrist," (Calvin as cited in Paden, 1988, p. 70).

This compelling image that stands in stark contrast to the expectations

## **Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation***

placed upon Hester. While she recognizes the need to acknowledge her sinful nature, her approach to this undertaking showcases an absence of the expected shame and humility that the Puritan sacrament of penance demands. Hester's unyielding "dignity" and "force of character," in the words of Thomas Shepard, "remain rooted in this world, rooted in [her] pride, rooted in [her] filthiness still" (as cited in Paden, 1988, p. 71). Shepard's assertion highlights that, sincere repentance necessitates the subordination of the self and acknowledgment of one's inadequacies, as it is through this modesty that reconciliation becomes achievable. It is the "avenue of hope" (p. 72) for individuals striving for absolution.

As Foucault reminds us, the act of "penance has to be dramatic, not nominal" (1988, p. 42); Hester's manifestation of acknowledgment is insufficient in the eyes of the crowd. In their view, her demeanor is a "laugh in the faces of [the] godly magistrates" (Hawthorne, p. 82), an irreverent display of pride and lack of remorse. Such behavior only further reinforces the severity of her sin in the eyes of the public, leading them to wish for her demise as a form of retribution as Hawthorne illustrates that they "were stern enough to look upon her death" (p. 86). Hester's failure to comply with the religious expectations during her confession precludes the presence of divine providence, and further reinforces her ostracization from society. In the matter, Paden (1988) quotes Richard Baxter:

Man's fall was his turning from God to himself; and his regeneration consisteth in the turning of him from himself to God... [Hence,] self-denial and the love of God are all [one]... It is self that the Scripture principally speaks against... The very name of Self and Own, should sound in the watchful Christian's ears as very terrible, wakening words, that are next to the names of sin and Satan (p. 69)

This citation highlights the importance of meekness, candor, and self-renunciation in seeking absolution. It underscores the inadequacy of mere verbal confession as a vehicle for redemption; highlighting the imperative for Hester to internalize the need for contrition in embarking upon a genuine process of self-transformation. In alignment with Foucault (1988), penance involves not only confessing one's sins but also exhibiting the true nature of the sinner, as "the greater part of penance [involves] not telling the truth of sin but showing the true sinful being of the sinner," p. 42). Therefore, this "penitential drama" (Foucault, 2014, p. 212) necessitates the presence of symbolic, ritualistic, and theatrical elements to convey the depth of Hester's remorse and her commitment to spiritual renewal.

### **2.2 Marcus's Examination and the Birth of the Art of the Human Body:**

In Philip Roth's novel, *Indignation* (2009), The reader is treated with the

complex journey of its protagonist, Marcus Messner. The latter, a young Jewish teenager from working-class origins, faces a plethora of challenges as he begins his academic journey in the prestigious institution of Winesburg, Ohio during the early 1950s. Upon his arrival to Winesburg, the protagonist faces multiple difficulties as he attempts to assimilate into his new academic environment. In portraying these challenges, Roth portrays how these challenges extend beyond mere scholastic demands, expressing Marcus's profound struggles reconciling his individuality with the hefty societal expectations he is burdened with. In essence, the novel captures Messner's dilemmas, including his clash with the college administration over dormitory regulations and obligatory chapel attendance issues. Finally, these events lead to a confrontation with the Dean of Men, Caudwell, who engages Messner in a furious debate about the nature of morality, sin, and redemption. As a result, Marcus is tasked with communicating the reason behind his request for a room move, and their meeting becomes a pivotal moment in the novel.

What warrants our close examination in the narrative is the exchange that occurs between Marcus and Dean Caudwell, as these meetings offer a significant illustration of the evolving dynamics of confessional practices. In the context of secular society, Foucault's study acknowledges that the use of confession has transcended its boundaries, extending to include a broader range of relationships beyond the traditional boundaries of religion and law. Accordingly, these practices encompass more intimate relationships between students and educators, parents and children, and patients and psychiatrists (Foucault, 1978). Consequently, the nature of confessional practices has undergone significant metamorphosis resulting in it taking on diverse forms, reflecting the complexity of the contemporary societal and political landscape.

Upon close examining the scene that unfolds in Dean Caudwell's office, a notable contrast can be observed between Marcus's confession and that of Hester's. While the latter involves a public display of sin before an entire community, Marcus's confession is confined to a private confrontation with a single person. This lack of the scenic element is attributed to the fact that this meeting aims "to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its [theatrical] splendor" (Foucault, 1980, p. 114). Rather than being subjected to the exhibition to an entire community, Marcus is put under the scrutiny of a solitary figure, Dean Caudwell. In a setting where the former is fixed by the gaze of the latter, Marcus is animated by it as every aspect of his existence is "recorded, transcribed, assembled into dossiers, published, and commented on" (Foucault, 1978, p. 63).

## Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation*

---

To illustrate the aforementioned further, let us scrutinize a particular scene featuring Dean Caudwell. Notably, whenever Dean Caudwell asks Marcus a question, he habitually consults a dossier laid before him. This act, characterized by Dean Caudwell's possession of the "legal pad in front of him—which had [Marcus's] name written in his script across the top" (Roth, p. 86), symbolizes the pervasive surveillance apparatus fixed upon Marcus. In the microcosm of Winesburg College, we witness how confessional practices operate in disciplinary settings. The presence of the pad functions as a "microscope of conduct, an apparatus of observation [and] recording" (Foucault, 1995, p. 173), enabling a "relative control over life" (1978, p. 142). This tangible object highlights the impact of modern power on the individual body at a micro level (Foucault, 1980), which "establishes over [Marcus] a visibility through which [Dean Caudwell] differentiates [him from others] and judges [him]" accordingly (Foucault, 1995, p. 184).

The disparity between Marcus's experience and Hester's with confessional practices goes beyond the mere notion of visibility. The difference in perception of Marcus's actions compared to Hester's transgression underscores a profound contrast. While Hester's actions are steeped in the realm of moral judgement, her action is attributed to "notions of error or sin, excess or transgression". Conversely, Marcus's case suggests that the decision to change rooms is placed "under the rule of the normal and the pathological" (Foucault, 1978, p. 67). Accordingly, Hester's wrongdoing is described as "the taint of deepest sin" (Hawthorne, p. 84), while Marcus finds himself bewildered by Dean Caudwell's intrusive interrogation.

Marcus's incredulous questions, "Why should I have to go through this interrogation simply because I'd moved from one dormitory room to another [...]? What business was it of his? Had he nothing better to do than interrogate me about my dormitory accommodations?" (p. 90), encapsulate Marcus's sense of injustice. Marcus believes that his academic achievements, being a straight-A student, should serve as a sufficient testament to his character, proving Dean Caudwell's attention unwarranted. The passage not only highlights Marcus's frustration, but it also illuminates the workings of disciplinary power within the institutional context of Winesburg College. In contrast to Hester's penance, which exemplifies a vestige of an earlier form of punishment that is "centered primarily around deduction (*prélèvement*)," the use of such power in Marcus's case "is utterly incongruous" since the modern form of power "is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control" (Foucault, 1978, p. 89). In essence, Foucault's excerpt emphasizes the significance



of legal normativity in shaping the experience of confession for individuals. This could be seen in response to Marcus, Dean Caudwell posits:

Marcus, what brings us together today, and what is worrying me today, is not your memorized words for words as a high school debater[...]What worries me is your social skills as exhibited here at Winesburg College. What worries me is your isolation. What worries me is your outspoken rejection of long-standing Winesburg tradition,[...]In all my experience at Winesburg I have never come across a student yet who objected to either of those requirements as infringements on his rights [...] To me it seems something to be attended to promptly and nipped in the bud. (Roth, p. 107)

In the excerpt, Dean Caudwell's expressed concern with Marcus's social skills and assimilation into the Winesburg community offer a compelling lens through which to examine the mechanisms of normalization and homogenization of behavior within institutional contexts. As Foucault aptly asserts, "the power of normalization imposes homogeneity" (1995, p. 184), shedding light on how institutions often wield authority to enforce conformity among students. In addition, the Dean's comments, coupled with his surprise at encountering such objections from a student, underscore the importance of internalizing social norms and expectations and the role of disciplinary power in shaping behavior. In this context, Marcus becomes a conspicuous anomaly and deviant figure for his inability to conform to the established social order.

The meeting between the two takes a pivotal role in the narrative as it is "assigned a role of normalization and pathologization" to address the perceived anomaly and eventually assign "a corrective technology" (Foucault, 1978, p. 105) to nip them in the bud. Caudwell's statement, "I wanted you to come in so we could meet and find out if I can be of any help to you in adjusting to Winesburg" (Roth, p. 83), illustrates how the examination utilizes both the techniques of an "observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment" (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). The Dean's gaze, along with the "legal pad," enables him to intervene with Marcus and, in a subtle and calculated way, regulate him by favoring a set of behaviors and discouraging others.

