

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S WOMEN: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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Abstract

The question of woman is the dominating motive in Hawthorne's works. Perceiving changes in women's lives and their growing social status, he depicts women as internally complex who, on the one hand belong to the Puritan, male-dominated tradition, and on the other hand to the Transcendental, feminist tradition. While the former are weak and dependent on men, the latter are strong, self-reliant, and self-defining.

Motto: "In this predominantly masculine enterprise [writing], the role of women has always been anomalous. The notorious ineptitude of the heroine in Western films serves as a constant reminder that in a world of movement in space, a woman was simply an encumbrance. Her alternatives were to remain behind in the ancestral covered wagon and the squatter hut. Without density and ... flamboyant marksmanship of Hurricane in the dime novels. Before *The Scarlet Letter* no American writer understood the values of time, tragedy, or womanhood well enough to create a woman in fiction."

(Roy Male: *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision*)

Hawthorne never viewed women as unimportant or as threatening Eves, but, rather, as men's vital, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual partners. He grew up with two sisters and a widowed mother, married an intellectual and emotional peer, and was the father of two outspoken daughters. Women were companions, not threats. (Turner: *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography*: 356). As his biographers have demonstrated, women often played crucial roles in his development. They inspired some of the female characters who appear in his fiction. Hawthorne also had important relationships with women who affected his professional life, including Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller. Some critics see Fuller as another inspiration for some of Hawthorne's female characters, particularly his strong rebellious figures. An intriguing creative woman and a professional colleague for Hawthorne, she played a central role in his thinking about women and in his portrayal of women confronting American men and society. It is enough to mention *Woman in*

the Nineteenth Century, the text so central to Hester's evolving philosophy in *The Scarlet Letter*, as Thomas R. Mitchell states in *Hawthorne's Fuller Mystery*. Their conventions about his marriage to Sophia helped Fuller "conceptualize alternative forms of marriage that allowed for greater equality and individual development for women." (82) These ideas Hawthorne explored in "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Garden".

In America, only Hawthorne dared to have a woman play a principal role instead of being part of the scenery or a victim. To such a mission he added an equally towering theme: that man's fear of women keeps him forever lonely and is the chief bar to a harmonious hearthside. But what editor or publisher thought this theme was saleable? Practicality, therefore, as Barbara Ellis states in "Some Observations about Hawthorne's Women" dictated that Hawthorne "dress the message in allegory. Better a cryptic message than none at all."

In his short stories and romances, Hawthorne creates a wide range of female characters. Some are strong, independent-minded, and self-confident, like Hester Prynne and Zenobia. Others embody the gender expectations for women in Hawthorne's day, such as Phoebe Pyncheon. Many of his female characters serve as redemptive figures for men who have isolated themselves or cut off their ties from their supporting community. Hawthorne also presents a number of female characters who are victims of men, destroyed by male power. Through these various characters and their experiences, Hawthorne explores the gender relations in his day. He also raises questions about the role of domesticity in shaping female characters and the role of emotion as well as reason in human experience. In some works, Hawthorne presents older women as central figures and through them explores the legacy of the past and the ways in which women are shaped by their individual and community history. Sympathetic to most of the female characters who appear in his works, Hawthorne presents the complexity of women's lives at times of profound social change, whether in his own day or in the historic past.

Old Esther Dudley, the title character of Hawthorne's story "Old Esther Dudley", represents one type of female character that Hawthorne developed, an older woman who serves as a legacy and relic of the past. She is proud of her once aristocratic connections, eccentric in her behavior, and gifted with what seem magical abilities to call forth the "presence" of those long gone. She has great affection for children, who do not mind her eccentricities, and often treats them with gingerbread. Old Esther refuses to leave the Province House when the British retreat during the American Revolution, certain that a Royal Governor will return. She wants to maintain the Province House intact and ready for use. She remains faithful to that idea until her dying day, the day when Governor John Hancock arrives to open the building for the new republic.

