

CONFLICTING VIEWS OF WOMEN IN HAWTHORNE

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on the nature of women in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work. There is an obviously divided way of thinking about gender here and we will try to highlight the extremes and the inbetween position, as far as the typology of feminine characters is concerned.

Key words: feminine entities, gender role, limitation, symbolic characters

Introduction

Probably the best way to start writing about Nathaniel Hawthorne is to offer a concise statement of his acknowledged merit. Such an expression was given, among others, by Roy R. Male (5), who stated that “before *The Scarlet Letter* no American writer understood the values of time, tragedy, or womanhood well enough to create a woman in fiction”.

The title of the present work mentions the existence of conflicting views of women: these conflicting views can be historically accounted for and will represent the starting-point in a proposed classification of female characters. The conflicting views are best expressed in the way this “feminist” author makes the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* attract the readers’ sympathy and leave the readers convinced that there can be only one possible dénouement. Maybe Edward Wagenknecht (57) was right when he stated that “Hawthorne’s genius had its limitations. His range was deep, not wide ... His prose is as fine as any we have to show in America, but the eighteenth century still kept her hold upon him.” In calling Hawthorne’s genius limited this critic was surely not thinking primarily about the author’s treatment of women in his prose. Nevertheless, one of the limitations one can speak about concerns the way in which Hawthorne

as a “creator” encroached upon the world of women. It has been stated that his use of female characters had a cathartic function and that he chose them as a method of working out his gender-related anxieties. Whether or not Hawthorne’s treatment of women reflects pre-Victorian expectations of female behaviour, whether he managed to solve the conflict generated in his soul by his early years spent with his mother—always dependent on others, always facing established social and gender roles—is a question the answer to which could be inferred from the typology of female characters in two of his important romances, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Female Characters in *The Scarlet Letter*

Being a woman brings into discussion the concept of “female”, which is historically and socially determined, and it is natural that Hawthorne’s writing should depict it as “connected with and complicit with structural social contradictions at the base of the domestic tensions” (Pfister 104). As Joel Pfister (80) states, “Hawthorne’s interest in the cultural ‘making’ of women took some seemingly oddball twists and turns, especially in his concept of their evolution”. The critic underlines the coarse fiber in “those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding” as opposed to their six-generations-later “fair descendants”. The transformation of Puritan women is remarkable if we consider the paleness as meaning not just physical alteration but also different discourse and behaviour:

Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding than in their fair descendants, separated from them by a series of six or seven generations; for, throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother had transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not a character of less force and solidity than her own. ... The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks, that had ripened in the far-off island, and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England. There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons, as most of them seemed to be, that would startle us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 63-64)

The nineteenth-century beholder would surely be startled by women’s public activity. The “feminine” is understood as “the whole range of potential meanings for woman which are seen as natural but are in fact socially constructed” (Pfister 80). Such traits that define a woman

are the starting point of our classification of women in Hawthorne's two novels. Their behaviour and their appearance are defining elements according to which they are judged in society. Depending on how much they accept what is expected of them, they fall into one of three categories: women who do not challenge their role, women who challenge their role but are ultimately somehow forced to accept social constraints, and the last category—that of uncontrollable women. The criterion according to which this classification is made relies upon the following definition: "To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. ... A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. ... From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually." (Berger, Blomberg, Fox, Dibb and Hollis 46) This is precisely why Hester is worried when she sees she can no longer control Pearl. Pearl is the only female character in *The Scarlet Letter* who belongs to the *third category*. A natural child, she is very frequently associated either with a devil or with an angel. While Hester seems to give in, although this decision is felt to be a little forced, Pearl, the living result of her decision not to conform to the rules, chooses to reject the judgment of others and thus becomes dangerous to the social order:

The child's own nature had something wrong in it which continually betokened that she had been born amiss—the effluence of her mother's lawless passion—and often impelled Hester to ask, in bitterness of heart, whether it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been born at all. Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 198)

Pearl could thus be seen as nothing more than the "major symbol" of the novel: "In Hawthorne's novel, the strict authoritarianism of Puritan patriarchy finds its object in the child Pearl, who, as the living 'likeness' of the letter ... becomes the target of the Puritans' efforts to control both human sexuality, and its literary, historical expression." (Daniels 221) Pearl is not such a complex character as Hawthorne might have wished: her function is that of a "living symbol of Hester's adultery, ability, affection, and role as feminine angle, connected to the story only through Hester's heart and emotional acuity" (Daniels 221). She is nothing but the embodiment of the message encoded in the letter—the passion that made Hester transgress contemporary rules and the subsequent sufferings that her punishment involved. Pearl's

relationship with nature is of a similar type to her relationship with the Puritan community. Both these relationships share the impossibility of control: the community is able to control neither nature, nor Pearl. Pearl gives a new significance to the end of the novel: she becomes “grace” and thus reflects the changing role of women, proving a new view of the power of women in a male-dominated society.