It is crucial to underscore that the "truths" recorded on the pad are insufficient. Instead, the pivotal juncture unfolds in Marcus's verbal responses to the Dean's questions as they are the crucial moment in determining Marcus's position within the college community. It has been stated that Hester's verbal confession is vested with relatively little significance. In her case, the religious doctrines have already rendered a moral judgment on her actions, leaving her no choice but to acknowledge herself as a penitent. This shift

## **Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation***

in the paradigm of confession, wherein the public spectacle has transitioned into a more private and reflective practice, with differing degrees of emphasis on the confessor's words. In Marcus's case, verbalization emerges as the central locus of significance. Foucault highlights that "verbalization has been reinserted in a different context by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self" (1988, pp. 48-49).

Expanding upon the dichotomy between religious and secular modes of confession, it is revealed that there is a disparity regarding how confession is both delivered and its underlying purpose. In stark contrast with the religious confession, the violent rapture of the self is non-existent in secular confessional practices because it is not contingent upon the contemporary goal which is to serve "life, understood as the basic needs, [Marcus's] concrete essence, the realization of his potential, a plenitude of the possible" (Foucault, 1978, p. 145). Therefore, the meeting orchestrated by Dean Caudwell is for Marcus to engage in self-reflection and introspection. Unlike the religious confession, Marcus's one aims to produce more efficient and productive individuals. While "penance is the effect of rupture with self" and "to renounce life" (Foucault, 1988, p. 43), modern confession aims to foster life.

For instance, when Dean Caudwell states, "you earned straight A's for your freshman year. I don't want anything at Winesburg to interfere in the slightest with such a stellar record of academic achievement" (Roth, pp. 83-84), it becomes evident that his primary objective is to guide, assess and help Marcus replicate his previous productivity. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the "art of maintaining life in pain" found in Hester's confession has been replaced by an "art of the human body" (Foucault, 1995, p. 33) that is aimed not only at enhancing the individual's skills but also at "the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely" (p. 137).

### **3. The Dualistic Dynamic in Confessional Practices:**

According to Gutman's (1988) analysis, the term "subject" in the context of confession exhibits a complex and multifaceted nature. He contends that the individual, when confessing, is simultaneously a subject "to be discussed" and a subject in the political sense, characterized by an inherently subordinate relationship to power (p. 108). Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that confessional practices are not purely voluntary acts, as they often entail an element of coercion. As Foucault aptly asserts, "one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession" (1978, p. 61). This binary dynamic

implies that truth-telling underscores a surrender of one's agency to a higher authority. Hawthorne echoes this idea and underscores the presence of this dualistic dynamic and power asymmetry inherent in Hester's public confession when he attests that:

It must have been repressed and overpowered by the solemn presence of men no less dignified than the governor, and several of his counselors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town, [...] When such personages could constitute a part of the spectacle, without risking the majesty, or reverence of rank and office, it was safely to be inferred that the infliction of a legal sentence would have an earnest and effectual meaning. (p. 86)

The passage effectively conveys the gravity and significance of the event by highlighting the presence of high-ranking figures, thereby underscoring the orchestrated nature of the proceedings. The spectacle of penance requires Governor Bellingham's presence, serving not only as the recipient of the confession but also the authoritative figure mandating its disclosure. As Hester's confession takes on a theatrical quality, she is thrust into the harsh spotlight of public scrutiny. Hawthorne notes that she "had fortified herself to encounter the stings and venomous stabs of public contumely, wreaking itself in every variety of insult; [...] and herself the object" (Hawthorne, pp. 85-86). Hester's anticipation that the judgements are not to be taken lightly, particularly in the presence of such figures, accentuates her dual position as both the subject of public scrutiny and subject to the authority wielded by the aforementioned figures.

Much like Hester's predicament, Marcus as well finds himself in a situation where his personal life lies bare before Dean Caudwell's watchful eye. In essence, both cases exemplify the fundamental dualistic dynamic that underlies confessional practices. Within this framework, it is discernible that knowledge is intricately linked to power while simultaneously forming an inseparable bond between the confessor and the recipient of the confession. This dualistic nature mirrors the inherent polarity in the confessional relationship, casting both Hester and Marcus into roles of the subject and object of the confession. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the disempowerment that befalls the two characters as they are stripped of their agency and effectively reduced to what Foucault terms "indexed to subjectivity" (2014, p. 82), entrapped under the scrutinizing gaze of an external Other.

