# *WOMEN'S EVOLUTION INTO HIGHER FORMS OF BEING IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AS EVINCED IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S HESTER AND PHOEBE, WILLIAM FAULKNER'S CADDY AND JOHN STEINBECK'S CATHY*

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***Abstract:*** *Women's role and position within literature has been under constant shift and improvement, leading to contemporary times when they share an acknowledged status of freedom and outspokenness. Throughout American literature of the first half of the nineteenth century we find a pervasive belief that the American woman, since the settling of the continent, had somehow evolved into a higher form of being. We herby consider that some American writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner or John Steinbeck might belong to the category expressing this belief in their description of their female characters, be they Puritan or contemporary women.*

***Keywords:*** *women, American literature, higher beings, evolution, the Bible.*

## Conceptual Framework

Women throughout history have been differently perceived; therefore, while women in Greek mythology were perceived more from a sexual perspective than from an individualistic angle (for this reason, many were taken advantage of; overall their rights were limited, and free expression was commonly forbidden), during Medieval times, the women were surprisingly a lot more candid and sexual than one might expect of an era where the ideal of femininity was Mary, the mother of Jesus. In a careful reading of the literature of the time, one finds the first buds of a feminist literature emerging from the words on the pages. The role of women in the 19th century literature was one in which they redefine their place in society by accepting an image of themselves which involved both home-centeredness and inferiority. In this time period, women were being portrayed as protagonists more often than in the past, even though they were still in a subjugated role despite their desire to break free of societies' restrictions.

Women's roles in literature have evolved throughout history and have lead women to develop into strong independent roles. 20th-century literature has served as an outlet and sounding board for women's rights and feminist pioneers. Women in modern literature often include strong independent females juxtaposed by oppressed women to provide examples for young female readers and to critique shortcomings of society. Consequently, the emergence of independent female characters in American literature has allowed for a new evolution of the role of women in fictional literature.

Throughout American literature of the first half of the nineteenth century readers can encounter a pervasive belief that the American woman, since the settling of the American continent, had somehow evolved into a higher form of being (McAlexander, 1975: 252). Therefore, we herby consider that some renowned American writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck

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might belong to the category of novelists who embarked on highlighting their outstanding female characters, in stark contrast to the historical background and reality, regardless of the society the respective women came from, whether they were Puritan or modern, contemporary women.

**Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Hawthorne's Female Characters Torn between Social Laws and Inner Laws**

First and foremost, in the A-scarlet-letter-marked Hester Prynne, the passionately honest woman featuring both the adulteress and angel characteristics, Nathaniel Hawthorne created one of the most admirable heroines of American fiction. Forced to exhibit herself for hours on a scaffold with both emblems of her sin at her breast – the infant Pearl and the letter "A" she herself gorgeously embroidered – Hester serves as the light that ultimately rescues her lover's soul from damnation, thus exceeding everyone's expectations, which is a rightful mark of her being superior in terms of her evolving from the submissive wife to an independent, self-sufficient individual, able to stand for her creed (which, unfortunately, does not apply to her "righteous" cleric who was her lover, too mortified to disclose his allegiance to the adulteress and their daughter).

Conversely, in *The House of the Seven Gables* Phoebe and Holgrave, in a Biblical sense, become the new Adam and Eve: "They transfigured the earth, and made it Eden again, and themselves the first two dwellers in it." (*HSG* 355) Their status is reconfirmed when Clifford pronounces the benediction, at the end of the chapter: "'And so the flower of Eden has bloomed, likewise, in this old, darksome house, today!'" (*HSG* 357) The narrator of *The House of the Seven Gables* speaks of the "Eden" retrieved by the young couple after the Judge's death:

> The bliss, which makes all things true, beautiful, and holy, shone around this youth and maiden. They were conscious of nothing sad nor old. They transfigured the earth, and made it Eden again, and themselves the two first dwellers in it. (*HSG* 307)

Nonetheless, this Eden is "the Eden in their hearts," a subjective Eden. Regardless of the fact that Phoebe is part of a household, a soon-to-be submissive wife, the idea of her evolution can be supported by her ability to cast light over the gloomy premises of the House of the Seven Gables, and revive a long-lost connection between two feuding families. According to those times society, Phoebe could be analyzed on the background of supporting the lawful unison between husband and wife in the holy matrimony, with pre-marital pregnancy involved, who is bound to stand out in the crowd by means of her organizational skills and lack of prejudice in her relationship with Holgrave.