The connection between women of type three and type two may be made at the symbolic level by an unusual female presence described in “The Custom House”:

Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes this unhappy fowl, she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community; and especially to warn all citizens, careful of their safety, against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 9-10)

Critics have viewed this eagle as a symbol of both Hester and Pearl, of their major influence upon the community, upon women in general. The reference to the shield has been interpreted as having “a direct link to the scarlet letter Hester wears throughout the novel, and, in fact, willingly re-replaces on her breast again at the end of the work” (Daniels 221). This description of the eagle could also be connected to Pearl’s description as “bird-like”, and thus it could lead us to view her as a symbol of a nation:

She seemed rather an airy sprite, which, after playing its fantastic sports for a little while upon the cottage floor, would flit away with a mocking smile. Whenever that look appeared in her wild, bright, deeply black eyes, it invested her with a strange remoteness and intangibility: it was as if she were hovering in the air, and might vanish, like a glimmering light that comes we know not whence, and goes we know not whither. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 113),

“But the child, ... escaped through the open window, and stood on the upper step, looking like a wild tropical bird of rich plumage, ready to take flight into the upper air.” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 135)

The description of the eagle at the beginning of the novel has been interpreted as “a moment of foreshadowing that points to the influence both Hester and Pearl are going to have for

the entire Puritan community, and also to their influence for future generations of women.” (Daniels 221) As she grows up, Pearl is not willing to accept the judgment of her society. This is why Hester is fearful, especially now that she is powerless—she can no longer control her child’s behaviour, and she can no longer convince her to accept what she only recently accepted: the rules of the community she lives in.

Hester Prynne belongs to *the second type of women*: her rebelliousness is depicted, but only for it to be contained and censured at the end of the novel. Her “voluntary” return to New England means manipulation, sadly confirming the theory according to which what is desirable for men significantly differs from what is desirable for women. Hester is ultimately left in a marginalized and irredeemable state. She is a kind of “liminal” character: “Adam may happily fall and rise again to redemption, but Eve in falling must be destroyed lest she introduce the chaotic into a highly ordered system” (Onderdonk 73). Her liminality is the result of her passionate transgression and is “emblemized by her virtual marginality, her abode located in the border region between city and forest, between the urban and the wild” (Egan 26).

Hester’s dwelling places her in the position the collective conscience requires:

On the *outskirts* of the town, within the *verge* of the peninsula, but *not in close vicinity* to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. It had been built by an earlier settler, and abandoned, because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative *remoteness* put it out of the sphere of that social activity which already marked the habits of the emigrants. It stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, towards the west. A clump of scrubby trees, such as alone grew on the peninsula, *did not so much conceal* the cottage from view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least *ought to be, concealed*. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 99)

Her marginal position in society is very well reflected by the position of her dwelling: *she lives at the outskirts, within the verge, not in close vicinity*. In her study of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Marble Faun*, Olivia Gatti Taylor mentions Kai T. Erikson, who states that “an individual deviant—or sinful behaviour may actually impart a sense of unity to the rest of society, as the deviant individual serves as a necessary element” (135). For the Puritan society it was necessary to have Hester there: it was a society that did not want to eradicate deviance, but only to keep it within bounds (Gatti Taylor 135). The explanation lies in the fact that “the rates of deviancy remain relatively stable in a given society as certain offenders are singled out to fulfill

the deviant role, while others practicing the same behaviours remain undisturbed” (135). The very proof of others’ sinfulness is felt by Hester:

“the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. She was terror stricken by the revelations that were thus made.” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 106)

The first category of female characters contains those women who do not challenge their status/position, and here we can mention the matrons described in the first part of *The Scarlet Letter*. The individual minor characters and the whole of society dictate the strict code according to which individuals are expected to live and “by which they are judged when they engage in wrongdoing.” (Ștefanovici 434)

Within this category a clear distinction can be drawn between the matrons and some other characters in *The House of the Seven Gables* (Hepzibah, Phoebe, Alice Pyncheon) and a subcategory of *symbolic feminine entities*. The element that distinguishes this sub-category is their connection to the idea of witchcraft and secrecy. Mistress Hibbins appears at four critical points in the novel. On her first appearance she pleads with Hester to come to the forest with her and sign her name in the Black Man’s book; on her second, she is in the darkness and witnesses the minister standing alone on the scaffold and crying out in anguish. In the third scene she meets Arthur after he has seen Hester in the forest. The last scene is the longest and involves an interchange with Hester in which Mistress Hibbins claims fellowship with her and her lover. The witch is always surrounded by horrified stares: other people even avoid touching her garment “as if it carried the plague among its gorgeous folds” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 205). Yet despite her critical role in the book, the gloomy-faced witch is rendered more as a hallucination than as fact.

Female Entities in *The House of the Seven Gables*

The House of the Seven Gables is built on an implicit substructure of Puritan myth. On this is erected a historical reconstruction of folk belief in witchcraft as it varied over two centuries. Like Mistress Hibbins, whose presence brings mystery and secrecy, the house is doubtful in extent and shape, no matter how solid other details may appear. And this reflects its metaphorical nature—the secret of the house is the secret of the Pyncheon family.