In her manner, appearance and view of the past, Esther anticipates the character of Hepzibah Pyncheon, who plays a major role in Hawthorne's novel *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Both women draw their sense of self in part from their relationship to a house in which they have lived for years. Their ability to preserve the house as they anticipate, the return of its rightful resident, gives each woman a feeling of pride and obligation. For Esther Dudley, the figure who arrives at the house is not the man she expects, and she dies believing she has welcomed a traitor. Esther becomes a symbol of a displaced past. Hepzibah is more fortunate, in that her long imprisoned brother Clifford does return to the House of the Seven Gables, but his arrival initially does not bring the happiness that Hepzibah anticipated.

In his romance *The House of the Seven Gables* Nathaniel Hawthorne created three distinct female characters who exemplify types of women he used throughout his fiction. Hepzibah Pyncheon, the timid lady aristocrat of another era, bravely but unsuccessfully attempts to run a Cent Shoppe as she protects and looks after her brother Clifford who has been wrongly imprisoned for thirty years. Phoebe Pyncheon, the lovely, practical country lass, manages the Cent Shoppe easily as she brings cheer and energy into the gloomy lives of her cousins Hepzibah and Clifford; Phoebe also brings tender love to the daguerreotypist Holgrave. Alice Pyncheon, a bold, independent and sharp-witted ancestor of Hepzibah and Phoebe, becomes enslaved to the wizard/carpenter Maule.

In many of his short stories, Nathaniel Hawthorne creates characters with either a malicious or evil feature to transmit to the reader a more allegorical meaning. Many would say he targets woman without justification. In fact he targets both sexes equally. In the story “Rappaccini’s Daughter” he uses Beatrice as a carrier of deadly poison. In “Young Goodman Brown” he targets Faith as the character who is lost to the Devil. In the stories “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “The Birthmark”, Hawthorne also uses men as transmitters of evil. The men involved in the stories have their own flaws which contribute to the flaws of the women in their lives.

Randall Stewart in “Hawthorne’s Female Characters” states that there are three types of female characters in Hawthorne’s writings: (1) “the wholesome New England girl, bright, sensible, and self-reliant,” (2) “the frail, sylph-like creature, easily swayed by a stronger personality,” and (3) “the woman with an exotic richness in her nature” (98), and that “Young Goodman Brown” has in Faith “cheerfulness, prettiness, and a simple-minded domesticity.” (99) So Faith can belong to type (1).

In “Young Goodman Brown”, Faith, the wife of Young Goodman Brown is a character who loses her faith and submits to the Devil. In this case, Faith is shown as weak, uncertain, lacking enough self-control to refuse the calling of the Devil. Even when her husband emotionally pleads: “Look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one,” she cannot resist the Devil’s temptation and has “uncertain sorrow” after submitting to him. Thus, Faith is also seen as symbolizing the Puritan hypocrisy – the Puritans are not as pure as we might think, they also have evil characteristics, which in this case are exploited at night.

From a woman's point of view, according to Melissa Pennell in her essay "The Unfortunate Fall", Hawthorne seems to allude that healthy marital relations are impossible as long as man believes women and sex are instruments of the Devil. At the beginning, Goodman has a healthy, robust sexual and soul-to-soul relationship with Faith that is highly enviable. But after three months of happiness, comes that witches' festival in the woods which reveals man's true vision of woman. Traditional fears of giving an inch to a woman character become visible.

"Lady Eleanore's Mantle" is a story about pride. Lady Eleanore Rochcliffe comes to Boston from London to live in the Province House under the care of her guardian, Governor Shute. She immediately shows her prideful contempt for all those she perceives as her inferiors, including Jervase Helwyse, a young man who has fallen in love with her. Lady Eleanore is known and envied for her beauty, which is highlighted by her embroidered mantle, without which she is seldom seen. To celebrate her arrival, Governor Shute hosts a ball to which all important people in the colony are invited, but Lady Eleanore ignores most of the guests. During the evening, Jervase comes to her and offers her a goblet of wine which she refuses. He also asks her to cast off her mantle, which she refuses to do, as well. In a short time, the famed smallpox plague of 1721 hits the city, and the rich and poor, the snobbish and compassionate alike, are felled by the disease. Lady Eleanore herself is stricken, and languishes in a final judgment on her pride – a disfiguring curse - that may very well have been spread by her incredibly designed mantle.

