

A Study of the Concepts of 'Self-Reliance' and 'True Womanhood' in the Life and Select Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Abstract

The ideas of masculinity and femininity have changed over the years worldwide. America, in this respect, is no different. From women being seen as subservient to them, learning to stand on their own feet is an achievement that will be told to the generations to come. Men are usually expected to bear the weight of the family and lead them on the path of truth. This is a pattern we see in various cultures across the globe. As seen in the last few decades, cultural and technological transitions have changed the construed mentality of the people in the world. During Nathaniel Hawthorne, Longfellow, and others, Americans expected women to be bound by laws and men, to be self-reliant and mentally strong. The personal and societal influence of Hawthorne is seen in his works. It is safe to say that he believed in the arguments of the popular opinions of his society, but at the same time, one may find his ideas contradicting his statements. The unraveling of his views on gender in analyzing his works may prove enlightening in discovering the mentality of America as a whole.

Keywords: Self-reliance, gender, femininity, womanhood, culture.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, without any doubt, was one of the most profound writers literature has ever seen. His works have deep psychological insights which may not be comprehended on any superficial reading. In addition, Hawthorne talked much about gender but not very explicitly in his fiction. One may uncover these truths while fixing his works in the cultural context.

Self-reliance was a concept that was hailed in the 19th century. This was because men were expected to bear the burdens of their families at any cost. In addition, men of those days were the primary sources of income. They expected to have a breakdown or lose their jobs at no charge. Hawthorne was seen as a disciplined man, but he had his longing for companionship that could not be met. He forced himself to suppress this yearning believing it to be an act of self-reliance. However, as we may find in many of his writings, he was unsure if such reliance was mandatory or even necessary.

"I have tried to keep down this yearning," he writes, "to stifle it, annihilate it, with making a position for myself, with being my past, but I cannot overcome this natural horror of being a creature floating in the air,

attached to nothing; nor this feeling that there is no reality in the life and fortunes, good or bad, of a being so unconnected" (Millington 60)

During Hawthorne's time, bold writings such as Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* were published in England. The defenders of male privilege argued that women were to be considered subservient based on physical differences. There is no denying that such writings influenced Hawthorne.

It is recorded that Hawthorne was deeply ashamed when his friend George Hillard did his best to save the former's family from poverty.

"I am ashamed of it, and I ought to be. A failure's fault is attributable—to a great degree, at least – to the man who fails. I should apply this truth in judging other men; it behooves me not to shun its point or edge in taking it home to my heart. Nobody has a right to live in this world, unless he is strong and able, and applies his ability to good purpose" (Millington 63)

Hawthorne tried his best to live up to the standards set forth by society. He wanted to be an example of a self-reliant male, but most of his conceptions of this ideal were flawed. He could not even accept the help his friend rendered to him. Joseph Pleck defined it as "gender role strain" (Pleck).

"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is a classic example of the psychic disposition

of a young man to stand on his own feet and be self-reliant. Robin Molineux came to town believing his uncle would help him settle well in society. However, in the latter part of the story, he joined the mob that gathered against the Major, Robin's uncle. The townsman commented that Robin would be able to stand independently: "as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux." This drive is seen as an inborn force inside every young man of the nineteenth century. From a young, unsteady man, he had turned out to be a "shrewd youth" (Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"). Robin was a representative of every young man who desired to emulate the model of self-reliance held in high regard by the people around them.

On the other hand, women were expected to be "pure" and turn their lust into admiration for their husbands. The 'purity' of a woman was necessary to keep the family size small and thereby meet the needs of her husband and children in a way that society considered acceptable.

Hawthorne praised his wife for possessing such 'purity.'

He likened her to a "pond-lily" of the sort that he found rooted in a disgusting slime at the bottom of the Concord River, which he saw as an emblem of sexual contamination... "It is a marvel," Hawthorne remarks, "how the pond-lily derives

its loveliness and perfume, sprouting as it does from the black mud over which the river sleeps, and from which, likewise, the yellow lily draws its unclean life." "I possess such a human and heavenly lily," Hawthorne concludes, "and wear it in -my bosom" (Millington 70-71)

These ideas are presented in "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter*. 'True Womanhood' was a bourgeois ideology that advocated women to be "pious, asexual, submissive" (Millington 80). This is the model in which the wife, Faith, is presented in "Young Goodman Brown." Her purity made her husband feel guilty for having drifted away from her safe arms in the latter part of the story.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Arthur Dimmesdale is ashamed of his adultery with Hester Prynne. He was 'called' to teach about the need to subdue human desires for the glory of God, but he could not do it. He lost his self-reliance and felt like a failure. Hawthorne considered Dimmesdale's emotional state as "womanly." Hester Prynne, on the other hand, had failed to uphold the values of purity, and she was seen as an adulterous and was thereby shunned from society.

Women were expected to be content with attending to household duties. Their participation in political activities was not appreciated. Robin, in "My Kinsman, Major

Molineux," concedes that a man may have "several voices" but adds, "Heaven forbid that a woman should!" (Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux").

Marriage was treated as sacred and pre-marital pregnancies were seen with the utmost contempt. It was during Hawthorne's period that new definitions for marriage were introduced. Hester's avowal to Dimmesdale that, "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other!" is an example of such a perspective on marriage (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 195).

Hawthorne's *Septimius Felton* highlights the advice given to the hero in pursuit of immortality: "On the whole, shun woman, for she is apt to be a disturbing influence" (Hawthorne, *Septimius Felton* 105). However, in "Young Goodman Brown," the voice of Faith is seen as a guiding force. Hawthorne was conflicted in his views on womanhood. To him, women were both 'wicked' and 'good.'

Nathaniel Hawthorne's views on self-reliance and womanhood have evoked many questions in the field of feminism. His views are being challenged, but one cannot deny that Hawthorne represented the beliefs that society thrust upon him. The author seemed unsure of the truth, and his conflicted opinions are manifested in his writings.

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