

The Portrait of a Young Lady in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

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Certainly an author's real life experience can influence his fiction in a number of significant ways and an analysis of female characters in a male writer's fiction is especially rewarding in this context. The images of women in literature often reflect their male creators' fantasy, ideal beauty, or in some cases, guilt and remorse. Above all, an author's sexual consciousness inevitably surfaces in his works.

Cases in point can be easily picked up from the history of English literature. Ernest Hemingway's resentment of his nagging mother lies behind the unfavorable depiction of the female character in his short story "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife." D.H. Lawrence's troubled relationship with his strong-minded, German-born wife Frieda colors the fierce contest for dominion over each other between Rupert and Ursula in his *Women in Love*. And Yeats' long, unfruitful love for Maud Gonne is evident in several of his poems, and notably, in the mixture of bitterness and grudging respect for the unnamed woman in the last lines of his poem "No Second Troy":

Why, what could she have done, being what she is?

Was there another Troy for her to burn?

Fear of sexuality can also color the image of women. Isabel Archer, in Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, discloses her repulsion from sexual passion repeatedly (even after her marriage!). For example, when Lord Warburton presses a suit saying that he does not fall in love so easily but that when he does:

"It's for life, Miss Archer, it's for life", Lord Warburton repeated in the kindest, tenderest, pleasantest voice Isabel had ever heard, and looking at her with eyes *charged with the light of a passion that had sifted itself clear of the baser parts of emotion—the heat, the violence, the unreason—and that burned as steadily as a lamp in a windless place.*

(*The Portrait of a Lady*, I, 12. My emphasis.)

Isabel is depicted as young, inexperienced, and intelligent. She is idealistic in characteristically American ways; she has a sincere, yet unoriented desire to develop her mind and sensibilities. Throughout her unmarried days in England, she is seen to be striving to give direction and form to this ardent aspiration after knowledge and experience. For a woman of her temperament, a marriage seems an obstacle for her self-realization. Also physical passion which is involved in it may be felt by her to be an encroachment on her

independence.

So long as Isabel's fear is hers only, there is nothing to quarrel with. But all internal evidence points up to the conjecture that James, as a young man, shares this fear. In an unguarded moment, James writes on the untimely death of his beloved cousin, Minny Temple:

. . . To have known her is certainly an immense gain, but who have wished her to live longer on such a footing—unless he had felt within him (what I felt little enough!) some irresistible mission to reconcile her to a world to which she was essentially hostile. There is absolute balm in the thought of poor Minny and *rest*—rest and immortal absence!⁽¹⁾

Though the fact that James genuinely grieves is sufficiently clear in the lines, but we are also disturbed by a certain 'false' detachment from the circumstance; James is virtually denying Minny a possibility of maturity in this world of relativism. Minny might have been happy to live even she finds the world seriously below her expectations; James is rejoicing in her death—one suspects—because it is painful for *him* to see her frustration and pain. He welcomes the fact that she has been removed from 'this changing realm of fact' to 'the steady realm of thought'. Her memory is locked away—safely—within 'the crystal walls of the past'. Minny used to be surrounded by many admirers; James felt himself doomed as a spectator for a world already hectic with business activities. Minny alive has been a constant reminder of his own lack of masculinity. (He felt unqualified as a suitor.) Minny dead, he can take an intellectual possession, so to speak. Female sexuality can be indeed deadly. (Later in life, he toys with the pun—"bedward, deadward!")

Does the young James regard sexual passion—with its importunate and blind demands—as an antithesis of a pursuit of an ideal civilization to which he has committed himself as an artist?

Female sexuality inimical to an artistic dedication is also a recurring theme of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In a case of an overtly sexy woman, as Beatrice in "Dr. Repaccini's Garden", Hawthorne tells us so in a barely disguised allegory. Then, how about a woman who seems as meek and unthreatening as Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables*? Phoebe belongs to a long line of sisterhood which includes the girl-wife in "the Great Carbuncle", Priscilla, and Hilda; women who are domestic, fair, and 'good'. There is another line of sisterhood likewise distinct. Sexy, creative, dark, and 'bad' heroines—Hester, Zenobia, and Miriam. (An example of lingering Romanticism is this dualism of fair maidens and dark maidens.)

