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## The Great Radical Dualism: Locating Margaret Fuller's Feminism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Fiction

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**THE GREAT RADICAL DUALISM: LOCATING MARGARET FULLER'S  
FEMINISM IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S FICTION**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of English  
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts, with University Honors

And Honors in English

by

Renee Michele Vincent

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## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	i
Acknowledgments .....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Gender Fluidity, Universality, and Identity Politics.....	3
The Scarlet Letter/Hester.....	10
The Scarlet Letter/Pearl.....	15
The Blithedale Romance/Zenobia.....	18
Conclusion.....	25
Works Cited.....	28
Vita.....	30

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to establish a foundation built on the congruencies between Margaret Fuller's feminist theory and Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction, with the aim of addressing two major points: first, the implications of universalizing gender in the context of identity politics; and second, to show how gender universality is challenged within Hawthorne's fiction and Fuller's prose. Given that Nathaniel Hawthorne's characters depict a range of personal variability, the act of synthesizing Margaret Fuller's feminist theory with Hawthorne's fiction functions to link the personal with the political. The overall goal of this study is to substantiate both writers within a feminist discourse and further, as contributory in the fight for gender equality.

Key words: Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, feminism, gender, universality, identity politics

## Introduction

The resurgence of the woman's movement in the late 1960s inspired feminist critics to revisit and reevaluate the literary canon. During this time, Nathaniel Hawthorne's works were often criticized as having an antifeminist bias. In "Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism," Nina Baym details the ways in which "academic feminism is rife with dissention"; many critics who disagree with her feminist readings of Hawthorne "stress the way Hawthorne inevitably punishes and/or silences unconventional women [through] reinforcing a culturally conservative agenda" (545). Baym challenges the notion that Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction serves to reinforce female oppression, instead arguing Hawthorne's unconventional characters serve to position him as a proponent of feminism by "simultaneously representing women as embodiments of misogynistic male fantasies about women and as real women struggling against these fantasies" (543). Furthermore, Baym reasons that Hawthorne's novels are "replete with objections *against* social arrangements that tell so heavily and unjustly against women" (emphasis added; 551).

Complicating the argument of Hawthorne's feminism even further is his relationship with Margaret Fuller, possibly the most well known American advocate for gender equality of her time. As Jeffrey Steel explains in his essay "Margaret Fuller's Rhetoric of Transformation," Fuller's theories are built on the ideology that

[t]he result of nineteenth-century gender divisions was a psychological and social disharmony based on the internalization of male authority. The misconception of gender had led to a society that limited women's self-development both inside and outside the home, culminating in

paternalistic conceptions of marriage, restricted roles, as well as sinister forms of sexual exploitation. (Steele 280)

Hawthorne's female characters have often been compared with Fuller, herself, revealing parallels in appearance and personality. Conversely, the intention here is to focus on the similarities between Hawthorne's fiction and Fuller's prose, especially in relation to the treatment of women and gender. While critics, for the most part, have not focused on establishing a foundation built on the congruencies between Fuller's feminist theory in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and Hawthorne's fiction, specifically *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, this study aims to address two major points: first, to understand the implications of universalizing gender in the context of identity politics; and second, to show how gender universality is challenged within Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction and Margaret Fuller's prose, positioning both writers as contributory in the fight for gender equality. Moreover, through an exploration of these issues, my goal is to substantiate how literature is not only influenced by society, but works in ways to impact the society that consumes it.