The power dynamic between Marcus and Dean Caudwell is evident in Marcus's reluctance to disclose information. He characterizes the meeting as a "tribulation," yet he ultimately yields to the Dean's demands for information as he expresses his indignation: "I was angered, I was humiliated, I was resentful"

## Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation*

(Roth, p. 90). The intensity of Marcus's anger can be attributed to Dean Caudwell's relentless questioning regarding Marcus's personal life and the fact that his responses are inadequately received by the Dean. Fundamentally, Marcus believes that his exceptional grades should suffice to meet the Dean's expectations. Nevertheless, the Dean dismisses Marcus's viewpoints as having little significance, underscoring that it is he who dictates the conversation's structure and determines the relevant topics for discussion. When Dean Caudwell answers Marcus by saying "I didn't ask about your grades, [...] I know your grades" (Roth, p. 93), the Dean confirms that he is the one to dictate the "form of the confession" and its accompanying "words and rituals" ultimately leads to Marcus's "subjectification" (Rose, 1989, p. 240).

Expanding upon this idea, Foucault (1978) contends that "the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is [Marcus] who is constrained), but in [Dean Caudwell] who listens [...]; not in the one who knows and answers but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know" (p. 62). As Marcus confesses, "I had begun to rile him up, I could see, and in just the way that could do me no good" (Roth, p. 93), this statement serves to underscore the inherent power imbalance between the speaker and the listener in confessional relationships. While Marcus holds exclusive knowledge of the matter and is obligated to convey it to Dean Caudwell, the latter wields ultimate judgmental power. According to Foucault's assertion (1988), Dean Caudwell assumes a role of "discriminating power" (p. 47), endowing him with the capacity to determine Marcus's fate, despite the fact that it is Marcus who is divulging the information.

Upon comparing Marcus's case to that of Hester's, it is clear to say that both protagonists are subject to power, albeit in different ways. Building on Foucault's perceptions (2014), we can attest that Hester and Marcus are coerced into declaring "here I am, me who obeys" and "this what I am, me who obeys," respectively. Phrased differently, Hester's case exemplifies the mode of religious penance, where she is expected to conform to a set of pre-existing norms comprised of an "inviolable and revealed truth in which the role of the individual, and therefore of the truth act, the point of their subjectivization, is essentially in accepting this content and in agreeing to demonstrate that one accepts it" (Foucault, 2014, p. 82). On the other hand, Marcus's case exemplifies institutional discipline, where confession goes beyond conforming to a pre-existing set of norms to encompass perpetual "exploring and examining individual secrets endlessly" (Foucault, 2014, pp. 83-84).

During the exchange between Marcus and Dean Caudwell, it becomes evident that the focus of the meeting shifts from changing rooms to a more pressing

issue. Using Foucault's argument, changing rooms becomes "nothing but a shadow that must be drawn aside to reveal the only thing that is now of importance", which is Marcus himself (2000, p 178). For Dean Caudwell to truly understand Marcus, he requires access to Marcus's self-constructed narrative, which is created through his "confession, memories, intimate disclosure," and other means of self-expression (Foucault, 2000, p. 177). The Dean's intrusive line of questioning regarding Marcus's personal interests, spiritual sources of nourishment, and romantic life exceeds the boundaries of academic inquiry, revealing a desire to gain access to Marcus's innermost thoughts. Such probing questions shed light on the Dean's manipulative tactics and efforts to establish an intimate relationship with Marcus.

In the matter, Foucault attests that confession ceases to be question of telling, what was done and how it was done. Instead, it becomes a process of "reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it" (1978, p. 63). Drawing on this contention, it is asserted that confession extends beyond acknowledging one's actions and emphasizes the retrospective aspects of disclosure. The encounter between Marcus and Dean Caudwell serves as an illustration of confession as a means of delve deep into the confessor's psyche, with the aim of unveiling a "general or diffuse causality" in their personal history in order to identify and address perceived deviance (Foucault, 1978, p. 65). Consequently, the meeting can be viewed as a "ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement" (p. 61) and a "biographical investigation" *par excellence* (Foucault, 1995, p. 252).

Within this context, the following excerpt from the meeting demonstrates how Dean Caudwell retrospectively inserts causal factors into the sequence of events that led to a particular effect.

"It says here that your father is a kosher butcher" "I don't believe so, sir. I remember writing down just 'butcher.' That's what I'd write on any form, I'm sure." "Well, that's what you did write. I'm merely assuming that he's a kosher butcher." "He is. But that's not what I wrote down." "I acknowledged that. But it's not inaccurate, is it, to identify him more precisely as a kosher butcher?" "But neither is what I wrote down inaccurate." "I'd be curious to know why you didn't write down 'kosher,' Marcus." "I didn't think that was relevant. If some entering student's father was a dermatologist or an orthopedist or an obstetrician, wouldn't he just write down 'physician'? Or 'doctor'? That's my guess, anyway." "But

## Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation*

---

kosher isn't in quite the same category." "If you're asking me, sir, if I was trying to hide the religion into which I was born, the answer is no." (91-92) What warrants our attention in this passage is how Marcus's insistence of simply writing "butcher" is countered by Dean Caudwell's firm assumption that Marcus's father is a "kosher" butcher and how he tries to compel him to acknowledge this detail. The scene in question exposes the reconstruction and reinterpretation of Marcus's raw data in an effort to uncover the truth about him and to draw distinction between the good and the bad, the normal and the abnormal, all in the pursuit of order and stability within the Winesburg community. By excessively highlighting the specificity of the term "kosher" and probing into Marcus's intentions, this scene illustrates the means by which such reconfigurations are carried out.