For some time, critics have been complaining of the novel's unwarranted happy ending; they find the union between Holgrave and Phoebe complacent and unconvincing.⁽²⁾ And the heroine Phoebe, whose name means shining in Greek and who is recognizably a fictionalized version of Sophia Hawthorne, has been assigned a redemptive role by most critics; the principle recipient of the grace is her lover Holgrave but Clifford and Hepzibah also enjoy its beneficial influence according to their limited capacities.⁽³⁾ To my knowledge, only two critics have detected any questionable qualities in Phoebe; Nina Baym

points out the ironic situation where Holgrave, the creative artist, finds himself in the end — the little law-abiding Phoebe turns out an effective check for his radical ideas.⁽⁴⁾ Frederick Crews condemns her ignorant conventionality and her reluctance to face the sexual reality between the adults and argues that Holgrave's resulting conservatism is also the direction which Hawthorne is heading at; Holgrave's (also Hawthorne's) source of creativity is his hostility toward fatherly figures; according to Crews, he loses his reason for creativity once his antagonist is removed; by clinging to the normalizing domestic influence, Hawthorne sacrifices the integrity of his art.⁽⁵⁾ Crews seems to imply that Hawthorne believes in Phoebe's (and Sophia's) stabilizing influence. But is Phoebe really Hawthorne's mouthpiece? How does he deal with his dual identity as a family man and as a dedicated artist?

At the beginning of the novel, we find the Pyncheons at Salem engaged in a fratricidal feud as if they were intent on expunging themselves. Colonel Pyncheon, the founding father of the family stole another man's piece of land so that he could build a family-mansion on it for the perpetuation of his progeny. Judge Pyncheon, the stern and virile colonel resurrected to the Modern Age, turns against the weaker family members for his self-aggrandizement. At the same time, the Pyncheons have lost most of positive qualities of their patriarch; Judge the businessman is obsessed with time and personal success — an American vice which, it seems, has already become typical, at least to the discerning eye of Hawthorne; he is nervous and irritable where the colonel is tough-minded and ruthlessly single-minded. And, ironically, this hard-headed judge hunts for old documents which are supposed to enlarge the family fortune but turn out useless. Hepzibah and Clifford, lacking Judge's drive, become an easy prey to their hostile environment which they can neither control nor predict.

Hepzibah is sympathetically depicted by the author; her grotesque appearance hides her delicacy and warm heart. Hawthorne makes fun of her only on one occasion; she clings to the illusion of the family importance and her ragged gentility is offended when, after sixty years of life of a recluse, she is forced to open a cent-shop for her living. Hawthorne's democratic creed is impatient with her aristocratic pretension (the Pyncheon's hereditary claim on 'eastern lands' which is completely irrelevant to the modern context is the symbol of its absurdity) and he somewhat ungallantly exposes her abortive efforts to establish a communication with the outside world.

The Pyncheons — aristocratic, prosaic, and of an unequivocal origin — is in every way quite a contrast to the Maules — plebeian, artistic, and men of underground. Clifford, who lives for beauty, seems to be an exception to such a grouping. But his estheticism is too brittle to represent an authentic artist; like the little watchmaker in "The Artist of the Beautiful", he has too diminutive ways to deal with beauty. (In this respect, his favorite soap-bubbles which burst at the first contact with hard reality are an apt metaphor for his temperament.) Thirty years of imprisonment has left him crack-brained and sexually impotent. (Clifford is a man, we are told, 'who had never quaffed the cup of passionate love'.) And both his sister and Phoebe treat him as a spoiled infant. He is still

strongly attached to his long-dead mother. His 'images of women' have been frozen 'into the chilliest ideality' (we remember James); that is, he cannot bear mature female sexuality—Hepzibah can be a gentle mother to him because he can simply a child to this sexless woman (though he cruelly rejects her) and Phoebe poses so little threat in this direction so he rejoices in her company.

