Perspectives on the Portrayal of Women in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction

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Abstract

Nineteenth century American fiction is marked by its deepened awareness of the necessity to break free from traditional modes of thought and to break down the static notions of society in order to bring about a greater acceptance of the new age opening up with the expansions of the frontiers and other revolutionary changes in the social and political scenes. The non-conforming woman was so long seen as a destructive force but in the novels of the American Renaissance she is, for the first time, seen as a reformer and a renovator who would help create a new society from the vestiges of the past. Nathaniel Hawthorne shows a similar change of attitude from the polarities of the previous literary ages in the woman characters he creates in his novels and short stories. But his vision of the possibilities of the women who refuse to conform seems to be enveloped with insecurity and uncertainty. Therefore, although he admires the courage, daring and independent mind-set of the women he creates, no doubt inspired by certain women he saw around him, he cannot bring himself to give his heroines the status that is due to them. However, there is a sense of mourning at the defeat of such courageous specimens of womanhood which is amiss in the works of his predecessors. This article aims to bring out these dichotomies as displayed in Hawthorne's depiction of women.

Keywords: *Deviant, misogyny, patriarchal, otherness, ambiguity, unconventional, frontier, femme fatale*

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) is one of those authors in the history of American literature who would always be remembered for his fascinating and insightful depiction of women in his short stories and novels. Hester, the heroine of his magnum opus 'The Scarlet Letter', is an unforgettable character who overwhelms the reader in the sheer wealth of avant-garde qualities with which she has been attributed by her creator. It is in Hester and other strong women characters like her that we see the emergence of the concept of the 'New Woman' in Hawthorne's works. Yet the ambiguity with which these iconic women are

treated by Hawthorne has given rise to a host of criticism from his very own time.

Differing Perspectives on Hawthorne's Characterization of Women

If we consider the different types of criticisms of Hawthorne's treatment of women, we see that the approaches fall broadly into two groups. To the first group belong critics like Henry F. Chorley and Arthur Cleveland Coxe, who were Hawthorne's contemporaries, as also later critics like Darrel Abel, Irving Howe, Roy R. Male, Philip Rahv, Neal F Doubleday, Oscar Cargill, Gustaaf Van Cromphout, Gloria Chasson Erlich and Morton Cronin. The consensus of this group is that Hawthorne is a male chauvinist

writer who sees his women as falling into two broad categories- the good and the evil, further heightened by the dark and light colour imagery he associates with them. The second group comprises of critics like Nina Baym, Preston M. Brown and Barbara F. Lefcowitz and Allan B. Lefcowitz. This group has revised the traditional conception of Hawthorne as a misogynist who wrote sadistic tales of female degradation. This approach can actually be traced back to Hawthorne's own times where we have a critic like George Bailey Loring praising Hawthorne for the insight and understanding with which he has made out a case for a non-conforming woman like Hester. In reality, none of the works of Hawthorne are closed texts. In fact it seems that Hawthorne himself has intentionally kept the endings of his works open to various interpretations, both conventional and liberal.

Hawthorne's views on the subjects of women and patriarchy evolved and developed throughout his career. Other writers of the Romantic period in America like Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Oliver Wendell Holmes also show their awareness of the dark deviant woman as more often a victim of culture and society rather than as a mere *femme fatale*. However, it cannot be denied that most of these writers fight shy of openly celebrating their reading of womanhood and consign to a kind of ambivalence regarding their influence on society. It is true that in Hester we have a truly Romantic figure that is able and admirable forcing the world around her to change and modify their conventional approach of her as a mere adulteress. However, it is also true that Hawthorne never again created any woman of such heroic proportions as her.

Zenobia and Miriam, heroines of 'The Blithedale Romance' and 'The Marble Faun' respectively, are mere shadows of Hester unable to win the admiration of the readers. Although Miriam is seen with some amount of individuality and strength of purpose, Zenobia is a pathetic caricature of the New Woman. The later novels of

Hawthorne sadly fail to repeat the vision with which Hester was created. Indeed, in the later novels it might even appear that he is hastily modifying his approach. Never do we find the richness of interpretation as we did with Hester. Was it a deliberate avoidance? Or was it due to a lapse of his creative powers? It cannot be regarded as a reaction to the wishes of the reading public as 'The Scarlet Letter' enjoyed a great success that, in fact, the later novels did not. And it is this retraction from the wonderful celebration of Romantic ideals in 'The Scarlet Letter' that have led hosts of critics over generations to regard Hawthorne in an anti-feminist light.