## Gender Fluidity, Universality, and Identity Politics

Nina Baym proposes that Hawthorne's point is "not that essentialism makes social change impossible but that it makes social change impossible unless differences between men and women are taken into account" ("Revisiting" 551). Baym theorizes that Hawthorne's focus is on the differences between men and women, while Margaret Fuller's theory offers a broader scope in regards to gender identity:

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman. (*Woman* 68)

It may appear an ideological contradiction; Fuller blurs the categorical perimeters of gender by positioning men and women on a continuum, allowing for fluid movement. If Hawthorne's focus really is on the differences between men and women, as per Baym, then it seems logical to assume he is in opposition to a fluid gender model and instead works to strengthen categorical distinctions. Despite these questionable differences, however, an analysis of Hawthorne's characters reveals a theory of gender that aligns closely with Fuller's. Put plainly, Hawthorne blurs the lines delineating gender roles, portraying women as not purely feminine and men as not wholly masculine; his characters are highly variable in terms of gender, leading to the supposition that, within his fiction, Hawthorne denounces gender universality, instead favoring a gender fluid model of identity, namely of Dimmesdale, Prynne, and Pearl, in *The Scarlet Letter*.



From the historical standpoint of gender construction and the widespread belief of that time that masculine strength and intellect “naturally” surpassed that of the feminine, Arthur Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates qualities that specifically defy the gender norm. This is most noticeable in the ways Dimmesdale cycles through feelings of empowerment over, and dependency upon, Hester Prynne. Despite Dimmesdale’s hierarchal standing as a clergyman, his social anxiety and emotional instability often cause him to feel repressed, vulnerable, and physically weak. Even after Dimmesdale makes the decision to reveal his sexual transgressions to the town, he still asks Hester to “support me up yonder scaffold” (588). Additionally, the same can be said of Miles Coverdale of *The Blithedale Romance*; he is a self-absorbed middle class man of means. And yet, he too, feels intimidated by his surroundings and succumbs to physical illness. In comparison to Dimmesdale, Hester’s mental and bodily strength prevails. In many ways, she symbolizes the pillar that he literally and metaphorically leans upon. Similarly, it is Zenobia’s “bloom, health, and vigor, which she possessed in such overflow” that strongly contrasts with Coverdale’s apprehensive demeanor (*Blithedale* 13).

Margaret Fuller openly opposes a universal ideal for women in her prose, pointedly advocating for a woman’s right to actualize herself in whatever way she chooses. Her declaration in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, “If you ask me what offices [women] may fill; I reply ---any; let them be sea captains, if you will. I do not doubt there are women well fitted for such an office” typifies this ideal (102). Though writing in a different genre, Hawthorne also engages in the discourse of gender equality through his female character development, specifically Zenobia of *The Blithedale*

*Romance*, and Pearl and Hester of *The Scarlet Letter*. Zenobia, Hester, and Pearl all defy traditional gender norms through superior intellectual fortitude and the demonstrations of utility and agency in the public sphere.

Biologically, there are differences between male and female bodies. There is also disparity between male and female agency, specifically created by and perpetuated through an unequal power structure. This disparity is often in direct relation to physical differences, as female bodies are less valued for the work they do in both public and private contexts. If we fail to recognize the differences between the sexes, then we mask the social forces that serve to subjugate women, instead blaming women's personal choices for their own subjugation. At the same time, if we don't acknowledge that human beings are variable and often subvert conventional norms (i.e.; women who are not maternal and/or men who are), hierarchal systems of oppression are perpetuated, wherein variation is labeled as deviant and "justifiably" punished. Margaret Fuller addresses this point when she claims:

History jeers at the attempts of physiologists to bind the great original laws by the forms which flow from them. They make a rule; they say from observation, what can and cannot be. In vain! Nature provides exceptions to every rule. She sends women to battle, and sets Hercules spinning; she enables women to bear immense burdens, cold and frost; she enables the man, who feels maternal love, to nourish his infant like a mother. (*Woman* 69)

It is important to note that Fuller makes a clear distinction between physiologist's "rules" and the natural powers that prove them wrong. In other words, Fuller in no way claims

that nature is responsible for gender restriction; instead, she argues that the spuriousness of “man-made” gender roles is proven through gender inversion: a woman’s ability to “bear immense burdens” and a man’s capacity for “maternal love.” In locating essentialism at the center of her feminist argument, Fuller addresses a touchstone issue in the fight for gender equality. From the time Fuller and other feminists pointed to its relevancy in the nineteenth century, female essentialism has remained a point of contention within the fight for gender equality—in relation to a previous, as well as contemporary context.

