

KATEŘINA PRAJZNEROVÁ

**FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN
GABLES* AND WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *FLAGS IN THE DUST***

In *The House of the Seven Gables* and *Flags in the Dust*, Hawthorne and Faulkner both explore the relationship between the past and the present. The two novels deal with social transformations taking place during different historical periods and in distinct geographical places, in particular the social effects of the industrial revolution in mid-nineteenth century New England and of the economic progress, brought on by Reconstruction and World War I, in the Deep South. However, in their portraits of cultural continuity amidst socio-economic change, Hawthorne and Faulkner employ strikingly similar methods. From a feminist perspective that emphasizes the interaction among social ideology, cultural context, and gender roles, the most conspicuous of these common means is the two writers' analogous usage of the relationship between two women, widely apart in age but close in companionship, as a microcosm reflecting the modifications occurring in the larger society at the time. A comparison of Hawthorne's characterization of Hepzibah and Phoebe's interaction with Faulkner's description of Jenny and Narcissa's friendship reveals intriguing parallels. In both novels, the dynamics of the inter-generational female relationships expose how the women's identities are not only mirrors but also reservoirs of cultural values. Moreover, it is the main female characters, rather than the men, who take the responsibility for cherishing and preserving the cyclic progression of familial heritage and social history.

Nussbaum and Brown explain that "[w]oman' must be read as an historically and culturally produced category that is situated within specific material conditions and is interactive with the complicated problems of class and race" (qtd. in Roberts xii). *The House of the Seven Gables* reflects Hawthorne's continuing preoccupation with the Colonial New England past and its influence on the social developments of his time. As Clifford observes, "... all human progress is in a circle.... The past is but a coarse and sensual prophecy of the present and the future" (Hawthorne 259-60).

Therefore, while Hawthorne contrasts the character of Hepzibah, grounded in the pre-Revolutionary ideals of English aristocracy, with Phoebe, who represents the “true New England woman,” he emphasizes the two women’s interaction and the ways in which they affect each other (Hawthorne 73-74). In a similar manner, in *Flags in the Dust*, Faulkner examines the lasting effects of the Old South on the current social values. Accordingly, he juxtaposes the character of Jenny, rooted in the pre-Civil War ideals of plantation aristocracy, with Narcissa, who embodies the new Southern Belle, while at the same time focusing on the evolving relationship between the two women. In both novels, the connections between the two generations of women symbolize continuity, however problematic and painful it may be, between the “old” and the “new” social orders.

Considered from this point of view, the characters of Hepzibah and Jenny appear to be the anchors not only of their families but of the novels as well. Hepzibah is the oldest surviving Pyncheon and lives alone in the family house built by the “iron-hearted Puritan,” Colonel Pyncheon, whose ghost still presides in the parlor (Hawthorne 15). Jenny is likewise the oldest in a long family line with aristocratic ancestors and she “runs” the house built and now haunted by the ghost of her brother, Colonel Sartoris (Faulkner 409). The elderly women’s identities are closely related to the characteristics of the houses in their care. The Pyncheon house is just as weathered and rusty as Hepzibah, its spacious but dusty rooms and corridors are just as full of “tragic dignity” (Hawthorne 41) and “family pride” (Hawthorne 39). When Phoebe appears, Hepzibah reluctantly unbolts the main door and gradually accepts the young girl’s place in her house as well as in her heart (Hawthorne 68-69). Like Jenny, the Sartoris house also bears traces of aging. Its parlor, once full of life, is now deserted and Narcissa is the only guest occasionally ushered in there (Faulkner 59-61).