In this story, Hawthorne creates a female character that is similar to some of his female characters, yet markedly different at the same time. Lady Eleanore is strong-willed like Hester Prynne, yet has neither Hester's pity nor her compassion. Eleanore is beautiful like Young Goodman Brown's wife, Faith, but has no spirit of kindness about her. What Eleanore does have is attitude and conceit, which leads to the final tragedy. Like Alice Pyncheon, Lady Eleanore becomes a mysterious presence, ghost-like in her haunting of the Province House at the end of the tale.

In "Rappaccini's Daughter", Beatrice is the daughter of the infamous scientist Signor Giacomo Rappaccini in 16th century Padua, Italy; she is a beautiful, kind and innocent young woman. She has been isolated from all society and friendship by her father's diabolical knowledge of botanical poisons and his experiment upon her. Beatrice is described as being "beautiful as the day, and with a bloom so deep and vivid that one shade more would have been too much." (39) However, her breath is poisonous. She falls passionately but chastely in love with a science student, Giovanni Guasconti, who is renting rooms next door to Rappaccini's marvelous but deadly garden. Although aware of Beatrice's fatal breath, Giovanni becomes fond of her sweetness, gaiety and extraordinary beauty. Soon he realizes that he, too, has become contaminated with the poisons. If he stays with Beatrice in the garden, he, too, will be deadly to all other humans, animals, insects or plant life. Cruelly, Giovanni accuses Beatrice of infecting him. His heartlessness plus her father's

evil plan to make his daughter deadly to all living creatures destroy Beatrice. She dies after taking a supposed antidote developed by Rappaccini's rival, Signor Pietro Baglioni, who has attempted to use Giovanni to get the upper hand in the rivalry with Rappaccini.

Melissa Pennell has noted that "from psychological perspective, critics explore the story's reflections of Hawthorne's personal anxieties about women in his life and about the nature of masculinity" (in 1844, when he wrote the story, he was forty and had been married to Sophia Peabody for two years) while "feminist critics have examined its treatment of the images of woman, especially in light of gender roles in the nineteenth century." (58) Richard Millington in his lecture "The Meanings of Hawthorne's Women" suggests that the story offers a critique of the diseased masculinity of the nineteenth century that plays itself out in the destruction of female characters.

Beatrice unintentionally provokes Giovanni's death when she "instilled a fierce and subtle poison into his system." Hawthorne creates Beatrice as the possessor of evil, but he doesn't present her as an evil character; in fact it is her father, Dr. Rappaccini who is perceived as an evil character. Giovanni remains in the garden created by Beatrice's father. It is he who has the evil flaw in this case; he is mentally ill and distorts nature by creating the garden. Beatrice is simply the result of her father's actions. It is Adam, and not Eve, in this case, who has caused the Fall. Beatrice, in fact, is the only character who is genuinely "blessed" and free of sin.

Richard Brenzo in "Beatrice Rappaccini: a Victim of Male Love and Horror" sees Beatrice as an Eve still trapped and controlled by three males. God, Adam and the Serpent are in Hawthorne Giovanni, Baglioni, and her own father.

"Each man represents a typical male role, might find a woman threatening, and might therefore try to destroy her. Giovanni, her lover and almost-husband, desires her sexuality, yet fears its power to dominate and destroy him. Baglioni, her professional rival, feeling insecure about his university position, tries to neutralize her by diverting her energies to a woman's proper sphere, which is marriage. Her father wants her beautiful enough to win a husband, dependent enough to remain in his home, obedient enough to do his bidding, and compliant enough to be molded to his standards. None of these men could have been portrayed as feeling these same fears, with the same intensity, about a man." (151)

On the other hand there is Giovanni for whom falling in love means losing control. Hawthorne captures this terror well:

"It mattered not whether she were angel or demon; he was irrevocably within her sphere, and must obey the law that whirled him onward, in ever-lessening circles, towards a result which he did not attempt to foreshadow, and yet, strange to say, there came across him a sudden doubt whether this intense interest on his part were not delusory; whether it were really so deep and positive a nature as to justify him in now thrusting himself into an incalculable position; whether it

were not merely the fantasy of a young man's brain, only slightly or not at all connected with his heart." (47)