Alice S. Rossi’s *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to Beauvoir* chronologically maps the fluctuations of the feminist movement from its nineteenth century pre-suffragette “first wave” beginnings to its resurgence in the 1970’s, commonly referred to as the “second wave.” Rossi categorizes those involved in the first wave women’s rights movement as being either “moral crusading” or “Enlightenment” feminists. These classifications not only reflect a difference in desired action, but also ideology. Moral crusading feminists include social reformers such as Angelina Grimke and Abbey Kelly, both of whom Fuller mentions in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. While the Enlightenment feminists may have shared the same views as the moral crusaders, their skepticism of social institutions prompted them to distrust reform and instead support structural societal change.

Margaret Fuller, Mary Wollstonecraft, and John Stuart Mill (among others) are all considered “Enlightenment” feminists, according to Rossi. Their differences are distinct from the moral crusaders, both socially and ideologically. Rossi writes that Enlightenment feminists are “highly urban, sophisticated, solitary thinkers and writers”

(248). They tended to be very well educated and used their writing, as opposed to rallying, to communicate ideas with others. Additionally, they do not propose women to be essentially morally superior to men. In an essay from *The Leader* published in 1855, George Eliot writes as follows:

Unfortunately, many over-zealous champions of women assert their actual equality with men—nay, even their moral superiority to men— as a ground for their release from oppressive laws and restrictions. They lose strength immensely by this false position ... both Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft have too much sagacity to fall into this sentimental exaggeration. (234)

Similar to Fuller’s critique of universal gender norms, Eliot’s essay denounces the idea of fixed identity as a “false position” that serves to weaken the argument for gender equality and praises Fuller’s erudition on the matter.

Fixed identities often appear central in the political struggles for equality, specifically for identification purposes that work to stipulate exactly who is oppressing whom. However, contemporary social theorists tend to agree that fixing identity based on race, gender, class, sexuality, location, and/or disability undermines the basis for equality; one reason being that as soon as one makes a definite statement on what defines an identity, an oppositional binary is simultaneously generated. As Judith Butler explains, “it becomes quite urgent to ask, who qualifies as a ‘who,’ and what systematic structures of disempowerment make it impossible for certain injured parties to invoke the ‘I’ effectively?” (153). Butler is not opposing the idea of a subject; rather, she is addressing the importance of examining how we limit our definitions of identity.

Vulnerable to a variety of manipulations, fixing identity is a process that potentially serves to devalue the subject. With relevance to this study, moral crusading feminists claimed essential superior morality as the basis for female presence in the public sphere. However, it can be argued—as it was by those who opposed a woman’s right to vote—that women are *too* moral (read: simple, unsophisticated, innocent and/or naive) to adequately handle the dangers of the public sphere. Here, the potential for exclusion and hierarchal structure becomes recognizable vis-à-vis instigating a universal identity. Arguing that women deserve equal rights because they are more moral than men perpetuates an ideology that, based on their sex, all women are the same in this particular way. Furthermore, if womanhood and morality are equated with one another, the implications in terms of identity potentially serve to undermine womanhood entirely, feeding a belief system in which a woman labeled as amoral is less of a woman and/or less than human. Herein, generalizations become devastatingly problematic. Heinous crimes against humanity, including the institution of slavery and the Salem Witch Trials, which Hawthorne so often refers back to, have been justified through identity politics that label a subjugated group as “un-natural” and/ or “less than human.”

Gayle Rubin, a pioneering activist and leading theorist of sex and gender politics, denounces universality through her assertion that “no system of classification can catalogue or explain the infinite vagaries of human diversity” (248). Much like Rubin, Margaret Fuller did not believe in definite gender classifications and instead claimed there be “no need to clip the wings of any bird that wants to soar and sing, or finds in itself the strength of pinion for a migratory flight unusual to its kind. The difference would be that *all* need not be constrained to employments, for which *some* are unfit”

(*Woman* 103). Arguably, Nathaniel Hawthorne portrays his female characters, Hester Prynne and Pearl of *The Scarlet Letter*, as replications of Fuller's metaphorical bird, both possessing the strength to challenge societal restraint and embark on a "flight unusual for [their] kind."