As proud matriarchs, Hepzibah and Jenny share a sense of duty and responsibility to maintain the continuity of the family heritage and lineage. Under a stern visage they both harbor a perceptive interior. Despite of her portentous scowl and fierce look, Hepzibah’s heart is “naturally tender, sensitive, and full of little tremors and palpitations” (Hawthorne 34). Jenny’s personality is likewise “spare and erect and brusque and uncompromising” but also “kind” (Faulkner 409). Neither of them has her own children but each devotes herself, “with a strange mingling of the mother and sister, and of pleasure and sadness,” to the men in her house (Hawthorne 148). Hepzibah envelops her brother Clifford in “her great, warm love” (Hawthorne 134) and in a manner more abrupt but just as caring, Jenny tries to watch over her Bayards, “mothering [them] with violent and cherishing affection” (Faulkner 259).

According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “[a] lady was not a woman who happened to be more affluent than others. She was a white woman whose privileged position was essential to her identity and social role” (202). Hepzibah and Jenny were born and educated to be ladies in this sense. However, they had both been uprooted by dramatic social developments, namely the Revolution and the Civil War. Therefore, in order to maintain their identities, it is necessary for them to continually recall and recreate the familiar social realities as well as ideals that

had shaped their roles. Hepzibah and Jenny share a “deeply cherished and ridiculous consciousness of long descent, recollections of having formerly thrummed on a harpsichord [or a piano], and walked a minuet [or a waltz]” (Hawthorne 80). In addition to frequently indulging in such “aristocratic reminiscences” (Hawthorne 37), they both like to tell stories about the family past that ripen with time like wine (Hawthorne 83, Faulkner 13).

While they represent the social ideals of ladyhood, Hepzibah and Jenny also display certain traits traditionally considered masculine, incorporating the characteristics of a soldier with those of a lady. Neither Hepzibah nor Jenny are broken by poverty and personal losses. On the contrary, these hardships inspire them to display “strength, resourcefulness, independence, and even tragic grandeur” (Wittenberg 329). Even though Hepzibah’s extreme isolation has resulted in a peculiar “squeamishness” in her dealings with the outside world, she does not shrink from the challenge of opening a shop to take care of herself and her brother (Hawthorne 47). In her interaction with Phoebe she displays a “remarkable frankness” (Hawthorne 82) that matches Jenny’s “usual forthrightness” (Faulkner 30).

Jenny, who is now eighty years old, grew up in the upper-class circles of the antebellum southern society and her life has been impacted by two wars. Allison Berg suggests that “[w]hat happens at home, both during and after the war, is equally important in registering war’s cataclysmic effects on gender definitions” (441). In *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* Diane Roberts points out that during the Civil War, the southern lady had to recreate herself “to accommodate, even valorize, hardship” (3). Roberts also argues that in his fiction Faulkner “revises the central representation of the Confederate Woman” who “bears the burden of New Southern nostalgia, yet becomes the vehicle for a challenge to it” (2). Jenny exemplifies the contradictions in this ideal of womanhood as “gentle steel” (Jones 26). She embodies an:

indomitable spirit which, born with a woman’s body into a heritage of rash and heedless men and seemingly for the sole purpose of cherishing those men to their early and violent ends, and this over a period of history which had seen brothers and husband slain in the same useless mischancing of human affairs, had seen the foundations of her life vanish as in a nightmare not to be healed by either waking or sleep ... how much finer that gallantry which never lowered lance to foes no sword could ever find, that uncomplaining steadfastness of those unsung (ay, unwept, too) women than the fustian and useless glamor of the men that theirs was hidden by. (Faulkner 410)

Both Hepzibah and Jenny do their best to protect their declining families from dying out. They each extend their maternal care toward a young girl to whom they hope to pass on their wisdom and who shall one day take their place. Consequently, Phoebe’s and Narcissa’s visits to the family houses mark the beginning of a growing connection between the two generations. Even though the older and the younger women belong to separate “spheres,” in their friendship they mutually adapt to each other and their common gender eventually bridges their age as well as socially constructed differences (Hawthorne 80). Hepzibah

and Jenny are keenly aware of the marriageability of their young companions. Despite the fact that they recognize and openly voice the weaknesses and potential dangers in the personalities of the young men who live in their houses, they are instrumental in encouraging the young people's love relationships.

