

HAWTHORNE'S WOMAN: FROM WITCH TO VICTIM

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Trying to establish a hierarchy of Hawthorne's women is probably the most difficult thing. The easiest aspect that everyone notices is the distinction between the dark, or the sinner, and the fair, or the pure, Puritan woman. The paradox here is that it is exactly the dark religion that matches the fair woman. In *The American Woman*, Emerson said: "All things have two handles: beware of the wrong one." (Bradley, 1965: 1037); it is a good piece of advice.

A subjective approach might rank Zenobia on the first place, while an objective one focuses on Hester. First of all, Hester's roots belong to Old England, and such a place should have produced a pure, gentle, fair creature. Instead we have this passionate-for-a-minute Hester, whose most striking aspect is the dark, abundant hair.

To a childish question, "How come?" one must bring into discussion the idea of predestination elaborated by St. Augustine and adopted by the Protestants. Augustine says that there are persons predestined to salvation and that, even if their deeds are immoral, they will still be saved by God's grace. The remainders are predestined to suffer. The end of the novel, and especially some aspects concerning Arthur might be explained by means of the doctrine of God's grace that elects only the chosen ones: "It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons who were spectators of the whole scene, (...), denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than of a new born infant's."

(Cowley, 1976: 541) According to St. Augustine, God doesn't have to give any explanations for his preferences.

Despite that, the idea of not accepting the imposed dogma, and as a consequence, of acting, of rebelling, characterizes all Hawthorne's women: "Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die." (Cowley, 1976: 483)

In one way or another, they all try to change their pre-established condition – the passive element – but their rebellion is what causes their perdition. For the Puritan shepherd there is only one possible type of woman: the lamb-like one, the meek woman that patiently waits for the Easter slaughter. Priscilla is the embodiment of such a type.

Priscilla's merit as a character is that she represents a pure type of womanhood. Yet, the adjective does not suppose greatness; it refers to a category that self-suffices, that receives no influences from the outside, meaning that her structure does not allow her any acceptance of the feminist ideas, hinted at by Zenobia. It is in this respect that she is pure, made up of a single element: light.

Hawthorne's greatness lies in the dark. Herman Melville, cited by Bernard Cohen in *The Recognition of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1969: 32) praised his "Blackness, ten times black." This mixture of shadow and of ray is the core of Hawthorne's creation. The light without the dark, the woman without the sin – the passion is unconceivable. Hawthorne's women are projections of his own dual nature. This is somehow similar to Poe's technique of the *Doppelgänger*, of the split self or at least it has to do with the psychoanalytical idea that truth

lies in repression. In this respect Hyatt H. Waggoner stated in Cohen's anthology:

"Like the Existentialist philosophers who articulate the sensibility of our time, Hawthorne is more concerned with the experienced toothache than with orthodontic theory. Like them too, he distrusts the claim of objective reason to be able to arrive at humanly relevant truth: his empiricists all end unhappily." (Cohen, 1969: 241)

Sartre's name is linked to existentialism, and one of his works, *Muștele* (*The Flies*) pointed out some ideas that more or less have something to do with Puritanism, a doctrine based on the principle of fear. Jupiter advises Oreste to leave people alone with their remorse and superstitions, because this is the sense of their existence. God likes these pathetic souls. It seems that in Hester's community these gods were the respectable Mr. Wilson, Mr. Bellingham, as well as Mr. Winthrop. They were the stage directors of a play of sin and retribution – the stage was the scaffold and the stage light was the plain daylight.

A peculiarity of the Puritan doctrine was their focus on the preach, and implicitly, on the auditive element instead of the visual one. The preach was performed at the pulpit that lacked any kind of adornments, lest they should tempt the eye. Fear was the core of the preach, so well prepared from beforehand, and this aspect is present in Sartre's play too, when a mother tells her son that he must be afraid, very afraid, because this is the only way he would become a good man. Hester's sin develops the Puritan oratory: "the elder clergy man, who had carefully prepared himself for the occasion, addressed to the multitude a discourse on sin." (Cowley: 358) Hester's punishment to wear that "A" letter hides the Puritan psychology that focused on the impact that an image – usually forbidden – would produce. This is the explanation for Hester's

allowance to decorate her “sin”. The eye, longing for an image, would cling to the angles of the sinful A and never get down. This staring violates the intimacy – it is a moral whipping.

