Images of Women in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction

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In their famous studies of America, two European observers, Alexis de Tocqueville and Harriet Martineau, commented on the status of women in the New World. De Tocqueville wrote in his Democracy in America (1838):

In the United States, the inexorable opinion of the public carefully circumscribes woman within the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties, and forbids her to step beyond it.

Harriet Martineau, who undertook her investigation about the same time as Tocqueville, drew a similar conclusion. In Society in America (1837) she stated,

The Americans have, in the treatment of women, fallen below, not only below their own democratic principles, but the practice of some parts of the Old World.

American women were not the subject of degrading abuses as were the negro slaves; however, compared with men, their situation left a lot to be desired. It was easy to perceive in the American home where the balance of power was. There was a wide gap between the privileges of the father and the mother.

With the growth of the new nation and the relentless fighting of American feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Charlotte Gilman Perkins, women’s situation in America improved. The ways in which American women had been brought up and their emancipation have been the concern of many nineteenth-century American writers. The changing situation of American women was not only reflected in American fiction by their becoming heroines whose names sometimes made the titles of novels. It was also represented by the emergence of a new type of heroine “who acts, not a heroine who is acted upon.” as is the case of Charlotte in Susannah Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1791), or Maggie in Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893). These emancipated heroines also reflect the changing situation of their real counterparts in the sense that they are mainly shown as self-reliant and having the opportunity of free choice - two characteristics which often brought them in conflict with their environment and the social conventions.

Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter (1850) is one of the most notable representation of the American woman who nourished the desire to free herself from the harsh social constraints that reduced her sex to subjugated position. One critic has indeed written, “today it would be foolish to claim that Hawthorne’s whole purpose was the liberation of women but that element of his purpose is thrown into sharper relief”. Hester Prynne’s attempt to liberate herself has an even greater significance since it constitutes a defiance to the severe obligations of the puritan ethic which exercised restraints not only on women, but also on men.

Hester Prynne is an Emersonian figure. Her adulterous act seems to comply to Emerson’s formulae in his essay, “Self-Reliance”, “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist”. 
Hester Prynne is self-reliant and incurs the punishment of her community because she refuses to conform to the social rules, and chooses to act according to her principles. Although Hester is severely punished she does not regret her act, and is never shown guilt-ridden. The end of the novel shows much more Hester Prynne’s resignation to her fate and her helpless submission to the dictates of the rigid moral values of her community than a repentance for the sin committed. Unlike the entire community, Hester Prynne and even Hawthorne do not regard this act as a sin. Although Hester Prynne accepts her fate at the end of the novel, not only does she come to despise the community for imposing restraints on people’s natural leanings, but, to some extent, she also magnifies her action. As she says to her lover, “what we did had a consecration of its own”. Hawthorne also shows great sympathy with Hester Prynne and a sneaking admiration for the courage with which she endures her punishment.

All the world had frowned on her,- for seven Long years had it frowned upon this lonely woman,- and still she bore it all, nor ever once turned away her firm, sad eyes. Heaven, likewise, had frowned upon her, and she had not died.

Hawthorne shows here the heroic stand of his character and elevates her above the community which condemns her.

Although Hawthorne does not condemn Hester Prynne’s act as the community does, he nevertheless shows her extreme vulnerability and the fatal consequences of her action on her position as a woman. Throughout the novel he stresses her status as a fallen woman by describing her exclusion from the community, and especially through the letter ‘A’ she wears. Hawthorne also suggests that her attempt to liberate herself is very limited for Hester. Hester despises the community and never regrets her act; but she also submits to the community’s punishment and its conventions. In the end it is the community which triumphs over Hester Prynne. Hester’s act as a self-liberating attempt proves a failure.

As is the case with Hester Prynne, it is also Isabel Archer’s own choice and her desire to affirm her freedom which lead to her unfortunate ending. At the beginning of The Portrait of a Lady (1881), Henry James introduces us to Isabel Archer who appears as the fictional representation of the typical nineteenth-century American young woman. She is beautiful, intelligent, and especially pure and innocent. However, unlike her real nineteenth-century counterparts, Isabel Archer is not prompted “by the modest but earnest pursuit of a good husband”. Instead, she wants to visit the world and deepen her knowledge. James provides his heroine with the means to do so, and sets her in Europe where she begins to carry out her dreams. By giving his heroine her economic independence thanks to the money she receives from her uncle, James also puts her in face of a great temptation and responsibility. The amount of money that Isabel inherits is not a liberating element only. It is also an entrapping one. Isabel herself shows her uneasiness when she states, “a large fortune means freedom, and I am afraid of that. It’s such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn’t, one would be ashamed”. Once again, Isabel asserts her attachment to freedom. It is because money is equated with freedom, and because a bad use of money may jeopardize her freedom, that Isabel is afraid. Hence, the handling of this money, or Isabel’s actions as a result of her economic independence become the focus of the novel.