The characters of Phoebe and Narcissa also share many features. Their innocence, spiritual qualities, and grace are compared to those of white roses (Hawthorne 71) and white lilies (Faulkner 31). Both Phoebe's and Narcissa's activities are limited within the domestic circle. Like Phoebe, Narcissa appears "contained and self-contained, a model of conformity" (Person 139). Despite their youthful freshness, they are both "orderly and obedient to common rules" (Hawthorne 68), they "[shock] no canon of taste," and their personalities are confined within the limits of their social roles (Hawthorne 80). Nevertheless, Phoebe's "natural magic" (Hawthorne 71) and Narcissa's "serene repose" do not suggest transparent simplicity of nature (Faulkner 31). On the contrary, Phoebe and Narcissa are enveloped in mystery. For all their angelic qualities, neither is quite the pure representation of "true womanhood" or "Southern Belle." Both are young, healthy women with awakening sexual desires. As Hawthorne's narrator warns, "those pebbles at the bottom of the fountain are father from us than we think" (140).

The development of Phoebe's and Narcissa's identities is affected by the ways in which they are perceived by the men within their social circles. As Minrose Gwin observes, "[s]ince white women were victims of adulation rather than violence, they often internalized stereotypical forms and attempted in great earnestness to become what they were expected to be" (405). However, Phoebe and Narcissa both struggle with their "psychological bondage" to their prospective lovers (Baym 251). The potential for moral and sexual corruption is evident in Narcissa's fascination with and attachment to the anonymous letters and her irresistible attraction to young Bayard (Faulkner 69-70, 158-59). Like Narcissa, Phoebe easily falls under Holgrave's spell, even though she is aware of their antithetical natures (Hawthorne 175, 306). The effect of Holgrave's storytelling on Phoebe leaves little doubt about Holgrave's seductive power over her (Hawthorne 211-12). Nevertheless, confined as they are within their socially assigned female spheres, both Phoebe and Narcissa also exercise a varying amount of domesticating influence on their men (Hawthorne 307, Faulkner 312).

Mutual adaptation between Hepzibah and Phoebe underlines the growth of these characters throughout the novel. Phoebe's arrival, which closely coincides with the opening of the cent-shop and the anticipated return of Clifford, clearly invigorates Hepzibah. Even though the relentless sound of the doorbell keeps agitating Hepzibah's sensitive nerves, the activities now taking place in the house excite in her "a thrill of almost youthful enjoyment" (Hawthorne 51). Phoebe brings "a glimpse of sunshine" (Hawthorne 52) into the dark house as well as Hepzibah's lonely life and "instantaneously creates for [her]self a propriety of being there" (Hawthorne 69). With her cheerful, "homely witchcraft," Phoebe "exorcise[s]" the sorrow and gloom from her surroundings (Hawthorne 72). While they prepare breakfast together, Hepzibah's "stiff and unmalleable

cast" and "habitual sluggishness" contrast with Phoebe's "innate fitness" and bright efficiency at the task (Hawthorne 76). Nevertheless, Hepzibah cannot help "being interested" in and "even amused" by their shared cooking adventure (Hawthorne 76). Soon, Hepzibah's affection toward Phoebe grows into love. Before Phoebe retires to bed in the evening, Hepzibah kisses her and embraces her with a mother's tenderness (Hawthorne 96).

Simultaneously, Hepzibah and her house exercise a "subtle influence" over Phoebe (Hawthorne 72). From the first morning, Hepzibah gently begins to incorporate Phoebe into her secret hopes and melancholy dreams of "castles in the air" (Hawthorne 65). Proudly, she shows Phoebe around the house, "recounting the traditions with which ... the walls were lugubriously frescoed" (Hawthorne 83). In her boudoir, while she tells Phoebe about Alice and her harpsichord, Hepzibah looks into Phoebe's eyes as "earnestly" as if she "expected to see right into [their] springs and motive secrets" (Hawthorne 73). Afterwards, Hepzibah brings out her treasured silver spoons with the family crest and the two of them drink tea together from her ancient tea-cups, "almost the first tea-cups ever seen in the colony" (Hawthorne 77). These tea-cups, Hepzibah emphasizes, were the wedding set from which Phoebe's "great, great, great, great grandmother" drank when she got married (Hawthorne 77).