The idea of *contemptus mundi* that characterized the Middle Ages reached the peak in the Protestant doctrine: the despite for the smile, the despite for the color, the despite for life and even for a child. Jean Delumeau in *Păcatul și frica (The Sin and the Fear)* cites what St. Augustine thought of childhood – that a child is still a sinner and that he was conceived in sin. He even asks himself whether he has been innocent. As for Hester’s sin, it belongs to the neo-platonic tradition: the union of two bodies has an irrational character, it degenerates man and sends him next to animals.

According to Augustine, the union had to lack any sign of passion and to resemble the hands that joined one another. Hester broke the law and her sin was unpardonable. The first of the Christian virtues was virginity. The *contemptus mundi* proclaimed the nostalgia for the primitive angel-like human being, for the sexless spiritualized one destined for pure contemplation. Augustine’s doctrine imagined a celestial fortress where people who act purely will in the end replace the fallen angels. Hilda’s refuge in the dove-tower may be seen as a hidden desire to replace such an angel. But in Hawthorne’s earthly fortress sin educates: he needs no asexuate Hildas, but passionate and contradictory women.

Though the prototype of Puritanism, Priscilla fails to impress mainly because she is deprived of the sense of the past: “But the past never comes back again.” (Hawthorne, 1986: 76) This contradicts all Hawthorne’s philosophy expressed in *The House of the Seven Gables*:

“... all human progress is in a circle, or, to use a more accurate and beautiful figure, in an ascending spiral curve. While we fancy ourselves going straight forward, and attaining at every step, an entirely new position of affairs, we do actually return to something long ago tried and abandoned, but which we now find etherealized, refined and perfected to its ideal. The Past is but a coarse and sensual prophecy of the present and the future.” (Hawthorne, 1986: 259)

Puritanism became a legal form of hypocrisy illustrated by both Dimmesdale and Bellingham; the latter kept a slave and inhabited a mansion that rather resembled Aladdin’s palace. This doctrine equals the male domination and anticipates miscegenation; thus, the episode of the sailors in *The Scarlet Letter* is very suggestive: “The buccaneer on the wave might relinquish his calling, and become, at once, if he chose, a man of probity and piety on land.” (Cowley, 1976: 517)

One last detail is that in *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne’s philosophy about the past that chains the present puts on the fictional garb of the Italian boy with his barrel organ. In spite of our dreams, or of our thoughts, we all dance according to the same tune.

Hawthorne’s name was also related to Transcendentalism. However, in his case the only aspect of Transcendentalism that matches his situation is the Feminist movement, and because of this, we will speak about an authentic transcendentalist Zenobia and of an apprentice Hester.

Except for Hester, all the other women are built in opposing pairs: Phoebe and Hepzibah, Miriam and Hilda, Zenobia and Priscilla. Hester is the only one who opposes herself: her strong Puritan beliefs and her timid feminist ideas. We could say that Zenobia’s principles are but a burst of Hester’s repressed thoughts towards the end of her experience.

The motto of the Transcendentalist movement is the one Emerson placed in the beginning of his "Self-Reliance": "Net e quaesiveris extra – Do not seek outside yourself" (Bradley, 1965: 1067). It is sin, in one form or another, which obliges Hawthorne's characters who can no longer stand their isolation to go for a dip in the sea of humanity. It so happens with Clifford, Phoebe and Hester who, when seeing Roger among the crowd understood that: "Dreadful as it was, she was conscious of a shelter in the presence of this thousand witness. (...) She fled to refuge, as it were to the public exposure, and dreaded the moment when its protection should be withdrawn from her." (Cowley, 1976: 354)

Out of Hawthorne's female characters it seems that only Phoebe experienced no drama, as she was the product of society. Her isolation in the house is, we might say, accidental, and her development, her blooming into a woman seems to stick to the normal, physical aspect. Hester's facing the people in the scaffold scene, as well as Clifford's wanting to jump out of the window may be understood by means of Emerson's statement in "The American Scholar": "The world, this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys, which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself." (Bradley, 1965: 1042) Here, it was Emerson's contradiction that allowed a comparison, as he is rather reputed for selfishness when saying that he would leave his family for the sake of isolation.

