

HAWTHORNE AND WOMEN

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Nathaniel Hawthorne is an eminent novelist of the nineteenth century America. His novels and short stories portray a gallery of courageous, young women protagonist who articulate the conflict between the old and new notions of female propriety. He sympathises with bold women characters who instead of suffering silently, work towards their own emancipation. In this he reaches beyond the inhibitions of his age in envisioning a better future for them and stands out as a champion for the rights of women.

Hawthorne has a gallery of both conventional and unconventional women characters, and their juxtaposition highlights the strengths of bold, independent protagonists. Nina Baym has aptly said – “The presence of women characters in his fiction is too pervasive, their role too striking, to be overlooked”. Hawthorne's women Hester Prynne, Zenobia, Miriam, Hepzibah, Phoebe and others are all exotically beautiful, endowed with oriental characteristics, yet are strong enough to challenge the patriarchal society in which they live. His portrayal of unusual heroines is a result of the childhood influence of women on him and of the emergence of feminism at that time.

Although feminism had been in America for a long time, Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* [1792] gave it a proper direction. Feminist studies came into their own much later in the twentieth century. Massachusetts had already witnessed Anne Hutchinson's rebellion [1590-1642] and the defiance of the Quaker women. Hawthorne sympathized with the views of such rebellions of women for he felt that women should rebel against any kind of injustice done to them. Under the influence of Wollstonecraft's highly provocative book, America in the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the first wave of feminism. This gave a whole new direction to the American society.

It had a significant impact on the literary works too, and therefore even Hawthorne could not escape being uninfluenced. His major women protagonists are sketched around these years of feminist awakening. Salvo has said “The most important phase of Hawthorne's career—the period during which he composed *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Marble Faun*—therefore coincided with the increasingly activist nineteenth century political movement for women's rights”.

Hawthorne's childhood was spent under the influence, love and tender care of only his mother and other women of the household. Left fatherless at the age

of four, Hawthorne had grown up observing the suffering of his widow mother in a patriarchal society. This early orientation and first hand information left a deep impact on his psyche, and he therefore developed a sharp insight into women's nature, mind and their unique place in this world. Apart from his mother there were other women friends who inspired him to endow some of his fictional women with their qualities like Sophia Peabody, Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller.

Hawthorne had deep reverence for his wife Sophia. He admired not only Sophia's good looks but also her intelligence. He gave her all respect and equal rights. From Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Margaret Fuller—leading feminists of their times made him realize that women had great potential and could handle both home and work efficiently. Hawthorne's women are often partial if not complete images of such real flesh and blood female acquaintances. His women are pictures of extraordinary courage and endurance and their unjust suffering eventually forces them to rebel against the oppressive social forces. Their struggle and perseverance is of perennial interest to the readers all over the world.

Since he was aware of their exploitation and unjust suffering, he has in his works high lighted their suffering & plight. In his first novel *Fanshawe*, he mocks at the idea of male supremacy and female exploitation. In his short stories like *The Birthmark*, *The Rappaccini's Daughter* etc., he shows how women are sacrificed at the alter of male ego. In his major novels, he thrusts his women protagonist into unusual conditions and after some suffering projects them as women fighting for their own rights.

Hester Prynne's defiance in not accepting her sin, and boldly and beautifully exhibiting the letter “A”—speaks leaps and bounds about her. Zenobia is a rebel—a feminist in her own right. Hepzibah fights against the family legacy and Miriam rejects the idea of a woman being content with her domesticity and defiantly ventures into the male profession of painting.

Thus the valorization of women by Hawthorne in his works emphasizes the fact that whenever the fundamental rights of a woman are violated, she will rise and fight for herself.

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