## The Scarlet Letter/ Hester

Numerous critics have made convincing arguments proposing Fuller as the model for Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Thomas R. Mitchell provides a compelling theory on an "ambivalent intimacy [with Fuller] that would haunt Hawthorne for years" (132). Mitchell theorizes that the tension between Hawthorne and Fuller occurring during the summer of 1844 was sexual in nature; he believes this is reflected throughout all of Hawthorne's writing. Mitchell considers it very likely that Arthur Dimmesdale is a projection of Hawthorne himself, therefore equating Fuller with Hester's character on multiple levels. Despite his extensive research, Mitchell's theory is speculative and lacks validity in the sense that the actual details of Hawthorne and Fuller's relationship are unknown.

However, Hester's feminine utility, noticeable through her extensive needle work and service to the sick aligns her character with Fuller's ideology. Hester's social agency is derived through the development of a "spiritual strength," explained by Nina Auerbach in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, that "does not transcend her fall but arises from it" (166). Hester transforms the stigma of the letter A on her dress into "the symbol of her calling [...] so much power to do and power to sympathize [...] they said it meant Able" (*Scarlet* 539). In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is explained that

the tendency of fate and fortunes had been to set [Hester] free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, despair and Solitude! These had been her teachers, —stern and wild ones, —and they had made her strong" (559).

Hawthorne did not attend Fuller's 18<sup>th</sup> Boston Conversation. If he had, however, he would have heard her assertions on the value of transcending personal pain:

[pain] must be acknowledged & accepted & allowed to act so as to be met by thought & feeling—Those who have not suffered have not *lived as yet*. The happiness that is worth anything was not that which arose out of ignorance of evil—or of shuffling it aside or turning the back on it—but out of looking it in the face—accepting it—suffering it—yet feeling it was finite before the infinite Soul.”  
 (“Boston” 180)

If not for the fact that Fuller's Conversation occurred nearly ten years before the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, based on content alone, it could be reasoned that she was describing circumstances relating to Hester Prynne. Hawthorne writes Prynne as a woman who has suffered yet prevailed, working through her shortcomings and looking her sin/scarlet letter “in the face” by “accepting it—and suffering it.” Instead of internalizing the social stigma that places her outside of societal acceptance, Hester proactively involves herself in the community, proving herself to be “so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted” (539). When the magistrate doubts her parental ability to morally guide her daughter, Hester explains that the scarlet letter, which she calls “this badge” has “taught me—it daily teaches me—it is teaching me at this moment—lessons whereof my child may be wiser and better” (511). In these ways, Hester accepts the scarlet letter as representing her condemned actions, as opposed to condemning her entire existence as evil and/or unworthy. In other words, Hester's sins are “finite before the Infinite soul.”



Perhaps an even more direct correlation of Hester's thoughts with Fuller's prose is demonstrated through Hester's questioning if society is even capable of actualizing a feminist reality:

Indeed the same dark question often arose in her mind, with reference to the whole race of womankind. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled [...] She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society must be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (541)

Hester's words, intended to reflect her thoughts on the seventeenth century, show her as distinctly aware of a woman's position in the nineteenth century. It's difficult not to recognize the similarities in this passage with Fuller's text. Fuller's denouncement of the French Revolution employs the same pessimism as Hester's lament in relation to gender equality:

As men become aware that few men have had a fair chance, they are inclined to say that no women have had a fair chance. The French Revolution, that strangely disguised angel, bore witness in favor of woman, but interpreted her claims no less ignorantly than those of man. Its idea of happiness did not rise above outward enjoyment, unobstructed by the tyranny of others. The title it gave

was citizen, citoyenne, and it is not unimportant to women that even this species of equality was awarded her. Before she could be condemned to perish on the scaffold for treason, not as a citizen, but as a subject. The right with which this title invested a human-being, was that of bloodshed and license. (*Woman* 12)