Mention should be made that Hawthorne's choice to write about two such cases of outstanding women rests on the historical background of his era, when in the 1850s bridal pregnancies had become infrequent and completely unacceptable, which could not have been a supportive case for at least one of Hawthorne's heroines (Smith and Hindus, in Millington, 1979: 79). When sexual codes alter this much and so quickly, something much wider is happening in society. This later eighteenth-century incidence of premarital/beyond-the-boundary-of-marriage sex was a "product of



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profound social disequilibrium" and disappeared once familial, social and economic situations changed yet again.

In Hawthorne's America, one of the society's key points of disturbance in evolution was for the emergent middle class, the condition of women. Profound ambivalences about women lay at the center of both middle-class emotional life and the republic's idea of itself as a nation of liberty and equality (*Ibid:* 79). Even though the Revolution has excluded women politically from its democratic promises, it nonetheless initiated a persistent debate about female roles, while ushering in new economic structures that would simultaneously constrain women and encourage their social questioning.

At the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, "Women, more especially, – in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion, – or with the dreary burden of a heat unyielded, because unvalued and unsought, – came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched , and what the remedy!". The red A's original religious and judicial "office" has startingly metamorphosised into a feminist conversation. Paradoxically, in this post-adultery novel, marriage is central, as indeed it was for most nineteenth-century women's lives (nearly 90 percent married). While the novel of adultery is one standard way to explore marriage, *The Scarlet Letter*'s unusual concern exclusively with the deed's denouement gives sustained attention to a figure encountered earlier, the "unhoused" woman; the once married woman reveals female subjectivity more fully in separation. In addition, it is the unattached woman who tests many common gender assumptions.

The importance of women in Hawthorne's life and career, and his awareness of their substantial capabilities, have been well documented, yet this awareness should not be equated with a feminist position. Interpreters have assigned to Hawthorne a confusion of positions on women, especially as the scope of criticism has broadened to consider the author's politics, psychology, homoerotic impulses, attitudes toward history, toward race, toward writing, revolution, mother, daughter, wife; with each new area of inquiry, new significations fill in the blanks the author so kindly left open (Onderdonk, 2003: 73).

Hawthorne's attitude toward women is most suggestively articulated in his textual treatment of the issue of sexual purity. T. Walter Herbert (apud Onderdonk, 2003: 73) has shown that the author's marital life was organized according to fairly orthodox nineteenth-century tropes of femininity and domesticity in all their inequalities and fraught sexual dynamics – but most especially in the Victorian insistence on feminine purity. Consequently, we cannot make any contention, without a shred of a doubt, about Hawthorne's real position towards Hester Prynne's role (whether she should be blamed or "sanctified"). In both her artistic and penitential aspects, Hester Prynne can only dramatize or embellish her guilt. She is ultimately set aside, left in a state both marginalized and irredeemable. Whatever limited purposes Hester might serve in her repentance should not obscure for us the fact of her practical abandonment and doom of sterility, unfit in Hawthorne's eyes for any life but that of self-abasement (Onderdonk, 2003: 74).

In figures like Hester Prynne, properties of individuality and sexuality that Hawthorne found seductively admirable in women, or just plain seductive, are anxiously represented as anarchic threats to stable patriarchy. This woman insisted on existence – physical, mental, spiritual – and could not allow the crucial "essence" of masculinity to pass without their influence. Thus she had each to be contained or destroyed – removed from the cycle of reproduction, with her less threatening sister



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placed at the center of the domestic order, namely Phoebe. Hester is a heroine in a book without heroes because she carries her love story all by herself. She is a creation of someone who loves women and who saw her as emotionally holy in a declined world. She may also be seen as the feminist rebel, having "sisters" in Hawthorne's other works.