The major test as it were for Isabel Archer to exercise her free choice is presented by marriage. Although Isabel Archer shows reservations towards marriage precisely because of its restricting effects on women's ambitions (“I am not sure I wish to marry anyone” ), the problem that she faces is not whether or not she should marry, but rather which among her three suitors...
who naturally will exercise the less restrictions on her freedom she is to choose. It is through her ‘free-choice’ that Henry James evaluates his heroine’s actions and the extent of her freedom. Up to the description of her marriage with Gilbert Osmond, James presents us with a strong and self-reliant heroine. She disposes of her two suitors Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton and sets to carry out her ambitious dreams. Isabel’s refusal of two marriage proposals are not offhanded decisions. Because of her fear that her marriage with Caspar Goodwood or Lord Warburton may restrict her freedom, she appears very cautious, and carefully weighs the pros and cons of the matter.

It is also after a cautious and profound reflection that Isabel Archer makes her choice and decides to marry Gilbert Osmond. She casts her choice on him because, among her suitors, he is the most sensitive, and appears as the one who is unlikely to intrude with her freedom. Because he is the less privileged Isabel also wants to use her money to contribute to his happiness. However, Gilbert Osmond turns out a selfish and cruel person. Through the description of the nightmare into which Isabel’s marriage turns, Henry James reverses the image that he gives of his heroine at the beginning of the novel. Isabel Archer no longer appears as the strong, self-reliant, and intelligent heroine. Her personality crumbles under the mean actions of her husband. She becomes dependent on him and submits to his principles. Isabel’s weakness is further stressed not only by her realization of her mistake and the loss of her liberty but also by her acceptance of her situation, as reflected mainly in her return to Osmond at the end of the novel. Hence, like Hawthorne James also suggests that his heroine’s free-choice turns into a kind of self inflicted punishment. Similarly, he shows through her return to Rome Isabel’s limitations.

Edna Pontelier in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899) and Rose in Hamlin Garland’s Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly (1895) present another facet of the self-reliant and emancipated heroine. Edna Pontelier and Rose are shown throughout not only challenging the social conventions and man-made laws but also having their own ways. Theirs is not a liberation attempt which ends in failure or a helpless resignation. Edna’s and Rose’s rises to free themselves are characterized by an unwillingness to submit, and most important a sense of fulfillment. Edna and Rose may be called the first American feminist heroines.

Both Edna and Rose experience an awakening, as embodied in their awareness of their abilities and their sexuality which kindles an urgent need to break out of the restraining social sphere. Rose achieves her self-discovery early in her life, whereas Edna Pontelier begins “to realize her position in the universe as a human being and to the world within and about her…” in her married life when she is twenty-eight of age. The marital status is the major difference between Edna and Rose. It accounts therefore for the plot differences of the two novels and the heroines’ liberating aims.

Edna’s awakening to her situation is perhaps more dramatic and bears a more revolutionary character than Rose’s. Her attempt to liberate herself compromises her marriage and casts doubts about her wifely and motherly duties, especially in the eyes of a puritan society. The impact of Edna’s anti-conventional actions and of her rejection of the marriage laws is further put in evidence thanks to the sharp contrast offered by the dutiful and motherly Mrs Ratignolle who is the antithesis of Mrs Pontelier. In Edna Pontelier, Kate Chopin has also created a strong character. Edna does not hesitate to rise and highly express her independence either to her husband or to the conventional Mrs Ratignolle. Edna’s first gesture of self-liberation is marked by her refusal to join Mr. Pontelier who summons her to bed. To Mrs Ratignolle Edna makes clear her position towards her family:
I would give up the unessential; I would give up the my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give up myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I’m beginning to comprehend which is revealing itself to me. (*The Awakening* p.257)

Throughout the novel Edna Pontelier does as she pleases, and indulges in an adulterous way of life. In spite of her controversial actions Edna, like Hester Prynne, is never guilt-ridden. Her conduct led some critics to compare Edna Pontelier with Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina. The three heroines have indeed in common their defiance of the social conventions and a kind of ‘mal de vivre’ which they hope to fulfill in extra-marital relations. However, unlike Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, Edna Pontelier does not indulge in adultery to seek a romantic adventure only. Edna’s adultery is a mark of her liberation. It is through the extra-marital relations that she achieves her freedom.

Like Flaubert’s heroine or Tolstoy’s, Edna Pontelier also ends tragically. Her suicide, however, bears a triumphant note. Edna does not commit suicide because she is desperate or because she resigns, like Hester Prynne, to a bad fate. It is because after her awakening she feels a certain contentment. Taken in a figurative sense the fact that Edna goes naked into the vastness of the sea marks a break with an unhappy past and an opening to a new life. Edna’s suicide after her awakening is in other words her rebirth. It anticipates the kind of fully liberated life that a woman like Garland’s Rose is determined to have.