The house is a complex symbol of various hereditary forces. Although it is to be perceived to be feminine only at a symbolical level, it still bears traits of the subcategory of symbolic characters. It somehow bears traits of the timid lady aristocrat of another era. Resembling a great human heart, the house also represents the inner life of the psyche. Through its dim mirror flow shades of the past that blend into the present. The orientation of the house signifies its place midway between two civilizations. It faces the commerce of the street on the west, while to the rear, on the east, is an old garden. What is impressive about the house is its darkness, its mystery. The house is described as a “*rusty* wooden house, with seven acutely-peaked gables,” (Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* 1), “through the shadow of these two *antiquities*—the great elm-tree, and the *weather-beaten* edifice,”(1), “with the scent of an *old and melancholy* house” (6), “Its whole visible exterior was ornamented with *quaint* figures, conceived in the *grotesqueness* of a *gothic fancy*” (8), “threw a shadow and *thoughtful gloom* into the lower rooms” (9), “how the *rustiness and infirmity of age* gathered over the venerable house itself” (19), “gave the house *such a meditative look*, that you could not pass without the idea that *it had secrets to keep*” (27), “this *desolate, decaying, gusty, rusty* old house” (28)

The house is viewed by Roy R. Male (125) as subsuming ambiguous qualities of womanhood. He considers that in the relation house-street the house is organic, temporal, feminine and integrated while the street is essentially mechanical, spatial, masculine, atomistic. The representatives of the street are Judge Pyncheon, Uncle Venner and Holgrave. As a veritable womb of time, the house hides within its depths the “letters and parchments” that Old Colonel Pyncheon left in his will to his posterity.

We connect the presence of Hepzibah with that of the ghosts of the past. She is overheard in the house with “*heavy sighs* that laboured from her bosom with little restraint as to their *lugubrious depth and volume ... gusty sighs ... the creaky joints ...* now whispered, now a *groan*, now a *struggling silence*” (Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* 31).

She is described as follows: “In the aspect of this *dark-arrayed, pale-faced, lady-like* old figure, there was a *deeply-tragic* character ... It seemed a *queer anomaly*, that *so gaunt and dismal a personage ...*” (39), “a *gaunt, sallow, rusty-jointed maiden ...* with a *strange horror* of a turban on her head” (44).

Her physical decay parallels that of the house she lives in. She is very much a product of and resembles very closely the environment that surrounds her: “She had dwelt too much

alone,—too long in the Pyncheon-house,—until her very brain was impregnated with the dry rot of its timbers.” (Hawthorne *The House of the Seven Gables* 66)

Considered to be the most complex figure in the romance, she is on the one hand a Pyncheon. Like her ancestor, Alice, she wants to be viewed as a “lady,” as a female representative of the power of wealth and prestige and art. On the other hand, she is forced to emerge from her gloomy world, in which she is much like the Gorgon Medusa rather than the wise Minerva, as Hugo McPherson states (138).

Phoebe’s symbolic role in the novel is to act in the romance. She clearly belongs to this first type of women, as she seems to possess qualities accepted by Puritan dogma: she was good at things such as “give a look of comfort and habitableness to any place which, for however brief a period, may happen to be their home.” (Hawthorne *The House of the Seven Gables* 80)

Therefore she is the person who has the power to modify Hepzibah’s environment. After she has slept in it once, her room becomes purified of all former evil and sorrow, her presence exorcizing the gloom of the house. To the social and psychological decadence of the house she brings one supreme virtue that has been lacking, that of not being morbid.

Alice Pyncheon is a representative character who is destroyed by male power. A bold and independent woman, she finally becomes enslaved to the carpenter Maule. All these three women in *The House of the Seven Gables* are to be found only in the first two categories given by Randal Stewart, as quoted by Smaranda Ștefanovici (430). In “Hawthorne’s Female Characters”, he divides Hawthorne’s female characters into three main types: (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”.

Conclusion

Among Hawthorne’s four novels, only *The Scarlet Letter* has a satisfying ending. There seem to be historical as well as fictional reasons for this, as Klaus Lanzinger (1) asserts. Hester Prynne returns to a community that has a defining purpose and spiritual values. As Hester can never be more than half-penitent, her dwelling has to remain between town and forest. Unlike Holgrave and Phoebe, Hester occupies an enriching marginal place. We can conceive it because Hester’s grim and shadowy perception of life, subversive though it is, is linked to a society of “demonstrable value”.

The three types of female characters demonstrate Hawthorne's preoccupation with the role of women in the nineteenth century. It is true that he shows a certain amount of ambivalence as far as their condition is concerned, but this attitude is to be accepted if one takes into consideration the Puritan background. Nevertheless, there is hope, as there are characters such as Pearl who represent a threat to the social order of the time. She belongs to the third category of women, whose option is "the most dangerous to the social order because it challenged the extralegal power of public opinion and social respect." (Daniels 221)

Hawthorne's awareness of women's substantial qualities has been well-documented, yet this position should not be misunderstood as feminist. His women seem to rehearse "familiar stances in new contexts, angelically innocent victims of destructive male projections of purity or sin, or essentially tainted embodiments of 'carnal pride' and dissenting social tendencies." (Baym 63)

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