A suspicious reading of Hawthorne's fiction thus asks if this body of work includes in its aims the reactionary desire to restrict women to an ideal and invisible non-being, their bodies controlled as vessels for their one necessary function – motherhood. If this is true, the insightful sympathy Hawthorne extended in his depictions of women was all the more disingenuous for its full apprehension of what it would suppress (*Ibid:* 75).

A lot of critics highlighted the fact that Hester is named for the biblical Queen Esther. *The Scarlet Letter*, by leaning on the Book of Esther, "positions itself as a kind of updated scripture." The connections between Hawthorne's romance and the *Book of Esther* are extensive and elusive. According to the Hebrew Bible, the biblical story unravels like this: Vashti, the wife of the Persian King Ahasuerus, is dismissed and banished because of her disobedience. Esther, a young Jewish woman, replaces Vashti as queen. Esther's guardian, Mordechai, urges her to keep their relationship and her Jewishness a secret. Because Mordechai refuses to bow to Ahasuerus's viceroy, Haman, the latter persuades Ahasuerus to authorize the destruction of all the Jews in the kingdom. Finding out about all these, Mordechai asks Esther to save her people. Esther risks her life by entering the king's inner court without being summoned. Then she invites Ahasuerus and Haman to two banquets. While at the second banquet, Esther confesses that she is a Jewish. Haman's plan to hang Mordechai fails when the king remembers that Mordechai has done him a favor and offers him a position of honor. Haman is hanged instead of Mordechai after Esther's revelation that he intends to kill her people. But Haman's plot is still in effect and Mordechai urges the Jews to fight against their attackers. Their triumph is commemorated in the holiday of Purim.

One also remarks the fact that the Book of Esther is the solely book of the Hebrew Bible which excludes the word "God". In the same way, *The Scarlet Letter* does not include the word "adultery" (the sin for which the letter actually stands). The lacunae contribute to literature of secrecy and coded sign.

**Modern American Twentieth-Century Feminist Instances with William Faulkner and John Steinbeck**

Moving on to the twentieth century, we embark on a challenging lookout for a rebellious heroine, whose initial position in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is indicative of her prospective growth into an "emblematic" character. Caddy is the shortened form of Candance, an English name derived from the title of the Queen Mothers of Ethiopia. The origin is uncertain, deriving either from Greek, meaning "fire-white, incandescent" or from Latin, meaning "pure, unsullied" (http://www.names-meanings.net/name/Candace/bible-female-Biblical; accessed online on June 22, 2010). However, the character's traits in the novel are quite opposite to "pure and unsullied."

From a biblical perspective, one can state that Caddy is Faulkner's Eve. Just like her Biblical antitype she breaks rules, learns about death (Eve as she ate the forbidden fruit, while Caddy as she climbs the prohibited pear tree in the family yard). On the one hand, Eve was seduced by the slippery serpent; on the other, Caddy loses her innocence to her first seducer Dalton Ames, who comes to her in the cedars in "the



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skins of a snake." Like Eve who was expelled from the Garden of Eden, pregnant Caddy has to leave the Compson residence (Anderson, 2002: 56).

Sex and death are one special case within the more general categories of independence and dependence. Sex is a typical juvenile avenue for independence. Moreover, the avert attitude towards sex that Caddy shows throughout the novel, from a feminist perspective is a form of sheer evolution; however, taking into consideration the moral standards of the twentieth century in the American south, her sexual freedom is a sign of depravity and rootlessness. Sex, as such, is pursued in private, away from the family and against their rules. Greater experience discloses that sex is linked with death at the core. Both are of the body, and the body stands for decay and inevitable death.

