

**Social change in the status of women in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables***

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Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München



Dr. Giorgia Tommasi

Submitted by:

Youssef Tekriti

11870099

Physik/1

SoSe-18

[Youssef.Tekriti@campus.lmu.de](mailto:Youssef.Tekriti@campus.lmu.de)

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“Not only do critics disagree violently, they tend to so quite complacently and with selected or distorted evidence. For example, Richard Chase and Gustaaf Van Cromphout simply assume Hawthorne's opposition to feminism, Morton Cronin and James Mellow show both sides and arbitrarily choose one (Cronin opposed, Mellow in favor); and Carolyn Heilbrun and Nina Baym presume, just as speculatively, that the evidence clearly supports Hawthorne's Feminism.” (David Stineback 93). Hawthorne's women are beyond doubt the center of his novels as in the *Scarlet Letter*, *The Blithedale Romance*, and *The House of the Seven Gables*, but whether in favor of women is an argument to claim as Stineback clarified. Hawthorne had a diverse often misleading perspective on Womanhood within his writings (Emandi 147). Given the latter, Hawthorne's Feminism has been contested largely, and argued by Nina Baym in 'Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism', Michael Hollister, Kaiko Arai, and many others. A brief insight on his biography would help clear the context of each stance.

Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up with a widowed mother and two sisters in Salem, Massachusetts, after the death of his father Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sr. in July 1842. He was wedded to the illustrator and transcendentalist Sophia Peabody. His literary fiction belonged to 'romanticism', and was inspired by his puritan origin, impacted by Transcendentalism, and nonetheless by his early life. Hawthorne considered his historical literary fiction as a medium to express his thoughts on deep psychological themes, e.g. guilt, sin, and evil. He nevertheless could depict the social and economic transitions in his time. Moreover, his writings were shaped by talented and supportive female of his childhood, as well as his adulthood, for example his mother, wife, Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody (Publisher of Hawthorne's writings). Hence, Hawthorne's fiction could portray the life of women with its frustrations, dreams and struggles (Melinda Ponder). In the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Industrialization has brought changes across the United States, and the women joined the workforce as opposed to their "natural" domestic role for housekeeping. Although the women's role was shifting, however their status in the patriarchal society remained unchanged. Under these circumstances, Women's right movement was established around 1848 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton along with her friend calling "a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman" at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls on July 19 and 20, 1848. The rise of social movements including women's right to vote was led by activists like Susan B. Anthony, Stanton and many others (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter 1998). Hawthorne did not support the movement publicly, but implicitly expressed his stand in his writings, novels and letters. He

believes that social change happens when the society is ready to accept a shift in its mentality. A look through his characters, he creates strong and independent females like Hester Prynne, or Zenobia (believed to be inspired from Margaret Fuller, a well-known activist and an acquaintance of his), While Hepzibah represents the victim of male oppression and power. In Hawthorne's, *The House of the Seven Gables*, he depicts the socio-economical change in the status of women. It portrays his objection to social reformation by drawing the struggle of Hepzibah, Clifford and Alice, dominated by men power illustrated by Judge Pyncheon, whereas Phoebe represents the "compromised" change that should occur. Although he believes that societal reformation needs an open mindset to be accepted and an adequate time, he drew Phoebe as a strong and independent character who could accelerate this transition.

Hepzibah, from the beginning of the romance, is drained and as weathered and rusty as the Pyncheon house, its spacious dusty rooms and corridors are as full of "tragic dignity" (Hawthorne 41; Ch. 2) and "Family pride" (Hawthorne 39; Ch. 2). Being old, poor and un-married has pushed Hepzibah to live on the margins of the society and its restrictions; She had to be excluded. The old maiden tries to open a cent-shop but fails to sell, as she cannot take part of production and competition owned by the masculine power nor can she be a domestic woman fulfilling her family and social duties (Melinda Ponder). The author elaborated on this subject, for three consecutive chapters (II, III, IV), to show men as in Clifford relying on women's agency for support and to draw her suffering from being an aristocratic unsuccessful business woman and her poor skills in housekeeping and having a significant other, a lover for herself. In *The House of the Seven Gables: The Religion of Love*, Alfred J. Levy draws the attention on the romance dynamics qualities in the novel as she depicts Hepzibah and her relation to the past:

