Women's Issues in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

Claudia Durst Johnson, Book Editor
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Chapter 1: Background on Nathaniel Hawthorne

1. The Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne 17
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   For most of his life, Hawthorne was surrounded by women, including his widowed mother and two sisters, with whom he lived for ten years after graduating from college.

2. Hawthorne's Family's Impact on His Fiction 25
   Gloria C. Erlich
   Hester represents the strong maternal figure that Hawthorne never found in his own mother, who leaned on her family rather than taking the lead herself.

3. The Hawthorne-Fuller Friendship 34
   David B. Kesterson
   Hawthorne and nineteenth-century feminist Margaret Fuller had a puzzling ten-year friendship, and he drew on her character for his female protagonists.

Chapter 2: The Scarlet Letter and Women's Issues

1. Hester and Feminists of the 1840s 40
   David S. Reynolds
   Like the feminists of the nineteenth century, Hester envisions a radical change in woman's relationship with man and raises the question of vocational limitations.

2. A Mixture of Feminism and Misogyny 48
   Alison Easton
   Hawthorne's true feelings toward his character Hester are uncertain, but one of the changes that the reader sees in The Scarlet Letter is the final acceptance of a woman with a passionate, sexual, intellectual nature.
3. Puritans and Feminists

*Leland S. Person*

Hawthorne drew upon the history of outspoken women in Puritan New England for *The Scarlet Letter*, and feminists in Hawthorne's own day influenced his portrait of Hester.

4. Hester as Hero

*Nina Baym*

Hester lives in a controlling society in which women are not only powerless but also invisible. Hester's power and radicalism are founded on her individualism.

5. Woman Identified with the Marginalized Artist

*Ken Egan Jr.*

Art and sexuality, in both Hester and Hawthorne, are intertwined and guilt producing. Adulteress and author are both compelled to enter the marketplace at their peril.

6. A Woman's Calling

*Carolyn R. Maibor*

Inwardly, Hester is a radical. From her position on the margins, she questions and influences the very foundation of society and religion.

7. Living Against Nature in Puritan New England

*Frederick Newberry*

Hester is subtly identified with the art and nature of an Old World culture, which her Puritan community in Boston has denounced.

8. Woman as Outsider

*Kristin Herzog*

Hester is identified with others in her life who are punished by the Puritans: Native Americans, disobedient children, Antinomians, and witches.

9. Leadership and Delicacy

*Joyce W. Warren*

Despite her strength and abilities, Hester can never assume the role of leader and does not attempt to do so. Instead, she remains rightfully in the shadows.
The story of Hester as presented by Hawthorne is not sympathetic to women; it is men who are the victims.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Perspectives on Women's Issues

1. The Forced Marriage
   John Dougherty and Kirk Johnson
   Hester's arranged and loveless marriage to Chillingworth is scarcely a thing of the past, as evidenced by this story of marriages arranged for minors by an isolated Mormon sect.

2. The Single Mother
   Ruth Sidel
   Like Hester, single mothers today suffer from loneliness and societal stigma.

3. Still Quiet and Submissive
   John Hooper and Jo Revill; John Hooper and Tania Branigan
   An official document of the Catholic Church, written by the man who has since become Pope, reinforces the subservience of women that Hester fought against. John Hooper and Tania Branigan also discuss that with its release of an official statement on the role of women, the Catholic Church issues a general warning against radical women.

4. "GodMen" in a Defeminized Church
   Paul T. Coughlin
   In the United States a new church has been flourishing that prides itself on restoring traditionally masculine traits to Christianity.

5. Hester's Powerful Progeny
   Karen Breslau
   An increasing number of women with Hester's strength are now political leaders.