Giovanni's struggle to stifle his love is what, as Hawthorne seems to say, constitutes male fear of humanity's most fulfilling reward: opening one's soul and heart to another. Unfortunately, Giovanni cannot let go of his fears. As Brenzo asserts, Beatrice's greatest suffering comes from Giovanni's cowardice:

"For Giovanni, sexual commitment to Beatrice means death in the sense of being dominated by a woman, being robbed of his independence, and having his personality swallowed up. Beatrice actually makes no attempt to bind him to her; she professes to want 'only to love thee, and be with thee a little time and so to let thee pass away, leaving but thine image in mine heart'... In fact, Giovanni has a real compulsion to possess Beatrice, to change and control her, a compulsion revealed by his attempts to know her sexually, and by his persistent desire to shape her into his personal woman who will gratify his ego and conform to his fantasies." (146-147)

Roy Male's traditional interpretation of "Rappaccini's Garden" in *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* is perhaps the most popular reading of the tale. He finds the moral of the story to be that, if man is to develop full human potential, he must accept either the woman or the dual promise she represents, tragic involvement with sin but also the consequent possibility of redemption. (54). Beatrice is the very embodiment of the Christian paradox; she is angelic yet corrupt, beautiful but damned. Along with Hester Prynne, Miriam and Zenobia, Beatrice is a temptress; an American femme fatale in nineteenth-century Romantic literature. Like Young Goodman Brown, Marilyn Fryer states in *The Faces of Eve* that Giovanni is unable to accept the sexuality and sinfulness of Beatrice. By refusing to accept her duality, Giovanni fails to realize that it is also through her that redemption and full human potential can be achieved.

A content analysis of Hawthorne's women in other tales as well demonstrates how Hawthorne uses them as vehicles of warning about the results of men's fears.

In "The Birthmark", Hawthorne introduces the character of Georgiana whose sole flaw is a birthmark on her face. All, except this birthmark, is perfect. Her husband Aylmer loves science and suggests that he should try and remove it. After the experiment, he announces, "My peerless bride, it is successful! You are perfect!" (23). Here, as well, Georgiana, the possessor of an evil characteristic, dies because of her husband's insistence on trying to distort nature. Aylmer here, as well, has the evil flaw with his persistence to remove the birthmark.

"The Birthmark" stands to represent a multitude of things. It represents the desire for the simplicity of scientific explanations; it is a symbol of the downfall of society through science and technology, and a symbol of the imminent death that is to come for Georgiana, the wife, thus representing the need for spiritual insight and intuitive understanding.

The best-known of Hawthorne's works, *The Scarlet Letter* presents a sad tale of love and betrayal set within the context of seventeenth-century Puritan New England. The values and traditions of the Puritan settlement influence the social as well as the gender expectations of the narrative, but Hawthorne through his narrator looks back upon his world with a nineteenth-century sensibility that affects the development of the characters. Within the novel, the individual minor characters and the community as a whole articulate the strict code by which individuals are expected to live and by which they are judged when they engage in wrongdoing. For the seventeenth-century that Hawthorne recreates, emphasis is placed upon the struggle between morality and sin. Hawthorne explores how this emphasis contributes to individual failings rooted in self-righteousness (i.e. believing in own virtue) and self-justification.

The act that precipitates the unfolding of the narrative occurs prior to the opening scene. Hester Prynne, a young wife whose husband remains absent from the settlement, violates her marriage vows by engaging in a sexual relationship with Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, a minister who seeks to establish his place among the Puritan divines of New England. Jailed for her crime when her pregnancy becomes known, Hester is judged guilty of adultery. The novel opens as Hester is brought forth upon the scaffold to face public condemnation for her sin. While Hester stands upon the scaffold holding her newborn daughter Pearl, she sees her husband, Roger Chillingworth, standing at the edge of the crowd. She also sees her lover, Arthur Dimmesdale, standing in the company of Puritan ministers and officials. A brave and strong-willed woman, Hester refuses to betray her lover, but realizes from her perspective on the scaffold that she must face her trials alone, that neither of the men who has affected her life will openly be a part of her future. These four characters become entangled in a web of concealment, deceit and revenge, a web that can only be broken by honesty, confession, and forgiveness.