Mingled with this infancism is his strong streak of narcissism; he wonders through the family-mansion in the faded dressing gown which once clad his blooming young self; he cannot bear his sister simply because she offends his sight. Something else is wrong with his appreciation of beauty; he literally devours it. (His animalistic appetite is its symbolic expression.) Hawthorne devotes a detailed analysis on Clifford's self-absorbed and ultimately destructive sensual gratification:

... Possibly, he was in a state of second growth and recovery, and was constantly assimilating nutriment for his spirit and intellect from sights, sounds, and events, which passed as a perfect void to persons more practised with the world. As all is activity and vicissitude to the new mind of a child, so might it be, likewise, to a mind that had undergone a kind of new creation, after its long-suspended life.⁽⁶⁾

Appreciation of beauty can be easily a momentary beastly act; it becomes a creative act only when the artist's inner vision goes out to commemorate reality. It needs both insight and perpetual self-control. (Clifford has neither.)

Phoebe, a gay and gentle country maiden who has escaped the hereditary spiriual lethargy of the Pyncheons because her father dared to marry below his rank, seems indeed an Angel of Mercy in contrast to other characters who, each in defferent ways, are victims of the past. She marries Holgrave and provides him a source of stability. She takes Hepzibah and Clifford off to Judge's country-house and would enliven their remaining life with her vivacity. At the same time, the limited pattern of redemption is obvious on the most superficial level—and has been duly recognized by critics. That their future is based on a wealth unlawfully accumulated has never been questioned. How long does it take that their abode become the new House of the Seven Gables?

By this denouement, Hawthorne may be implying a conditional nature of man's happiness; it emerges out of the intricate web of interactions between the community and man's inborn nature, and great writers have never failed to point out that neither can be a sole determining factor. (We have only to remember, among others, the denouement of *King Lear*—where the young people who are supposed to take the responsibility to maintain the restored moral order sound curiously pessimistic—and that of *Middlemarch*—where the central characters achieve only partial self-knowledge.) Or, the denouement might be the result of Hawthorne's increasing obsession with what he thought to be the demands of his reading public; certain of his correspondence show the Hawthorne compelled to produce healthy, light-hearted kind of literature. (He evaluates his second novel as "more characteristic of my mind, and more proper and natural for me to write, than *The Scarlet Letter*".) Hence the poetic justice and the happy ending.⁽⁷⁾ But it is

possible that an author's inner vision betrays his declared intention which conforms to the popular sentiment of his age. "It is better for a widow to take a lover than to remarry."—this proverb, for example, was sanctioned by Webster's contemporaries. The dramatist himself says in his preface to *The Duchess of Malfi* that he intends to show how disastrous are the consequences of the duchess' defiance of custom. ("Readers," he says, "you will see the great duchess chasing a man like a bitch in heat, completely forgetting her precious blood of the Aragons.") But his artistic instinct has deeply sympathized with her behaviors. Webster the moralist is at odds with Webster the artist. Likewise, I am inclined to think the denouement as a case of cleavage between Hawthorne's purpose and his inner compulsion. Also, I notice some subtle but consistent attempts to depreciate Phoebe's figure which is another symptom of this cleavage—even though Hawthorne ostensibly calls her as sunshine, a blooming virgin, and a graceful bird.

A bird-like natural grace. Isn't however, the complement double-edged? The girl is implied as unthinking as a bird is. Hawthorne somewhat overdoes the Maule's Fountain motif; after the Colonel had committed the Sin of Greed, the water lost its primordial transparency; thus, the Original Sin. Sometimes the surface of the water allegedly reflects strange figures—but it is only 'a sort of mosaic-work of variously colored pebbles' to Phoebe; she is satisfied with life's bright surface; she has never been troubled with man's innate depravity.