Throughout *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller argues for the recognition of women's worth, while simultaneously denouncing man's will to do so. Fuller describes the difficulty in achieving "justice to the interests of women [...] when not one man in the million, shall I say? No, not in the hundred million can rise above the belief that woman was made *for man*" (emphasis in original; 20). Just as Hester Prynne believes that ending men's "long hereditary habit" of oppressing women would require "the whole system of society" to be rebuilt, Fuller, too, believes female oppression to be indoctrinated within the "hundred million men" who consider women destined for subservience. Hester's point mirrors Fuller's in that true change would require total destruction of the current system.

Additionally, Hester's belief that it is not reform, but rather a complete restructuring of society that is necessary for gender equality arguably places her somewhere within the Enlightenment Feminist camp. Hester's "migratory flight that is unusual for her kind" is largely situated not only in her ability to rise above the social stigma imposed upon her by the scarlet letter, but also in her clarity to discern the structural forces that serve to keep her oppressed. It is Hester's physical and intellectual strength matched with her ability to sustain an existence as a single mother that challenges gender stereotypes relegating women to a state of subservient mental and

physical dependency on men. Furthermore, the most iconoclastic aspect of Hester's life conceivably resides in her daughter, Pearl, who is far from a stereotypical female child.

## The Scarlet Letter/ Pearl

Pearl is aesthetically and theoretically representative of Fuller's metaphorical bird who wants to "soar and sing." In *The Scarlet Letter*, when the Good Master Wilson attempts to "draw Pearl betwixt his knees" to test her "Christian nurture," Pearl, "looking like a wild, tropical bird, of rich plumage, ready to take flight into open air" escapes through an open window and perches on an upper step (511). This is just one of many examples of Pearl's defiance of authoritative power. Pearl is written to not only defy gender norms through her brazen behavior and lack of "feminine" propriety, but to also challenge the societal structure through her alternative value system.

T. Walter Herbert Jr. writes, "Little Pearl is made to enact the qualities that most troubled Hawthorne in his daughter [Una]" (287). Herbert is responding to Hawthorne's notes, written in the months preceding his writing *The Scarlet Letter*, that detail his concerns about Una's behavior:

[T]here is something that almost frightens me about the child—I know not whether elfish or angelic, but, at all events, supernatural. She steps so boldly into the midst of everything, shrinks from nothing, has such a comprehension of everything, seems at times to have but little delicacy, and anon shows that she possesses the finest essence of it; now so hard, now so tender; now so perfectly unreasonable, soon again so wise. In short, I now and then catch an aspect of her, in which I cannot believe her to be my own human child, but a spirit strangely mingled with good and evil, haunting the house where I dwell. (*American* 430-1)

On a variety of levels, Pearl's character mirrors Una. The performance and display of natural power from both Pearl and Una defy gender norms for their times, respectively. Furthermore, attributes such as "boldness, hardness and unshrinking comprehension of everything" would be identified as masculine in both time periods. Hawthorne sets up, as Herbert claims, an "unstable fusion of feminism and misogyny" within the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* (Herbert 285). Hester is redeemed through demonstrating selfless feminine utility: she embroiders, cares for the sick, and raises her child. Pearl, however, challenges female essentialism by displaying male traits and rejecting society's expectations. She survives outside of society because her existence is stigmatized. Not only are the circumstances of her conception considered sinful, but her lack of adherence to normative behavior/performance for a child and female challenges the dominant social structure. Moreover, Pearl is able to connect with the natural world because "the mother-forest, and [the] wild things it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child" (562).