When Hepzibah tells Phoebe about Holgrave, she does so in an interestingly contradictory manner, as if to warn and protect Phoebe but also arouse her curiosity. Hepzibah mentions that Holgrave gives "wild and disorganizing" speeches and meets with "banditi-like associates" but that he is a "well-meaning and orderly young man" who has a special way of "taking hold of one's mind" (Hawthorne 84-85). Significantly, it is shortly after having tea with Hepzibah that Phoebe wonders into the garden and for the first time meets Holgrave (Hawthorne 86). They talk for a while and during their conversation Phoebe struggles against "a certain magnetic element" in Holgrave's nature (Hawthorne 94). Before he disappears into his gable, Holgrave warns Phoebe not to drink from Maule's Well, because its water is "bewitched," like "an old lady's cup of tea" (Hawthorne 94). It is now too late, though. Phoebe has already been enchanted.

In Phoebe's presence, Hepzibah's shriveled heart warms up, strengthens, and opens toward others. At the same time, a "visible" change occurs in Phoebe" (Hawthorne 175). During her stay in Hepzibah's house, Phoebe's eyes grow "darker and deeper," her whole manner becomes graver, and she develops from a girl into a woman (Hawthorne 175). Gradually, a "mutual understanding" and confidence develop between Hepzibah and Phoebe (Hawthorne 73). At the end, a "harlequin trick of fortune" does intervene and Hepzibah's dream of preserving her ladyhood and the Pyncheon family's aristocratic heritage is fulfilled (Hawthorne 64). Gillian Brown points out that the "disestablishment of women and home from the realm of production" in the nineteenth century was a "pivotal point in the history of capitalism and the construction of gender" (63). As factories replaced household production, the ideology of "bourgeois domesticity" emerged, placing women in an idealized home and incorporating aristo-

cratic aspirations of the middle-class in a democratic society (Brown 69). The commercial success of Jeffrey Pyncheon eventually enables Phoebe's "new Plebeianism" and Hepzibah's "old Gentility" to merge within the somewhat nostalgic cult of domesticity (Hawthorne 81). Thus, in the story of Hepzibah and Phoebe's relationship, Hawthorne "domesticate[s] the social dislocation of the 1840s and 1850s in a literary form that imagines the past and present as utterly continuous" (Michaels, qtd. in Brown 88).

By marrying Phoebe to Holgrave and moving the whole family to Judge Pyncheon's comfortable country house, Hawthorne reconciles the tension between the aristocratic and the modern capitalist systems, imagining an "orderly circulation" of women within their designated realms (Goddu 122). In this way, he attempts to resolve the potential for inter-generational conflict during a time of social transformation by stressing "the value of love and human relationships as opposed to materialism and self-centeredness" (Gallagher 5). However, Hawthorne's elevation of the seemingly effortless and natural gift of homemaking hides the imprisoning and subjugating aspects of such definition of the women's proper sphere. Just as he confines his vision of socio-economic change within "ancient limits," his views regarding gender politics, as expressed in this novel, are rather conservative (Hawthorne 307).

A similar reciprocal influence can be observed in the development of the friendship between Jenny and Narcissa. Narcissa's visits refresh Jenny and bring her emotional satisfaction. It is spring and she enjoys sharing with Narcissa her flowers and other produce from her garden full of "shoots and graftings from Carolina and Virginian gardens she had known as a girl" (Faulkner 43). Jenny also likes to invite Narcissa into her parlor. Narcissa's white dress and her piano music bring "light" and life again into the "gloom" (Faulkner 62) of the room, which had been filled with "solemn and macabre mustiness" over the years of disuse (Faulkner 60). Without Narcissa, the parlor gives Jenny "the creeps" but Narcissa's music transports Jenny back into her youth (Faulkner 60). Listening, she sees again the "figures in crinoline and hooped muslin and silk; in stocks and flowing coats; ... Jeb Stuart himself perhaps, ... with his sunny hair falling upon fine broadcloth beneath the mistletoe and holly boughs of Baltimore in '58" (Faulkner 61).