The First Perspective

We may now consider some of these approaches. From the first group of traditional critics, Morton Cronin and Gloria Chasson Erlich can be taken as representatives. Cronin in his essay entitled 'Hawthorne On Romantic Love and The Status of Women' divides Hawthorne's women into three groups- the 'fragile creatures' like Alice Pyncheon ('The House of The Seven Gables') and Priscilla ('The Blithedale Romance'); the 'bright, self-reliant, and wholesome girls' such as Phoebe ('The House of The Seven Gables') and Hilda ('The Marble Faun'); and lastly, the women of 'heroic proportions' like Hester Prynne ('The Scarlet Letter'), Zenobia ('The Blithedale Romance') and Miriam ('The Marble Faun'). Cronin clearly states that, although in Hester, Hawthorne has created a character whose approach to life is Romantic, he himself does not subscribe to this view. He refutes the stance taken up by a critic like Lloyd Morris: 'He had not condemned either Hester Prynne or Arthur Dimmesdale for their sin; their love having a consecration of its own never caused them repentance' (p 89). Cronin says that there are certain reasons why Hawthorne is often mistook for endorsing the Romantic convictions. One of them is the critical manner in which Hawthorne depicts the Puritan spirit in 'The Scarlet Letter' (and we may add 'The House of The Seven Gables') for example, when he says that Hester's generation wore the blackest shade of Puritanism.

Cronin, however, says that there is a difference between attacking Puritanism and embracing the Romantic Ideal of freedom. In other words, the novel does not in any way bear a candid statement of Hawthorne's support of the Romantic ideals of individual freedom. On the contrary, Hester's failure to achieve her vision seems to be seen as the only beneficial conclusion by her creator. The second cause behind the misconception, as Cronin says, is the overwhelming appeal of the heroine of 'The Scarlet Letter'. He points out that the common reaction of the readers towards Hester is: How can anything so admirable and attractive be sinful? Cronin's answer is plain and simple: Hawthorne overreached himself while creating Hester and 'She acquired a life of her own and fought her creator to a standstill' (p 91). Therefore, while creating Zenobia, Hawthorne was careful to maintain a detached and coolly satiric distance and the only point at which he allows himself the previous closeness is at the moment of Zenobia's death. While discussing 'The Marble Faun', he says that by showing Hilda, Miriam's counterfoil, to have one defect, namely the lack of warmth and humanity, and holding the lack of the consciousness of sin as the reason, Hawthorne makes a sort of concession to Romanticism. But he also points out that for Hawthorne 'the educative value of sin depends upon the hearty repentance of the sinner' (p 95). Instead of adopting the Romantic approach to sin as a creative act which can become a new principle of virtue, Cronin takes all these illuminations to be a pointer towards the fact that in respect to the role of woman, Hawthorne votes for the traditional limitations inspite of his fascination with the New Woman and his plain disgust of the genteel and lady-like ones. Cronin's view is that Phoebe is Hawthorne's idea of the perfect woman: resourceful but unthreatening and the critic plainly calls this stance bourgeois. His final opinion is that Hawthorne's attitude towards women is more liberal than his Puritan forbears but not in any way free from mistrust and conservatism: '... Hawthorne's ideal in this respect is Hilda, from whose life the chaperone

has been eliminated, but not the code which the chaperone's presence enforced' (p 97).

Gloria Chasson Erlich's article, 'Deadly Innocence: Hawthorne's Dark Women' is a step further from Cronin's analysis as she shows that even the conforming women in Hawthorne's fiction bear a kind of ambivalence. She points out that although the conventional women offer no threat to either masculinity or purity, there is a secret snare. She says: 'Although domestic marvels, these women seem to affect the creativity of their men. Holgrave gives up his wizardry for Phoebe. Kenyon notices that he is less of an artist under the influence of Hilda and Hollingsworth goes off with Priscilla a broken man..... even the sunny maidens are a shade paradoxical and exact a somewhat destructive price' (p 175). Erlich's analysis does not give a wholesome picture of Hawthorne's attitude towards women and paints the author as a misogynist. This is because Erlich sees all of Hawthorne's women as replicas of the figure of Eve as painted in the popular Puritan thought. She finds most of Hawthorne's plots as versions of the Fall, the setting of his tales as new Edens, and a considerable number of his characters as prototypes of Adam, Eve and Satan. According to her, the problem of ambiguity in 'The Scarlet Letter' results from the author's paradoxical notions of woman as the source of comfort, pleasure and upliftment but also as a temptress, the agent of Satan and the cause of man's downfall. That Hawthorne's heroines are versions of Eve is further underlined by Erlich when she points out their 'Jewish' features, especially their dark back hair. She draws detailed parallels between Hawthorne's famous short story 'Rappaccinni's Daughter' and the novel 'The Scarlet Letter' to show how the theme of the loss of paradise through the agency of woman is used to form the underlying texture of Hawthorne's work. The same parallel is continued for 'The Marble Faun' where Erlich once again finds a picture of the contrast between pre-and post-lapsarian man. Erlich, therefore, sees Hawthorne's presentation of women as obsessively narrow as