Hepzibah Pyncheon is thoroughly dominated by the past, by what she believes is familial curse of bloody, violent deaths for all male Pyncheons. She is powerless, before she opens her cent shop, to cope with the present. She is an old and feeble lady, who had missed her chance for a vigorous life. Her enforced isolation has enervated her; she has become somewhat unbalanced, "a kind of lunatic" (p.209). Even in her most strenuous attempt to repudiate the past-her train ride with Clifford-she is overwhelmed by what she is doing and

fundamentally adheres to her fixed idea of the past by imaging that the train was “passing and down Pyncheon street” (p.306) (p.190)

Hepzibah failed to know what love actually is in her own experience (Hawthorne 37; Ch. 2), as marriage for the nineteenth century was the single most profound reaching institution that would affect the course of her life (Levine 150). For this, she was cast aside from the lot of her common sex; Marriage was a major social construct object on women, as it shifts every aspect of their daily existence (Levine 150). When we move later to the end of the romance, we can perceive marriage as the happy ending that Hawthorne imposed on Phoebe. Our little girl as she comes into the story, on the other hand brought prosperity to the shop with her practical skills as soon as she moves in the business given her smile and beauty, as well as, reorganizing the shop, and renewing the stock (Hawthorne 85; Ch. 5). She also could take care of the house and brought light into its dark corners. Hepzibah felt as if this experience has termed her the lower class, from her idle aristocracy to which her pride belongs, whereas Phoebe felt proud and more natural being a saleswoman, yet a successful one (Hawthorne 58,82; Ch. 3, 4). In other words, as Teresa Goddu in her essay on “the circulation of women in Hawthorne’s novel” puts it in economic terms, it can be observed “how unwillingly Hepzibah joined the market with an aristocratic rather than a democratic exchange when she sells her goods and failing” (Goddu 120). The truest points of Melancholy for the narrator as in this morning when the old Hepzibah, who had fed herself with the food of aristocratic reminiscences for 60 years as she is fain now to step down from her “imaginary” rank, had now to earn her own food or starve, transforming it into what he called a “plebian woman” (Hawthorne 42; Ch.2). He went on criticizing the rank to which she belonged:

In This republican country, amid the fluctuating waves of our social life, somebody is always at the drowning-point. The tragedy is enacted with as continual repetition as that of a popular drama on a holiday; and nevertheless, is felt as deeply, perhaps as when an hereditary noble sinks below his order. More deeply’ since, with us, rank is the grosser substance of wealth and a splendid establishment, and has not spiritual existence after the death of these, but dies hopelessly along with them. (Hawthorne 265; Ch. 2)

The struggle of Hepzibah being forced into the work-field as a result of late change in the economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the contrary Phoebe, although she is a virgin, unlike Hepzibah, this “little saleswoman” actively goes to market serving as public property not only by working in the shop but also by refusing to participate in any type of incestuous change with her male cousin, as she draws back when Jude Pyncheon try to kiss her (Goddu 123). Hawthorne in this comparison, could show us women joining the workforce is rather natural, and her performing her housekeeping duty, being taken off by their long hours of work in factory or in their own small shops. Hawthorne went further by exploring not only suppressed women but enslaved as in the case of Alice Pyncheon. Critics have explained Mathew’s Maule mesmeric practice on Alice, The pure and virgin lady, as form of Sexual possession (Arai 47). Maule practices his witchcraft and put Alice under his control and she let him, although “a woman’s might against man’s might, is a match not often equal, on the part of woman” (Hawthorne 197; Ch. 13). Alice’s ghost is left confined in the corridors of house after she dies in a cold fatal, until the portrait of Colonel Pyncheon falls on its face at the end of the novel and Uncle Verner hears a strain of music, and he believed to be a farewell touch of Alice’s spirit joy upon her Harpsichord, as she ascended to heaven from the gloomy House of the Seven Gables (Hawthorne 308; Ch. 21). Alice is an exaggeration of the dominance man can exercise on women. She was taken from her sanity, and put into an illusion of possession with Maule. She could not withdraw from her curse imposed on her. Alice and Hepzibah were not alone in their suffering, Clifford has been oppressed, imprisoned for thirty years by Judge Pyncheon after he was accused falsely on a crime he did not commit by the latter, Judge Pyncheon, his cousin. Throughout the novel, Clifford has been portrayed as childlike with feminine traits, belonging to the other sex (Hawthorne 64; Ch. 4), as he bursts into “woman’s passion of tears” (Hawthorne 114; Ch. 7), and his affection for flowers, which women usually has a sympathy for (Hawthorne 147; Ch. 10). Stressing on Clifford’s femininity is essential for us, as I assume, to recognize the oppression of men when given legal superiority. The judge has always tried to threaten Hepzibah in putting Clifford in a mental asylum, in case he would not reveal the papers affirming the ownership of the Pyncheon property, an incalculable wealth (Hawthorne 227; Ch. 15). This tyranny continues on, as he goes into the house regardless of Hepzibah’s effort to stop him as a dragon guarding over an enchanted beauty (Hawthorne 127; Ch.8). In the end of the romance, the relief is when the judge was found dead on the chair, following the two owls, Hepzibah and Clifford, fleeing the house of injustice. When Phoebe comes back from her visit to her mother, she