Narcissa also enjoys and benefits from Jenny's companionship, which provides her with opportunities to discuss confidential matters and receive guidance in dealing with her inner dilemmas. When Narcissa first starts coming out to see Jenny, she is experiencing a surge of sexual awakening which she had previously repressed because of her maternal responsibility toward her brother Horace. With Horace gone, Narcissa's sexual desires had been sparked by suggestive anonymous letters which she secretly treasures. Driving out to see Jenny is to Narcissa "like emerging into the fresh air from a stale room" (Faulkner 225). While she talks with Jenny in the garden, Narcissa appears to blend in with the flowers in Jenny's care. This association highlights her potential to bloom into womanhood but also her need to be "nurtured" and "pruned" by Jenny's controlling and protective love (Buchanan 449).

Narcissa tries to live up to the expectations and embody the virtues assigned to her as “the designated work of art of southern culture” (Roberts xiv). She is repeatedly associated with the images of a vase, a statue, and a flower in an enclosed garden. According to Roberts, Narcissa represents the myth of the Southern Belle, the “heiress” of the Confederate Woman, a myth that Faulkner destabilizes (102). As T. Daniel Young points out, Narcissa is “torn between adventure and security, sexuality and self-containment, brother and lover, conformity and self-expression” (89). Narcissa’s behavior and her talks with Jenny disclose “a mixture of self-knowledge and self-deception” (Young 94). When young Bayard returns home from war, Narcissa’s painful struggle between longing for emotional peace and an irresistible sexual desire is intensified. She is fascinated by Bayard’s recklessness and at the same time his violence terrifies her (Faulkner 158–59).

Jenny’s assured social status and advanced age grant her the freedom to articulate unconventional attitudes and truths about human nature. Her acceptance of female sexuality as natural helps Narcissa admit her own sexual needs and overcome her futile wish for a world without men. As Jenny assures her, “[a]ny young woman is liable to get an anonymous letter” (Faulkner 70). Jenny also shares with Narcissa her views on the overall situation of women. Ruminating on the life of Bayard’s first wife, she concludes: “Poor women ... I reckon we do have to take our revenge wherever and whenever we can get it” (Faulkner 57). On the question of marriage, Jenny honestly expresses her ambivalence:

I wouldn’t advise anybody to marry. You wont be happy, but women haven’t got civilized enough yet to be happy unmarried, so you might as well try it. We can stand anything, anyway. And change is good for folks. They say it is, that is. (Faulkner 287)

Jenny’s “keen old eyes that seemed to see so much more than you thought—or hoped” quickly recognize the unhealthy depth of the attachment between Narcissa and Horace (Faulkner 226). Jenny encourages Narcissa to think about marriage and “let that baby look after himself for a while” (Faulkner 33). As she puts it, Horace is just “making an old maid out of [her]” (Faulkner 287). However, Narcissa insists that she had “promised her mother” that she would take care of her brother (Faulkner 33). When Jenny detects Narcissa’s interest in young Bayard, she openly tells her what she thinks of him: “Bayard love anybody, that cold brute? ... He never cared a snap of his fingers for anybody in his life except Johnny” (Faulkner 57). Nevertheless, Jenny also worries about young Bayard’s unhappy restlessness and the possibility that with his generation the Sartoris family might die out: “Let him get a son, then he can break his neck as soon and as often as he pleases” (Faulkner 92). Therefore, despite her proclamation that she would “hate to see any girl [she] was fond of, married to him” (Faulkner 92), Jenny supports the development of Narcissa and Bayard’s relationship and repeatedly creates situations in which they could be alone (Faulkner 80, 227, 242, 270, 289–90).