The drama that Hawthorne's characters experienced during their isolation might be explained by what Henri Bergson thought about society. In his work *Cele două surse ale moralei și religiei (The Two Sources of Morality and Religion)*, Bergson argued that even the ego belongs both to the self and to

the society, and that, if somebody wishes to separate himself from the society, he won't be able to do this, because the memory and the imagination live out of what society placed in them.

Bergson presents a very interesting case – that of a criminal who, despite his living in the middle of a community does not confess. He feels much more isolated here than on a deserted island, Bergson says, because in the last case the criminal would find solace in imagining society, whereas here, in the middle of it, he feels lost because of his crime and the only possible way to reintegrate would be to confess. This theory applies to Dimmesdale's case: "... There was an air about this young minister – an apprehensive, a startled, a half-frightened look, as of a being who felt himself quite astray (...) and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own. (Cowley, 1976: 356)

Hawthorne's Transcendentalism implies feminism and the Feminist movement, whereas Puritanism is reduced to the male dominion. His revolt against Puritanism is the revolt of his feminine soul against the tyranny of his male ancestors.

Margaret's Fuller's beliefs (the high priestess of the New England Transcendentalist group, as she used to be called) influenced Hawthorne a lot, as it can be seen from his *French and Italian Notebooks* gathered in Cowley's *Portable Hawthorne* (1976: 659), where he dedicated several pages to her memory: "On the whole, I do not know, but I like the better for it; the better, because she proved herself a very woman, after all, and fell as the weakest of her sisters might."

This statement puzzles us and, though we were warned in the preface to *The Blithedale Romance* not to make any comparison between the narrator and

the author himself, we cannot help ourselves – it is too obvious: the “very woman” is the one that allows an element of weakness – hence, Coverdale’s exclamation in the end: “I – I myself was in love with Priscilla.” (Hawthorne, 1986: 284)

In *Păcatul și frica (Sin and Fear)*, Jean Delumeau analyzed all the forms of that wide-spread phenomenon: *contemptus mundi*. Delumeau mentions Antonio Vieira’s Jesuit opinions, who tries desperately to find out the cause of Adam’s Fall and it seems that the results of this Fall, all the sufferings of the body, all the vices of the soul happened and happen because of a woman. However, the climax of his Jesuit opinions will be reached when he speaks of a legitimate wife, not an adulteress one, not guilty, and created like that by the very hands of God.

It surely took a great effort to demolish such a conception and, until Margaret Fuller’s age, there had been a long and harsh epoch that tried to repress any sign of passion, any hint of temptation: girls resorted to painful methods or customs, such as pressing metallic strips against their bosom, thus preventing the natural development that might lead into temptation, and when, at one moment, the true nature of woman finally burst, the hunt began.

In *Magia și Vrăjitoria în Europa (Magic and Witchery in Europe)* James Sharpe presents many famous situations in which witches were involved. Thus, in 1478, the Bedford duchess was suspected of having used witchcraft, and then Jane Shore who was in love with Richard III was accused of witchcraft. The 17th century was the outburst of a plague of witches. In 1692 the plague reached New England, too.

Researchers try to explain the hysteria by means of economic aspects, yet it is not the cause that interests us, but a name: Hawthorne – the sin of a father that Nathaniel tried to take upon himself. In *The Custom House*, he stated: “At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take the shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them (...) may be now and henceforth removed.” (Cowley, 1976: 300)

The hunters were eventually tamed and in *The Legend of the Sleepy Hollow* W. Irving managed to offer an unforgettable, comical image of the woman who no longer witches, but smites:

“and he had seen many specters in his time, and been more than once beset by Satan in diverse shapes, (...) he would have passed a pleasant life of it, in despite of the devil and all his works, if his path had not been crossed by a being that causes more perplexity to mortal man than ghosts, goblins, and the whole race of witches put together, and that was: a woman.” (Bradley, 1965: 380)

In the 19th century the situation reversed and in order to see the manifestation of the unnatural you had to pay ... the tax collector was nobody else but Westervelt ... the woman ... from witch to victim: Priscilla and even more Beatrice.

Hawthorne’s preference for all the aspects related to womanhood is analyzed by Millicent Bell in his Introduction to *New Essays on Hawthorne’s Major Tales*. Here it is stated that those tales that Melville called “black” seem to bespeak hostility to the feminine, a desire to write masculine will on the feminine body, as literalized in *The Birthmark* or in *Rappaccini’s Daughter*, both anticipations of *The Scarlet Letter*.