Hawthorne's attitude toward her obtruseness seems to be somewhat akin to Emily Dickinson's scorn at the moral complacency of her hometown women—both begin with mock-eulogy—though Hawthorne lacks Dickinson's biting edge:

What Soft—Cherubic Creatures—
 These Gentlewomen are—
 One would as soon assault a Plush—
 Or violate a Star—
 Such Dimity Convictions—
 A Horror so refined
 Of freckled Human Nature—
 Of Deity—ashamed—
 It's such a common—Glory—
 A Fisherman's—Degree—
 Redemption—Brittle Lady—
 Be so—ashamed of Thee—

(*Final Harvest* #154 c. 1862)

Dickinson's religious tone is deceptive; her impatience is directed not so much at the unspiritual nature of the Christianity of her day as at the spirit of conformity which is insensitive to the crucial moral experiences in life. Likewise, Hawthorne—who retains Calvinistic habit of self-introspection—passes judgement on the lack of consciousness of evil in a perfectly secular context. Phoebe's conformity results in her failure in intuition:

Phoebe went, accordingly, but perplexed herself, meanwhile, with queries as to the purport of the scene which she had just witnessed, and also whether judges, clergymen, and other characters of that eminent stamp and respectability, could really, in any single instance, be otherwise than just and upright men. A doubt of this nature has a most disturbing influence, and, if shown to be a fact, comes with fearful and startling effect, on minds of the trim, orderly, and limit-loving class, in which we find our little country-girl. Dispositions more boldly speculative may derive a stern enjoyment from the discovery, since there must be evil in the world, that a high man is as likely to grasp his share of it, as a low one. A wider scope of view, and a deeper insight, may see rank, dignity, and station, all proved illusory, so far as regards their claim to human reverence, and yet not feel as if the universe were thereby tumbled headlong into chaos. But Phoebe, in order to keep the universe in its old place, was fain to smother, in some degree, her own intuitions as to Judge Pyncheon's character.⁽⁸⁾

Her basis of judgement turns out equally deficient as regards to the character of Holgrave. A powerful obstacle is on his way to selfhood in the form of coldly materialistic Judge Pyncheon. So Holgrave's problem is how he can assume his identity on his own terms and until then he has no choice but to be a spectator in life. (It is his disguise.) Holgrave does not represent a tyranny of artistic temperament—such is the case of the carpenter Matthew who is conscious of his physical attraction and cruelly exploits it over the weaker-minded female. Holgrave is free-spirited and warm-hearted. (There is an implication that he has helped Hepzibah in her preparation for opening the cent-shop and he uses his daguerreotype in order to establish Clifford's unrelatedness to the cause of Judge's death which, accidentally, rescues Clifford from the ancient dishonor of murder.) Even his radical turn of mind causes no disturbance; he believes in progress and retains enough young enthusiasm. In short, what he represents is a promising man who has all virtues of an artistic temperament and a through-going sense of responsibility. (Even Hepzibah the arch-conservative admits that the young man 'has a law of his own'.) Phoebe mistakes Holgrave's spectatorship as an intellectual detachment which comes from an artist's habit of observation. Holgrave regards Phoebe as a charming simpleton—that is, his judgement is unconditionally sanctioned by the author.

A charming simpleton—though an affectionate appellation, it implies subtle tolerance and condescension. There is a strange passage in which Hawthorne characteristically offers us his conjecture on the reasons why two people who have little in common like Clifford and Phoebe can be happy with each other's company:

. . . Why are poets so apt to choose their mates, not for any similarity of poetic endowment, but for qualities which might make the happiness of the rudest handicraft man as well as that of the ideal craftsman of the spirit? Because, probably, at his highest elevation, the poet needs no human intercourse; but he finds it dreary to descend, and be a stranger.⁽⁹⁾

As we have seen, Clifford does not represent the kind of estheticism that Hawthorne en-

dorses; Clifford is certainly not the 'elevated' poet in the passage; it is almost as if Hawthorne forgets that he is depicting Clifford and dismissing all Phoebes in the world—all Sophias——, the daughters of man who serve basic physical needs of the Olympian! Phoebe's love for restraint (to her, 'all extravagance was a horror') is not, as some critics have said, an ideal moderation——rather it is an unimaginative and uninteresting kind of virtue. Again, there occurs a curious self-identification of the author with Clifford which seems inexplicable except that Hawthorne feels safest to confess in this ridiculous dramatic personae:

... Whatever was morbid in his mind and experience, she [Phoebe] ignored, and thereby kept their intercourse healthy by the incautious, but, as it were, heaven-directed freedom of her whole conduct.⁽¹⁰⁾

With a sign of relief, does Hawthorne thank Phoebe for her normalizing influence? Isn't the passage tantamount to the confession that her 'freedom' to suppress the artist's deep thought is suffocating to him? 'Freedom' seems to be hardly a word to occur in this context; if not it is deliberately intended to make the reader think over the whole passage again.