As their lives merge within the Sartoris family circle and Narcissa becomes pregnant, Jenny and Narcissa come to a mutual understanding at a new level, as

partners joined in the sisterhood of “women throughout the world’s history” (Faulkner 331). After a few peaceful months, young Bayard fails as a husband and an expecting father and Jenny notices that Narcissa is “getting moony” (Faulkner 331). Jenny admits her part in the whole affair and apologizes for “getting [Narcissa] into this” (Faulkner 331). Narcissa is not sorry, though. She accepts her share of responsibility in her current situation and then, silently, with “that fine and passive courage of women” the two seal their “hopeless pact” (Faulkner 331).

While most critics interpret Narcissa’s refusal to name her son John as an attempted rebellion against Jenny’s wishes and her predictions of the doomed destiny of the Sartoris men, it seems more probable that the name Benbow which Narcissa chooses symbolizes her return to the kind of love that she had experienced with Horace. As Judith Bryant Wittenberg explains, Narcissa was as a child “forced by her own mother’s death into being a mother to her brother [and] learned to be possessive about Horace and repressive of her own sexuality” (332). It is therefore likely that now, abandoned by her husband, she will enclose her son in the same maternal/incestuous caring.

Both *The House of the Seven Gables* and *Flags in the Dust* appear to stress women’s acceptance rather than rebellion against patriarchal ideals of womanhood and to promote orderly, gradual vision of socio-economic change that would not threaten cultural continuity. Despite the novels’ destabilizing impulses, the development of the relationships between Hepzibah and Phoebe and between Jenny and Narcissa ultimately re-invokes traditional gender roles for the women concerned. Nevertheless, both Hawthorne and Faulkner re-imagine the dominant definitions of womanhood at their times in order to show not only how powerful but also how precarious these categories are. Their characters of Hepzibah, Jenny, Phoebe, and Narcissa have to a large degree internalized the expectations associated with their gender and their social status. However, within their respective roles, they each display personal depth and complexity that transcend the boundaries of typification and give them individuality. Despite their human limitations, Hepzibah and Jenny possess the inner strength to cope and endure with dignity the social transformations of their worlds. They know “how to give up gracefully and be a grandmamma” (Faulkner 312). In their relationships with Phoebe and Narcissa, they pass on their wisdom and sense of responsibility for continuing life to the women of the younger generation, ensuring the cyclical passage of cultural history.

WORKS CITED

- Berg, Allison. “The Great War and the War at Home: Gender Battles in *Flags in the Dust* and *The Unvanquished*.” *Women’s Studies* 22:4 (1993): 441-53.
- Brown, Gillian. *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth Century America*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

- Buchanan, Ron. "'I Want You to Be Human': The Potential Sexuality of Narcissa Benbow." *Mississippi Quarterly* 41:3 (1988): 447-58.
- Byam, Nina. "Hawthorne's Women: The Tyranny of Social Myths." *The Centennial Review* 15 (1971): 250-72.
- Faulkner, William. *Flags in the Dust*. 1973. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten. "A Domestic Reading of *The House of the Seven Gables*." *Studies in the Novel* 21:1 (1989): 1-13.
- Goddu, Teresa. "The Circulation of Women in *The House of the Seven Gables*." *Studies in the Novel* 23:1 (1991): 119-27.
- Gwin, Minrose C. *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1985.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables*. 1851. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Jones, Anne Goodwyn. *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981.
- Person, Leland S., Jr. *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988.
- Roberts, Diane. *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994.
- Wittenberg, Judith Bryant. "William Faulkner: A Feminist Consideration." *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Fritz Fleischmann. Boston: Hall, 1982.
- Young, Daniel T. "Narcissa Benbow's Strange Love's: William Faulkner." *American Declarations of Love*. Ed. Ann Massa. New York: St. Martin's P, 1990.