It is important to note that Pearl's "wildness," in no way indicates that she is being dishonest or immoral. On the contrary, she proves to be more high-minded than Hester and Dimmesdale—but in a progressive way, unattached to tradition and/or religion. Her moral tenacity is demonstrated in her disapproval of Hester and Dimmesdale's plan to escape the town, as well as her ability to recognize Robert Chillingworth for the manipulative adversary that he is.

It is made clear in the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter* that while Hester Prynne stays in Boston, Pearl, now in early womanhood, is no longer a resident; Hester receives letters, assumed to be from her daughter, with “armorial seals...unknown to English heraldry” (592). The victory is that Pearl has moved past the “worn out” Puritan soil. She came into the lives of Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth as a scandal. The effects she has on them, however, are nothing short of incredible. Each one of these adults is saved by Pearl’s unconventional mind. She taught Hester the meaning of love, Dimmesdale the virtue of honesty, and Chillingworth the value of generosity. The narrative expounds on the historical beginnings of New England settlers, noting that “[t]heir immediate posterity, the generation next to the early immigrants, wore the blackest shade of Puritanism, and so darkened the national visage with it, that all subsequent years have not sufficed to clear it up” (577).

The birth of Pearl, with its sinful connotation, combined with her natural supernatural spirit, her devotion to honesty, and her defiance of societal and gender norms, serve to swing the pendulum of humanity in the opposite direction from the “blackest shade” of intolerance. The hidebound national visage will arguably be improved by Pearl’s contribution in the form of social evolution. Her ability to effect such change, Pearl’s “aspect of infinite variety [that...] could not be made amendable to rules” as written by Hawthorne, precisely exemplifies her defiance of universal norms (500). Both Hester Prynne and Pearl demonstrate alternative feminine identities that denounce a universal gender model and therefore render *The Scarlet Letter* as contributory to a feminist discourse.

## **The Blithedale Romance/ Zenobia**

It is possible that the most notable character in Hawthorne's oeuvre to resemble Margaret Fuller is Zenobia of *The Blithedale Romance*. Not only have critics compared Zenobia's physical characteristics with Fuller's, but many believe Zenobia's personality traits are written to specifically reflect Margaret Fuller's persona. Contrary to prevailing criticism, I argue that Zenobia's resemblance with Fuller is a reinscription rather than a renunciation of Fuller's ideals. In other words, I contest that Hawthorne's intention was to insult and/or criticize Fuller and, instead, posit that Zenobia's character construction is conceivably an homage to Fuller's feminism.

In her essay, "Margaret Fuller As Hawthorne's Zenobia: The Problem of Moral Accountability In Fictional Biography," Louise D. Cary states that the "portrait of Fuller is so thinly disguised that readers of 1852 immediately noticed the resemblance" (32). Cary believes that Hawthorne degrades Margaret Fuller's feminist image in *The Blithedale Romance*, in that "Zenobia's desire for Hollingsworth causes her to be so easily dominated by him that she deserts her principles with an abandon that is hardly credible, and indeed kills herself, presumably because her eyes have been opened [...] to the mockery of her own idealism" (32). Cary positions Hawthorne's criticism of Fuller in Miles Coverdale's questioning the integrity of Zenobia's feminism when he states:

what amused and puzzled me was that women, however intellectually superior, so seldom disquiet themselves about the rights and wrongs of their sex unless their own individual affections chance to lie in idleness, or to be ill at ease. They are not natural reformers, but become such by the pressure of exceptional misfortune. I could measure Zenobia's

inward trouble by the animosity with which she took up the general quarrel of woman against man. (85)

Cary contends, in a biographical context, Hawthorne's motivation is personal, and that he sets out to defame Margaret Fuller's character by criticizing Zenobia's feminism as unauthentic; Coverdale's accusation that "[Zenobia] becomes a spokesperson for women's rights" because she has "trouble getting and keeping a man," is a jab, Cary posits, directed at Zenobia, with an ultimate target of Fuller.