finds the corpse laid down, and Holgrave, to whom she will be married. He told her to fetch a plan, as she is strong and wise, and he is in need of her counsel to do the right thing (Hawthorne 291; Ch.20) as the two owls later arrived from their trip to find Phoebe, pleasantly. Hepzibah and Clifford have failed to escape from their destiny and their long fight with the past of male domination. The struggle between the two genders cannot be solved, as claimed, by diverting from the main issue. The difference should be addressed, and the rights and responsibilities are to be claimed not by radicalism but rather than as a civil and slow development. The social construct is obsolete and no longer adequate illustrated by the death of the judge. It needs to be changed within the sphere of domesticity, which Phoebe brilliantly lives. An alternate solution should be worked upon and integrated successfully, as seen in the new model Hawthorne proposed. "Hawthorne gives Phoebe a certain power to subvert the hunting pattern of masculine domination over the feminine and to work toward a new vision of nonpatriarchal culture." (Arai 53). In other terms, Hawthorne proposed a new model the nation should adopt, in which the conflict between the two genders is resolved attributing power to women, and their invalid critical weight in the society as the family departs with Phoebe into a new land along with her husband, Uncle Venner, Hepzibah and her brother Clifford where aristocracy and gender hierarchy are no longer valid. Although, as far as observed, the femininity attributed to Phoebe is compromised, by which I mean that Phoebe belongs within certain limits to the sphere of domestic woman as if there no divergence in her nature. She might have brought a bright future upon the house of the seven gables, but she possessed what an ordinary woman should have, e.g., Housekeeping, planting flowers, and nice body (Hawthorne 84; Ch. 5). Moreover, the novel ended up with her marriage to Holgrave, as a typical and happy end for a proper lady. However, this remark does not hide the fact what Hawthorne attributed to Phoebe's power of change brought into the society. It sheds light onto the hidden compromise Hawthorne is suggesting to the change women were demanding, as he was not a radical reformer but an orthodox.

Hawthorne does not take the conservative believes as excuses to put the demand of woman down; As we have investigated in *The House of the Seven Gables*, one could see that given these facts women may be raised up on the contrary (Millicent Bell 118). He clearly objects the masculine hierarchy imposed on women, as for his characters in the novel: Hepzibah, Alice and Clifford. On the other hand, Phoebe within the context of the authority could alter the restricting definitions inflicted upon women. She could accelerate the change within her small society and

helped bringing a new order. In the nineteenth century domestic culture, girlhood is confined as training period for becoming a domestic woman (Arai 41). In spite of that, Phoebe grew up differently from she is meant, she was capable to indulge in shop business and family restructure along with her skills in housekeeping. She could integrate within the growing economy of small business, and successfully runs a cent-shop without seeing this as degrading for her rank, as Hepzibah had seen it. In brief, Social change must happen gradually as Hawthorne could portray, and could be accelerated within the particular context; There is no need for radicalism to take over and oppose the social construct of society. It should be built up gradually and pushed upon the opposing side. There must a transition, and a duel who women should endure and suffer, until they can push the margins of their status within the patriarchal society. The economic and social circumstances imposed difficulties on change, along with the mainstream mindset in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a better time, it must alter for the better, and women must obtain their rights and a proper status in their surroundings.

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