As previously mentioned, Caddy is William Faulkner's Eve, having the personal orientation of the new cultural outlook. She is forced out of the family home and never returns, constantly on the move in order to encounter something better. She is constantly seeking to exceed her own limits and boundaries through new possibilities. As with Eve, Caddy's initial loss of innocence (in patriarchal terms) comes in connection with violating her father's rule of a tree – climbing a pear tree. Repeating the experience of Eve with the serpent, sex is the venue for Caddy's first major independent move away from the family. She does it in secret among the cedar trees and against their rules of respectability. Uniting the sex and death themes, Caddy describes the intensity of her youthful sex urge as "dying" (*Ibid:* 60). Later when pregnant, she says she was right but did not understand at the time exactly what was dying. Eventually, pregnant, she does understand. Unfortunately, motherhood, ties her down and subjects her to the common-established position of women, as care-takers and nurturers, a status she will refuse stubbornly. She perceives motherhood as the death of her independence and innocence. In her case, sex turns out to be a dead end as far as self and freedom are concerned. Her pursuit of independent organ pleasure is first subjected to the reproductive function for the species survival and then to prostitution for individual survival. She returns her child back to the family home because mortality requirements limit her life possibilities. As with Eve in the Garden, her innocence is over. Abandoned by her family, she continues to endure through courage, always seeking new possibilities. She never returns to her family home, not even to her father's funeral. The Appendix of the book has her moving around, married off in Hollywood and Europe.

One detail is particularly revealing about Caddy's relationship with one of her brothers and the thin line between her feminine superiority and debasement verging onto inhumanity; Caddy, ever practical, asks if Quentin will be able to cut his own throat. Quentin's reply involves an apparent non sequitur: "yes the blades long enough Benjys in bed by now." Several elements are involved: Quentin invokes his resentment of Benjy, who slept with Caddy until he was 13; fears of sexual inadequacy, tied up with the innuendo that all idiots are sexual giants; and a glimmer of self-recognition (Godden, in Moreland, 2007: 28).

Caddy suffers an enforced and humiliating marriage to obscure her pregnancy out of wedlock, a marriage doomed to failure; she feels forced to leave her child as a hostage to Jason; and she disappears only later to turn up again – just possibly – in a faded photograph "ageless and beautiful, cold serene and damned; beside her a handsome lean man of middle-age in the ribbons and tabs of a German staff general", a betrayal of her nation standing in judgment of her loss of family and of family loyalty, family ties (Kinney, in Moreland, 2007: 191).

The ever-absent Caddy Compson evokes the erotic sublime in *The Sound and the Fury.* Minrose Gwin's *The Feminine and Faulkner* (1990) might be seen as a



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feminine application of loss and absence, gender and race to the novel, a sort of gendered deconstructive reading of one of Faulkner's more notable female characters, Caddy Compson. The power of Gwin's reading of Faulkner lies in her provocative rereading of this female character as an agent of instability and disruption; in her analysis, this woman destabilizes the South's gender hierarchies, revealing the region's "cult of true womanhood" to be anything but natural or transparent. After Gwin, gender has become a primary focus of Faulkner studies, and an entire generation has learned the necessity of listening for Caddy's voice (Caron, in Moreland, 2007: 489).

In the case of Faulkner's friend and contemporary opponent, Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* dwells not only on the role of Eve but on the woman over whom Cal and Aron fight. These roles are played by the twins' mother, Catherine, to some extent the 'Eve' of the novel, and by Abra, who eventually transfers her affections from the hopelessly idealistic Aron, unable to see her as she really is, to Cal (Wright, 2007: 65).

Steinbeck interwove the Trask plotline with the story of another family, the naïve Ameses. Ironically, their "lovely" daughter Cathy has been responsible for the death of one of her teachers after a sexual liaison and has further implicated two young classmates in a rape. The parents suspect nothing regarding the innate evil in their offspring. By merging the C and A in Cathy's first and last names and further joining her with the Trask family's Cain and Abel symbolism, Steinbeck confronts the dual heritage of all men head-on.