both the black and the white women of his fiction appear to bear diabolical trails of character which pose deadly harm to the male figures.

The Second Perspective

There is another school of critics whose endeavours prove that in spite of the tragic fate that Hawthorne chalks out for his strong women protagonists, he is implicitly supporting them for the courage and daring that they stand for. Barbara F. Lefcowitz and Allan B. Lefcowitz pursue this line of thought in their essay entitled 'Some Rents in the Veil: New Light on Priscilla and Zenobia.' They oppose the popular notion that a character like Priscilla, who belongs to the group of the white virgins of Hawthorne's fiction, is the kind of woman the author approves of. In support of their argument, they point out that Hawthorne's 'obvious fascination and involvement with the psychological profundities of the dark ladies' (p 341) is lacking in the characterizations of their virginal counterparts, who become increasingly abstract and unreal 'on the precarious journey from Phoebe through Priscilla to Hilda' (pp 341-342).

This implicitly implies that because Hawthorne did not really approve of the type represented by his white heroines, he has failed to sketch them out as real human beings of flesh and blood, and they are merely abstract figures showing their creator's lack of empathy. Their argument takes off from Erlich's contention that Hawthorne's virgins too, are not free from diabolical features. This argument leads to the breaking down of the traditional notion that Hawthorne creates a pair of women-one good, the other bad- to show what he supports and what he disapproves of. In fact, Priscilla is a more sinister figure than her sister Zenobia as she has a dark past, bears traits of secrecy, and is easily susceptible to evil. The essay brings out Priscilla's association with 'the narrow' the clandestine, and the limited' and shows how the author contrasts it with Zenobia's open and frank nature, a contrast which is shown also through the two symbols which Hawthorne frequently associates with

them- the open flower of Zenobia and the closed purse of Priscilla. Finally, the fact that Priscilla is 'the flimsy paradigm of some vague principle of floating good' (p 348) lacking the author's own conviction is further proved when the whole vision of the novel breaks down into mere allegory as Hawthorne enforces the defeat of Zenobia as if against his own wishes: 'As the price of maintaining the reality of good, the result is at best a bitter pyrrhic victory. (p 350). They conclude that despite the degeneration of the narrative into a strained and foggy quasi-allegory (resulting from the author's own lack of conviction in the moral he pronounces), it is in many respects a 'surprisingly modern work of art' (p 350).

The boldest of this second group of critics is Nina Baym who negates all previous conceptions of Hawthorne as an anti-feminist writer. In the essay entitled 'Thwarted Nature: Nathaniel Hawthorne as Feminist' she rejects the dark-fair polarity as 'a critic's creation' (p 60) and the view that Hawthorne's works display his intense dislike of the contemporary reform movements for the emancipation and upliftment of women. She takes up a completely unconventional line of thought by saying that the women in Hawthorne's fiction are the idealized figures whereas the men who reject them are really the ones whom the author criticizes: '[The women] represent desirable and valuable qualities lacking in the male protagonist. They offer him the opportunity to attain these qualities through erotic alliance or marriage. The man's invariable failure to take the opportunity is harshly judged by the narrator in fiction after fiction' (p 60). She overturns the traditional approach to the paired women of Hawthorne's fiction by saying that the women of these pairs who have been identified as bad by previous criticism actually stands for the good. This is because in all the novels, where we find these contrasting pairs, the defect of the male figures results from their over-socialization and therefore that woman of the pair who defies society naturally present the ideal. Baym accepts the view of the psychological critics that the male