In addition, the provided excerpt underscores a nuanced understanding of the intricate process of truth-telling within the realm of secular confession. Rather than a linear process, it is revealed that confession involves two interdependent stages, with the latter being integral to the establishment of truth. The first stage necessitates that the confessor, in this case, Marcus, must speak truthfully, albeit from his own subjective viewpoint. However, this subjective perspective is inherently limited, and here comes the second stage, which is fundamental, as it requires the Dean to interpret Marcus's truth, thereby completing it, as Marcus's truth remains "blind to itself" (Foucault, 1978, p. 66). In order to ascertain the veracity of Marcus's actions, the Dean must undertake the onus of interpreting Marcus's subjective data and scrutinizing its roots and origins. Henceforth, the Dean assumes the role of "master of truth with a hermeneutic function" (Foucault, 1978, p. 66). This master however, cannot operate solely with a law, a violation, or an accountable party as supplementary materials are required; knowledge. Caudwell is unable to carry out his duty as the enforcer of order until he receives a discourse, a verbalization provided by Marcus about himself. Consequently, when Marcus returns to the Dean's office for a second time, his discourse serves as the evidence that ultimately incriminates him.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This study of confessional practices within the context of the two literary works, through the discerning eye of Foucault, provides an illuminating insight into the intricate web of confession as a socio-cultural and political phenomenon. In analyzing the instances of confessions within the two novels, what is revealed is an intricate interplay between power, knowledge, and subjectivity in Hester's religious milieu and Marcus's secular sphere. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne,

through Hester's public spectacle, highlights the tension between self-knowledge and self-abnegation and how the emphasis on the latter is seen as the only way to salvation. In stark juxtaposition, Roth's *Indignation* provides a window to the secular landscape and lays bare the repercussions of modern power upon the individual. The latter being illustrated by the confrontation between Marcus and Dean Caudwell. Although the settings of the two novels diverge significantly, a common theme unites them, seamlessly connecting one to the other. In essence, despite the evolving methods employed in confession practices, it is still executed "in the service of a regulatory power" (Butler, 2005, p. 112) for the ultimate goal of the objectification of the self.

## 5. Bibliography List:

- Besley, T. (2007). Foucault, Truth-Telling and Technologies of the Self: Confessional Practices of the Self and Schools. *Counterpoints*, 292, 55-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42979092>
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham University Press.
- Davidson, A. (2003). Introduction. In M. Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975* (pp. ix-xix). Picador.
- Eusden, J. D. (1960). Natural Law and Covenant Theology in New England, 1620-1670. *Natural Law Forum*, Paper 47. [http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/nd\\_naturallaw\\_forum/47](http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/nd_naturallaw_forum/47)
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16-49). University of Massachusetts Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1993). About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth. *Political Theory*, 21(2), 198-227. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/191814>
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1996). *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984* (L. H. Martin, Ed.; J. Barr, Trans.). Semiotext(e).
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1997). Christianity and Confession. In S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth (Eds.), *The Politics of Truth* (pp. 199-236). Semiotext.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2000). About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychiatry. In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), *Power* (pp. 176-200). The New Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2014) *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2021). *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 4*. F. Gros (Ed.). Pantheon.
- Gutman, H. (1988). Rousseau's confession: A technology of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 99-120). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hawthorne, N. (2008). *The Scarlet Letter*. The Floating Press.

**Truth-Telling and Self-Objectification: A Study of Confessional Practices  
in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Philip Roth's *Indignation***

---

- Paden, W. E. (1988). Theatre of Humility and Suspicion: Desert Saints and New England Puritans. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*(pp. 65-79). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Rose, N. (1989). *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. Routledge.
- Roth, P. (2009). *Indignation*. Vintage.
- Tell, D. (2010). Rhetoric and Power: An Inquiry into Foucault's Critique of Confession. *Philosophy&Rhetoric*, 43(2), 95–117. <https://doi.org/10.5325/phlrrhet.43.2.0095>