Another element which is devastating to Phoebe's figure is her inadequacy for matured love between the adults. Clifford clings to her as if to a mother. At the same time, she is a virginal sanctity incarnated. A virgin mother——protective, comforting, and sexless. Her role in relation with Holgrave is much the same. We are told the tragic consequences of psychological abuse to which Phoebe's ancestor, Alice Pyncheon was exposed. Because of her rank in a genteel society, Alice had to suppress her natural sexual longing for Matthiew Maule, powerfully sexy but plebian. But the subconscious urge was so strong that Alice conjured up various fantasy on him and become a noctambulist. During her sleep, she went to him to submit herself; rejected and baffled, she retreated into a sheltered life again. Holgrave is telling the danger of distorted biological necessity——but Phoebe, who is susceptible to Holgrave's masculine appeal, does not get much out of his story. She never comes out of puberty. Even Holgrave turns toward her as the maternal figure. The artist, who believed in progress and human possibility, is shocked out of that illusion by the evidence of remorseless working of fate in the form of Judge's death. Holgrave does not even disguise his need for protection at this spiritual crisis:

... The presence of yonder dead man threw a great black shadow over everything; he made the universe. . . a scene of guilt, and of retribution more dreadful than the guilt. . . my past life, so lonesome and dreary; my future, a shapeless gloom. . . But, Phoebe, you crossed the threshold; and hope, warmth and joy, came in with you! The black moment became at once a blissful one. . . I love you!

(11)

Can we applaud the sentimental attachment between the young people which begins this way? In one of the last scenes we see Holgrave, he bears the mark of washbrain:

... They were like two children who go hand in hand, pressing closely to one another's side, through a shadow-haunted passage.⁽¹²⁾

An appropriate behavior for a lover who treats his child-sweetheart with the most tender deference! But we have been hearing of Phoebe's budding womanhood; we don't simply see it; or, Phoebe retreats safely—to the author—into perpetual girlhood. (After all, perpetual girlhood is one of the rare jobs which are allowed to women of Hawthorne's and Dickinson's America.) But certainly it is not flattering for a woman to be depicted as one with so little sexual appeal.

Phoebe's alleged maturity into womanhood is one of many instances that Hawthorne, as if in a fit, throws a sporadic and isolated complement for the girl into the context. Likewise, we are told that 'there was both lustre and depth, in her eyes'; she does not display her intelligence. And again, Hawthorne talks about the unexpected complexity of Phoebe's nature in a rather generalized way:

... these transparent natures are often deceptive in their depth; those pebbles at the bottom of the fountain are farther from us than we think.⁽¹³⁾

The passage is appropriate for Lucy Tartan in *Pierre*; for Phoebe, not. This kind of strange utterance (between this pedestalled image and the ways in which Hawthorne lets Phoebe act out her normal yet unreflective nature there is only a vacuum.) culminates in a cry of glorification and—desperate, one takes it perversely—a gesture of total submission. ('a Religion in herself, warm, simple, true, with a substance that could walk on earth, and a spirit that was capable of Heaven.')