protagonists of Hawthorne continually reject their female counterparts and, in the process, they reject everything that a woman stands for, especially sensuality. But she points out that unlike 'machismo authors' who join their heroes in boasting about cruelty to women and unlike 'patriarchal authors' who present gestures of contempt or dislike toward women in the form of affection, Hawthorne entertains no illusion about this rejection and, on the contrary, sees it as defective and harmful for men. He holds himself responsible along with other men for injuries done to women and in order to expiate this guilt he repeats in story after story the distress of the 'injured women' to bring it into greater focus. Thus, Baym shows that Hawthorne's obsession with the theme of mistreated women is not at all a projection of his views of how women should be treated or even his warning to women themselves but an illustration of his awareness of the wrongs done to women. In the later part of her argument, she states that the root of all the tragic outcomes in Hawthorne's fiction lies, not in the figures or the machinations of the women, but in men's pathetic failure to accept what women stand for. The rejection is mainly of sexual union- a denial of the natural order that affects both the men and women adversely and, in the case of the women (especially the women of his short stories- Beatrice, Faith, Martha, Elizabeth, Dorcas), often fatally. In her essay, Baym also deals with the way in which Hawthorne possibly viewed contemporary society and the opportunities it offered to women who chose to be different. She says that in the novels dealing with the contrasting pair of women we see the casting off of one woman and her being supplanted by another. The woman who is cast off, however, possesses all the admirable qualities like health, vigour and natural affection. The woman who succeeds her comes nowhere near to creating such an impression. The fact that the latter is the one chosen by society is obviously an explicit criticism of society itself by the author rather than representing his own choice. By showing society to condemn Hester, Zenobia, and Miriam, Hawthorne proves that it is the misfortune of these women to have been born

ahead of their times. According to Baym, this is the consciousness that accentuates their tragedies and this consciousness is echoed with the author's hope that a new revelation will make a change 'at some brighter period when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time' (p 76).

Conclusion

The stance taken up by the first group of traditional critics that Hawthorne is a writer of the conservative bend can now be seen as a rather confined and limited approach. It cannot be denied that, at times, Hawthorne's plots appear to be versions of the Fall and he seems to be following the Calvinist doctrine of sin in his delineations of women. The change of circumstance brought about in the life of Giovanni by Beatrice in 'Rappaccinni's Daughter', in Young Goodman Brown's by Faith in 'Young Goodman Brown', in Donatello's by Miriam in 'The Marble Faun', and in Dimmesdale's by Hester in 'The Scarlet Letter' are perhaps responsible for creating these impressions. The interplay of the myth of the loss of paradise and the primal sin cannot be denied as an operative symbol at the back of Hawthorne's works but, at the same time, there seems to be an effort of transcending the myth and seeing it from an alternative angle which carries implications of it being a fortunate Fall. Like a true Puritan, Hawthorne's vision is coloured by the biblical precepts, but by viewing the Fall as a harbinger of awareness and enlightenment in place of mere bliss, Hawthorne remains a true representative of the Romantic and Transcendental age of America. The biblical myth is the starting point of many of his tales, which then initiates the reader to take up a complex and critical approach to the Fall and to view for themselves the distinction between the lapsarian and pre-lapsarian states of existence.

Hawthorne attitude towards the unconventional women he creates is marked by ambivalence instead of any one particular mindset as advocated by either the first group of critics or the second. The marked feature of Hawthorne's depiction of women in his fiction is that although

he damns the unconventional women, he does not celebrate the unadventurous ones either. Priscilla is prissy (maybe that is what suggested her name), Hilda is as cold as the marble of the title of the book where we find her, and Phoebe, though practical and compassionate, hardly has any striking quality to make her assume the status of a heroine like Hester or Zenobia or Miriam. If Hawthorne refuses to grant victory to his dark heroines, he also rejects their counterfoils as supplements. On the one hand, there is a genuine appreciation of the unusual novelty and wealth of his dark heroines as noted by the critics of the second group. The glorified pictures of the heroines throw a very poor light on the fair and frail women, thus, making them the victims of the author's irony and implied criticism. But, on the other hand, it is also true that Hawthorne sees the frontier heroines as obvious threats to the status quo and to the age-old and sanctified institutions of marriage and domestic harmony. Therefore, the ultimate destiny that awaits these women from the author is either defeat or death. His celebration of the emancipated women seems to stop midway and gets lost in a mist of doubt and uncertainty leading to a retrace and reversal. All his strong women suffer a gradual diminution as they are forced to adopt the conventional and orthodox roles assigned to their gender in a patriarchal society.

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