Having discovered Cathy almost bludgeoned to death outside the family home (she has previously killed her parents, run away, served as a prostitute and been beaten by her whoremaster), Adam chooses to ignore her obvious potential for evil and instead to impulsively join their fates through marriage. On their wedding night, this serpent-like woman betrays Adam's good-heartedness by having intercourse with his brother, Charles. Even when settling in California's Salinas Valley, unfortunately he remains ignorant of Cathy's real nature. Here in the pseudo-Edenic setting, Adam intends to build a family tradition. However, Cathy, desperate to be free, tries to abort her dual pregnancy and shoots Adam in the shoulder and shortly thereafter, she rejects the confining "goodness" of his character and abandons their twin sons. A striking element is that both the twins and their mother try to escape their identity. While the boys resort to nicknames to deny their biblical heritage (spelling Aron instead of Aaron, and shortening Caleb to Cal), their mother Cathy assumes the name of Kate and becomes the sadistic Madame of a notorious Salinas brothel. Cathy attains this powerful position by poisoning the original owner, Faye, despite the fact that Faye has treated her kindly, almost as if she were her own daughter. Thus, Cathy/Kate could be considered the very image of depravity that all people have in themselves, but simultaneously, a superiority of character, regarding her choices in life. Nevertheless, as the book draws to a close, she does see her own insufficiency, despite the power she wields. Her unexpected suicide is designed to hurt both her sons, but especially Aron because she hopes that his deep religiosity will be shattered by the genetic ties he will be forced to acknowledge. In her death, however, Cathy/Kate also seems to confront her isolation and loneliness and the fact that the power of evil cannot always destroy. In Adam's final confrontation with his estranged wife, he finally accepts and denounces Cathy for the true demonic influence she has tried to implant in his own existence and that of his sons.

Catherine, like Eve in the Biblical accounts, seems to be particularly open to the serpent's temptation. In introducing Catherine, his embodiment of evil, in chapter 8 of the novel, Steinbeck calls her a 'monster' of depravity, a 'malformed soul,' referring back to a 'time when a girl like Cathy would have been called possessed by the devil'



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before being 'exorcised to cast out the evil spirit' or even 'burned as a witch for the good of the community' (*EE* 80-1). She proceeds to build a career upon the sexual weakness and credulity of men. She brings out what Steinbeck not altogether ironically calls 'the glory' in Adam, whose dreams of a paradise in the Salinas Valley are clearly rooted in the opening chapters of Genesis. He tells Samuel, in terms of the Genesis-code they enjoy using with each other, 'I mean to make a garden of my land. Remember my name is Adam. So far I've had no Eden, let alone been driven out.' Samuel in turn starts joking about apples, wondering whether his Eve will allow him not to have an orchard, only for Adam to insist, 'You don't know this Eve...I don't think anyone can know her goodness' (*EE* 189).

This, of course, is painfully ironic for readers, who have privileged access to the earlier career of this Eve. This battle between good and evil, as Steinbeck proclaims somewhat sententiously at the beginning of Part IV of the novel, is 'the one story in the world...There is only one story,' one question which it makes sense to ask of an individual's life (*EE* 459). In Cathy's case, the answer clearly is that she is bad, although even she has her moments of goodness, for instance in wanting to protect Aron from all knowledge of her (Wright, 2007: 66). Her final thoughts before swallowing the capsule that will make her disappear suggest that the others in the novel 'had something she lacked,' a belief in the possibility of goodness which keeps them going (*EE* 610).

Some early critics missed the "covered thing" about *East of Eden* and labeled the work as a didactic moral tale that merely simplified the differences between good and evil and reduced the complexity of human life to unbelievable extremes. In fact, however, by combining the story of American with his own experience of California's Salinas Valley, Steinbeck produced an allegory that stressed the moral sense that had shaped the growth of the nation (and of women's perception) and still influenced the world of the present. Highlighting an evil female character, that far surpasses and exceeds any reasonable expectations of someone aiming at reaching beyond their own limitations, the novelist, succeeded in featuring a superior breed of women – even though this species might have fitted the Arian German faction. Intriguing because of its unique characters and the complex interweaving of plotlines and themes, *East of Eden* has continued to fascinate readers ever since and has never been out of print.

## Concluding Remarks

In the present article, I have actually exalted the American female character from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, both in their qualifications which ennoble human nature, as well in those that are demeaning, and make them either angelic or devilish; my contention has also been that the natural genius of women can, if improved, make outstanding attainments. My object has been to show some American novel female characters acting according to their vocation (be it an adulteress, the marriage-dedicated woman, or even women who are prone to seduce, abandon, and even kill – which could be considered means of evolution for some female high-achievers who led the way to modern feminists).

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