Released from jail and sentenced to wear a scarlet letter A upon her bosom so that all will know of her sin, Hester discovers that she must also fight to keep custody of her daughter. Mother and daughter live a simple life in a secluded cottage on the edge of town. This isolation allows Hester time for introspection, during which she engages in independent thinking, allowing herself to consider ideas that the Puritans would consider antinomian, as she places faith and love above obedience to moral law and social custom. Hawthorne, as Melissa Pennell states, emphasizes this aspect of Hester's nature by linking her to the seventeenth-century Puritan Ann Hutchinson, whose trial for heresy was at the center of the Antinomian Controversy related to the opposition towards strict moral laws.

Hester supports herself and her child through her talents as a seamstress and needlewoman. Her work in this medium provides an outlet for Hester's artistic sensibilities, which she exercises in the work she does for others and in the clothes she makes for Pearl. Hester dresses

plainly and somberly, except for the highly ornate scarlet letter A that she has embroidered on the breast of her dress. Hester wears it as a badge of distinction as well as the sign of shame it is intended to be. Hester adorns Pearl in fanciful, bright clothing, cloaking her in obvious signs of her own separateness from the Puritan community, a community that sees Pearl as the visible symbol of her mother's threat to order and stability. Pearl is a mischievous child, sometimes seeming to be an integral part of nature, sometimes seeming to be the wicked embodiment of her parents' sin, always stubborn and capricious and hard to control.

While the relationship between mother and daughter forms a central component of the narrative, Hawthorne also develops the relationships between Hester and the two central male characters, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. Each man has told Hester secrets he expects her to keep. Hoping to protect Dimmesdale and feeling obliged to Chillingworth, Hester reveals further aspects of her nature as she interacts with each man and makes decisions about how to respond to the demands that each places upon her. Although Hester wants to believe that flight with Dimmesdale is possible, she discovers that none of the characters can escape the consequences of their earlier actions. At times Hester contemplates her own freedom and the possibilities for a woman's self-realization, but the end of the novel suggests that in such thinking, Hester is ahead of her time. When she returns to the Puritan settlement at the end of the novel, Hester continues to wear the scarlet letter, which "has ceased to be a stigma", and has become instead a badge of her wisdom and insight. Paradoxically, *The Scarlet Letter* can be described from a feminist viewpoint, but, at the same time, it reflects the stereotype of woman as either good or evil, and how it's reflected in the main character of Hester Prynne.

Traditional fears of modern women are apparent in Hawthorne's short stories and romances. According to Charles Swann in *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tradition and Revolution* (69-70), Hester ends by prophesizing the second coming of Christ – only this time a woman. Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance* attacks Hollingsworth for "the intensity" of his "masculine egotism" and claims a woman ruler for his Utopia: "I should love dearly – for the next thousand years at last – to have all government devolve into the hands of women ... Oh, in the better order of things, Heaven grant that the ministry of souls may be left in charge of women!"

Apparently, Hawthorne's awareness of mutual fears was the first step in taking action to solve the problems between men and women and to show that men's fears to lose power were largely groundless. Unfortunately, he had to garb this vital message in allegory. In Millington's words, "Hawthorne uses his admirable or formidable female characters to represent an adequately complex and comparatively free relation to life. Besides other things, this relation entitles women to a more freely chosen, more adequately imagined, more powerfully ethical life". This is, of course clearest in *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester's life is at once rebellious of and

engaged with one's community. Such a life, one notices, is precisely what Dimmesdale – a victim, one might propose, of his deep affiliation to the power system whose norms he has violated – cannot fully understand. Such a life, Millington continues, is the goal of the Narrator of “The Custom House”, who, in seeking to become a “citizen of somewhere else”, allies himself with Hester across the boundaries of gender. So, he concludes, if we join the critique of masculinity we witness in the stories to a creation of a character like Hester, Hawthorne's women might “operate as powerfully moving and constructive expressers of the alternative values these fictions endorse and yearn for.” In other words, on the one hand, despite the fact that Hawthorne created one strong female protagonist – *The Scarlet Letter's* Hester Prynne – in general he was uncomfortable with strong women, and most of his female characters have no real identity of their own. However, on the other hand, that feeling did not stop him from challenging the conventional views of men and women.

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