In the Introduction to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Milton R. Stern details the literary context of the epoch: thus, we find out that the way for an

American romancer to break into the American literary marketplace was through short literary pieces accepted by the magazines that published fiction and poetry. But this literary market was for ladies, as gentlemen's magazines published political, social, and military issues. So, Hawthorne had to make some compromises and the best example is that of *The House of the Seven Gables* which ends in an unexpected way for what we know of Hawthorne.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was proud of the American woman and he clearly expresses that in *The English Notebooks* comprised in *The Portable Hawthorne*: "The women of England are more atrociously ugly than any other human beings, and I have not yet seen one whom we should distinguish as beautiful in America." (Cowley, 1976: 641) The most striking difference lies in the character: "They certainly look much better, able to take care of themselves than our women; but I see no reason to suppose that they really have greater strength of character than any." (Cowley, 1976: 642)

Puritanism puzzles or gives birth to paradoxes; it so happens with the depiction of womanhood. Inconsistency is part of a woman's nature (George Sand proclaimed that as one great Truth) and has nothing to do with miscegenation. A fiction that tries to deal with such delicate matter is bound to produce confusion; first, we deal with Hawthorne, and secondly, with woman. The author's obstinacy in presenting the same peculiarities of the sinner type of woman gave birth to a sort of *metaphor*: the Dark Lady.

Between 1800-1860 America was flooded with novels and poetry volumes written by women for women, initiating the cult of domesticity based on values of gentle virtue such as piety, purity and passivity. But sometimes the woman, whom Reynolds calls *the adventure feminist*, commands and acts just

like a man. The critic establishes twelve types of American women identifying the figure of the woman victim with the dark lady's wrongs. Yet, Reynolds' dark woman has almost nothing or little to do with Hawthorne's Dark Lady.

Before Hawthorne's woman, we have the American woman, whose basic characteristic is strength. Reynolds adopts Margaret Dalzeil's opinion about the British heroine - *lovely imbecile* - inherited from the 18th century didactic fiction, a character that was fragile, religious and dependent on man. As compared to this type of heroine, the American one had all the rights to be called the *Amazon*. Reynolds considers that the best explanation for this adjective was offered by Tocqueville whom he quotes: "In the USA, Protestant teaching is combined with free constitution and a very democratic society, and in no other country is a girl left to look after herself." (Reynolds, 1988: 341)

The above-mentioned conditions created what Reynolds named the moral exemplar of womanhood, divided again in the angel, or angelic woman, and the practical one. It is now that we approach Hawthorne's territory. The critic considers that an angel's basic function is religious or philosophical one and that, despite her strength for good, it did not echo in the feminist matters. Initially, this type served as a means of erasing the tradition of Scholastic Calvinism; it affirmed the faith in man's salvation through this angel-woman. The practical type of woman, best illustrated by Phoebe, had to render the efficiency of good works, and her indomitable cheer was flown into the face of the Calvinistic gloom.

Leslie A. Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1984: 78) analyzes the matter of womanhood from a sexual point of view, bearing

antipathy for the pure, fair maiden, derived from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, stating that:

"The scarcely distinguishable ingénues of Cooper, the incredible Lucy over whom Melville drivels in *Pierre*, Hawthorne's Priscilla and unbearably dove-like Hilda: these are the scandals of our literature."

The critic states bluntly that in Hawthorne's case, everything is explainable by his being married to an ethereal ice-lady. Thus, his dark ladies stem from his obscene fancies.

Gloria C. Erlich in *Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction* considers that all the author's fictional projections are deeply rooted in his own biography: "Sibling incest, dark women contrasted with fair ones – these staples of Gothic romance – were amplified by Hawthorne's family experience." (Erlich, 1986: 93)

She offers some very interesting family details: Maria Louisa, Nathaniel's younger sister, stands for the fair type of woman, being a capable cook and a seamstress. Ebe, as the child Nathaniel was not able to pronounce the whole name, Elizabeth, the older sister was an imperious and brilliant type of woman, totally independent. She was dark-haired woman, having a possessive attitude to her brother and unveiled antipathy for Sophia.