As I have already pointed out, Hawthorne, at the time when he is working on *The House*, has an oppressive sense of the disparity between what he thinks his audience wants and what he really wants to write. People want light-hearted or 'moral' reading; they repel the unruly egoism, the perverse impulses, and the macabre that lie beneath the controlled and ordered surface of the conscious mind. As a breadwinner of a large family, Hawthorne cannot risk immediate popularity; no wonder if he resents his forced compromise for his 'mediocre' audience. Now, Sophia is upset by his treatment of *The Scarlet Letter* and wholeheartedly approves that of *The House*.⁽¹⁴⁾ Though she has been always the staunchest defender of her husband's art to the third party, her face-to-face 'mediocre' response may lead Hawthorne to identify her with the uncomprehending audience. (We remember the taming of Mark Twain by his ever-watchful, ever-revising wife Olivia.) Ever-watchful censorship both without and within his private world.⁽¹⁵⁾ On the other hand, Hawthorne believes that his union with Sophia is his initiation into the world. And he is always emotionally so dependent upon her; whenever she goes away, he feels helpless. Then he cannot risk offending her; but there is a need to channel his aggression into a verbal plane; what is the safest way to poke fun at this asexual, sickly, and mediocre bluestocking?; by apotheosizing her perpetual girlhood and by glorifying her spots of commonness. She will only understand the surface level. Indeed, we are tempted to speculate that Hawthorne might have reasoned this way.

But, as I have tried to show, this is really a story of a creative artist's retreat into conservatism through his union with an un-intellectual—and positively anti-intellectual—girl. He is at last free to assume his true identity after the removal of all-powerful

Judge. But the artist prefers personal security. ('I have a presentiment that. . . it will be my lot. . . to conform myself to laws, and the peaceful practice of society.' Holgrave sounds curiously middle-aged at the end.) Or, Hawthorne's purpose may have been idealization of his wife, but his impulse (his malice albeit unconscious) betrays his conscious purpose. And this aspect of anti-Phoebism which is treated with great virtuosity by Hawthorne the Public Author is very revealing about Hawthorne the Private and Inner Man.

Notes

- (1) Henry James, *Henry James Letters*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: MacMillan, 1974), I, p. 219.
 - (2) See, for example, Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 169-172; Frederick Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p.171, p.173, p.187, p.189; Roy R. Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (New York: Norton, 1957), pp.136-137; F.O.Matthiessen, "The House of The Seven Gables," in *Hawthorne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. N. Kaul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 149; Hugo McPherson, *Hawthorne as Myth-maker: A Study in Imagination* (Toronto; Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 142, p. 145; Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, M. A.; Harvard Univ. Press, 1955), p. 172.
 - (3) See Newton Arvin, *Hawthorne* (Boston; Brown, 1929), p. 196; Crews, pp. 185-187; Richard H. Fogle, *Hawthorne's Imagery: The "Proper Light and Shadow" in the Major Romances* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1969), p. 48, p. 50; Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1958), pp.56-58; Male, p. 136; Mcpherson, p. 135, pp. 139-140; Waggoner, p. 157, p. 161, pp. 166-167, p. 171.
 - (4) Baym, pp. 166-167.
 - (5) Crews, p. 185, p. 187, p. 192, p. 266.
 - (6) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. Seymour L. Gross (New York: Norton, 1967), XII, p. 173.
 - (7) Though the preceding novel has been received in generally favorable ways, some of the reviews for prominent magazines complain its excessive 'morbidty' and the author's sympathetic treatment of adultery of which Hawthorne must have been painfully aware. The main tenet of literary reviews at his time is insistence on poetic justice and on didacticism; it seems to have considerably affected the author's direction. For typical response, see *The Scarlet Letter*, eds. Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 251-257.
 - (8) *The House of the Seven Gables*, VIII, pp. 131-132.
 - (9) *Ibid.*, IX, p. 141.
 - (10) *Ibid.*, IX, p. 143.
 - (11) *Ibid.*, XX, p. 306.
 - (12) *Ibid.*, XX, p. 305.
 - (13) *Ibid.*, XII, p. 182.
 - (14) Seymour L. Gross, Introd., *The House of the Seven Gables*, p. viii.
 - (15) As Hawthorne shrewdly had predicted, reviewers rejoiced in the novel's genialities and predict its 'permanent fame'. See, *Ibid.*, pp. 354-359.
- Even as penetrating a man as Melville, comments that 'We think the book, for pleasantness of running interest, surpasses the other works of the author. The curtains are more drawn; the sun comes in more; genialities peep out more.'
- Herman Melville, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, Eds. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gelman (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), p. 124.

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