Early in her childhood Rose becomes aware of the segregating practices against her sex and decides to challenge the man-made world. As Garland writes, “she saw no reason why boys should have all the fun”. Throughout the novel Garland presents a heroine with radical ideas who reacts aggressively against any attempt to keep her down. Rose is a typical example of the ‘New Woman’. Her views on the woman question and marriage, in particular, recall the views held by some of the American feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Charlotte Gilman Perkins. Rose who decides to become a writer in order to celebrate her ideal Williams De Lisle (a circus performer), is aware of the restraints of marriage and its negative impact on her ambitions. As far as Rose is concerned, marriage “meant a change, undoing of plans throwing away ambitions. It meant flinging herself to the immemorial sacrifice men demand of women”. (Rose, p.140) Such conviction is further reinforced by the advice Rose gets from some people. Mrs Spencer, whom Rose meets on the train leading her to Madison, advises the young girl not to marry “till you are thirty … Marry only when you want to be a mother”. (p.94) Dr. Thatcher, Rose’s protector in Madison, tells her that she could reach her aim “provided you don’t marry”.

After her graduation at a Madison college, Rose decides to move to Chicago which offers wider literary and artistic opportunities. In Chicago she meets new people and becomes increasingly involved in middle-class social gatherings. Among the people Rose gets acquainted with are Dr. Isabel Herrick and Mason, a journalist, who exercise a great influence on her career. She admires Dr. Isabel Herrick because she embodies her dreams and comes to stand, like William De Lisle, as her ideal. Dr. Herrick is also an example of the New Woman. She is full of life, self-confident, and has enough courage to defy her male comrades in the medical school with unequivocal words, “Men. I don’t say gentlemen. I’m here for business, and I’m here to stay. If you’re afraid of competition from a woman you’d better get out of the profession”. (p.287)
As for the journalist Mason his influence as a critic helps Rose to become an artist, or, at least, paves the way to her success. Mason’s leanings towards Rose go beyond his interests in her literary career. Garland’s novel, especially the last part of it, is also a romance between Rose and Mason which ends with their marriage.

One might wonder first if Rose, who hates the marriage institutions has not lost faith in her principles. Second, how does Rose come to marry Mason since he does not embody the qualities of her ideal William De Lisle? It is true that Rose feels she will be restricted by her married life. However, Dr. Herrick assures her that marriage is not incompatible with the development of women’s ambitions and does not always mean submission and hardship. (Dr. Herrick’s own marriage emerges as a significant example.) Moreover Rose, as Isabel Herrick also tells her, will find her delight in motherhood. On the other hand, although Mason differs from William De Lisle, he has nevertheless some points in common with Rose. Mason holds similar views on the important question of marriage, that it should not be an obstacle to women’s careers. Rose also accepts to marry Mason because in the letter which accompanies his marriage proposal, he leaves out “the clause which demands obedience from her”. (p.255)

Hence, the ending of the novel shows that Garland is not entirely against the marriage institution. He believed like some of the feminists that women should enter marriage on an equal basis, as is the case with his two heroines Rose and Dr. Isabel Herrick. Throughout the novel Hamlin Garland protects as it were his heroine from the negative consequences of marriage, and spares her the submission that characterized women in the farming places as Coolly. It is only when she acquires a higher education and becomes independent thanks to her literary career that Rose decides to marry. Then her ambition and her freedom are no longer at stake.

Upon their publication Garland’s Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly and Chopin’s The Awakening were received with a hostile reaction. To avoid his novel being banned Hamlin Garland had either to alter or to suppress some of its passages. As for Kate Chopin she could hardly overcome the public’s reaction and gradually sank into oblivion. The bad reception of the two novels was due to a large extent to the ‘Zolaesque’ leaning toward the treatment of sex, and especially to the creation of an unusual type of heroines. In 1900 Theodore Dreiser published his novel Sister Carrie which caused great uproar and was banned for seven years. This is because Dreiser took the treatment of the woman question in American literature a step further and created the most revolutionary heroine to that point. Sister Carrie is a lower class girl who achieves success through controversial means. Moreover in Sister Carrie Dreiser created a character who appears very much as the precursor of yet another type of heroines in American fiction which one critic has called ‘The Great American Bitch’. She is in the words of Edmund Wilson whom the critic quotes, “the impossible civilized woman who despises the civilized man for his failure in initiative and nerve and then jealous tries to break him down as soon as he begins to exhibit any”.

Endnotes


6. The word man is used here in the sense of “human being (irrespective sex or age)” or denoting “the male sex though by implication referring also to women”. Man may also be said to refer to “A person of position, importance or note”. See the various meanings of the word man in The Oxford English Dictionary 12 Vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), Vol.6, p.99


9. Ibid., p.140.


12. Ibid., p.99.


16. Hamlin Garland, Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), p.17. Further references to quotations from Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly are to this edition and are included in the text.

17. For a lengthy discussion of Sister Carrie and the representation of women in Dreiser’s novels, see my article, “Theodore Dreiser’s Women”, Revue des Langues Etrangères (Université d’Oran) June 1989.