Erlich focuses on Hawthorne's experience recorded in *The English Notebooks* about meeting a Jewish woman in a restaurant from London. This figure seems to explain the terror behind many portrayals of the dark, exotically suggestive women like Hester, Zenobia, Miriam and Beatrice. Hawthorne's journal is the most efficient instrument used by the psychoanalytical approach: it is here where we find Hawthorne's acting like Giovanni:

“I never should have thought of touching her, nor desired to touch her; for, whether owing to the distinctiveness of race, my sense that she was a Jewish, or whatever else, I felt a strong repugnance, simultaneously with my perception that she was an admirable creature.” (as cited by Erlich, 1986: 94)

A synthesis of all these qualities and flaws may have been captured by Leslie Fiedler when she states that the Dark Lady represented the hunger of the Protestant male not only for the rich sexuality he had rejected as unworthy of his wife, but also for the religions he had rejected and for the social, or racial groups he had excluded.

The same Dark Lady is viewed as an *American Madonna*, the title of John Gatta's book who took into consideration the *Marian image* in Hawthorne's fiction as well as the author's duality between Protestantism and Catholicism. Gatta notices that the image of Madonna offered Hawthorne a symbolic correspondent for his faith in the saving force mediated through womanhood. At the same time, Nathaniel's deprivation of an earthly father made him regard a woman as an access towards a celestial father, the woman being his mother who was viewed in curious virginal terms because of her seclusion.

The critic distinguishes between two types of Mary that correspond to the fair and to the dark lady: the first is *St. Mary the Virgin*, with her mystique of surpassing purity and latent sexuality, and the second is *Mother Mary* whom we can identify with Hester. These two types combine and create what Gatta calls the Christian Magna Matter in Hawthorne's fiction.

His final conclusion is that Hawthorne's ambiguous women embody a redemptive, but non-virginal aspect of the archetypal Madonna, and that, either a terrible anima, a mother, or a virgin, they all offer the man a chance to fulfill.

The historical Madonna was no angel and it is through her body that Mary became blessed. This idea sustains the greatness of all the Dark Ladies.

The study of woman in Hawthorne's fiction (in a different way than chronological) must be focused on the way this one splits into contradictions or on the way she unites them.

The House of the Seven Gables represents the literary womb that gives birth to all the other types of womanhood. This literary womb was initially abused by Pyncheon's pride; thus, it was doomed to ill-functioning and to a premature birth: we recognize such abortive creatures in Hepzibah as well as in Clifford whose conception as a male seems to be rather an accident; differently said, it is a sexual decline. Phoebe is to be analyzed only in extremes: as the ones who saves because she represents a new type of womanhood, one that engages herself in social matters, or as somehow plain woman whose passion was exorcised and whose broom was transformed into a practical thing.

The offsprings of this wounded womb will be Zenobia and Priscilla, both representing pure types of womanhood, that is, comprising a single element – the light or the dark. We have stated that Priscilla represents the authentic Puritan, consequently we are obliged to name Zenobia as the authentic sinner; yet the term must not be considered in its most negative connotations. Her sin consists in pride and mostly in the way she treats Priscilla.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the third romance in my analysis, the two opposing principles will fuse and produce Hester. This one inherited Zenobia's strength and Priscilla's skill: the skill of sewing. The Transcendentalist gene is only a recessive one in Hester. In her turn, this one will become the literary

mother for Hilda and Miriam. It is Hilda that will continue her religious aspirations, while Miriam will replace sewing by a superior form of art, painting. More or less a failure (it depends on the critics' taste), *The Marble Faun* clearly presents two types of womanhood: the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene.

In *Omul și Mulțimea (The Man and the Crowd)*, Jose Ortega y Gasset tells us a kind of a fable: while he was traveling back to Spain, he met on board of the ship some American women that were offended when he treated them as women and tried to talk to them accordingly. They demanded Gasset that they should be treated as human beings and not as women ... the principles of equality had erased the very essence of womanhood. In spite of his exaggerated praising words, Gasset managed to rehabilitate the concept of woman and that of the female body, which are both a shield and a vulnerable pawn. The body itself is a soul, Gasset stated, that is why women pay so much attention to the needs of their body and start to decorate it. This statement fits Zenobia perfectly.

As strong as it may seem, the strength of a woman lies in her flaws, too ... Zenobia. It is only now that we can understand Hawthorne's opinions about Margaret Fuller: too much strength might scare, and too much weakness fails to impress.

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