Although Cary maintains, by association, the depiction of Zenobia degrades Fuller's character, her point of view remains highly speculative. Furthermore, it is reductive to minimize Zenobia as an ineffectual character. On the contrary, Zenobia is strong in her convictions, challenging Coverdale in her declaration,

It is my belief—yes, and my prophecy, should I die before it happens—that, when my sex shall receive its rights, there will be ten eloquent women, where now there is one eloquent man. Thus far, no woman in the world has ever spoken out her whole heart and her whole mind. The mistrust and disapproval of the vast bulk of society throttles us, as with two gigantic hands at our throats! We mumble a few weak words, and leave a thousand better ones unsaid. You let us write a little, it is true, on a limited range of subjects. But the pen is not for women. Her power is too natural and immediate. It is with the living voice, alone, that she can compel the world to recognize the light of her intellect and the depth of her heart! (84)



Zenobia's words are not only forceful and direct, they reflect the assertive and righteous feminist ideology found in Margaret Fuller's writing. In his essay "Margaret Fuller's Rhetoric of Transformation," Jeffrey Steele claims that by the time Fuller was publishing on the rights of women, she

had reached a point in her development where she began exploring the possibility that American women might also be able to achieve self-reliance by transforming themselves. The first step toward such transformation was the articulation of grief at the damage caused by restrictive gender codes. (282)

It could be argued that through Zenobia's death, which serves to silence her, Hawthorne communicates the grief caused by restrictive gender codes. More importantly, however, he positions Zenobia's feminist voice to live on through the narrative, made apparent in the textual space he dedicates to her beliefs.

Considering *The Blithedale Romance* was published three years after Margaret Fuller's death, Zenobia's resemblance to Fuller is conceivably a tribute to Fuller's ideology, as opposed to Cary's conception of Zenobia as a slight to Fuller's character. Zenobia's declaration recalls Fuller's claims that

[A] sign of the times is furnished by the triumphs of female authorship. These have been great and constantly increasing. Women have taken possession of so many provinces for which men have pronounced them unfit, that though these still declare there are some inaccessible to them, it is difficult to say just *where* they must stop. Whether much or little has been done or will be done, whether women will add to the talent of

narration, the power of systemizing, whether they will carve marble, as well as draw and paint is not important. But that it should be acknowledged that they have intellect which needs developing; that they should not be considered complete, if beings of affection and habit alone, is important. (*Woman* 56)

Although Fuller details the “triumphs” of renown female writers throughout history within *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, she asserts that *all* women must have the opportunity for intellectual development. Again, Fuller opposes a gender universal, arguing for unlimited variation and accessibility in relation to women’s provinces/life choices. Even though Zenobia denounces the written word as inferior to a woman’s “living voice,” her sentiment highlights the necessity of “compel[ling] the world to recognize the light of [a woman’s] intellect” (*Blithedale* 84). Furthermore, Zenobia’s treatment of Coverdale in no way implies that she submits to him and, as Laura Tanner states, “[w]hen examined carefully, the crucial scenes in which Zenobia apparently sacrifices her feminist ideals are in fact highly ambiguous situations which Coverdale deliberately manipulates to indict Zenobia” (9). In other words, it’s possible Coverdale’s influence as narrator persuades the reader to overlook the intensity of Zenobia’s words.

Zenobia challenges Coverdale on numerous occasions, giving one of her most profound responses when Coverdale’s voyeurism is revealed. A close reading shows not only Coverdale’s propensity for unreliability, but also Zenobia’s bitter repudiation of the patriarchal powers serving to oppress her. Tanner explains “Coverdale's rapid gloss of Zenobia's response immediately turns the reader's attention from her words to his interpretation of them” (9). Coverdale questions Zenobia about Priscilla and

Hollingsworth, claiming his inquisitiveness is based on “a sense of some duty to preform.” Zenobia’s retort is swift and cutting:

Oh, this stale excuse of duty [...] I have often heard it before, from those who sought to interfere with me, and I know precisely what it signifies. Bigotry; self-conceit; an insolent curiosity; a meddling temper; a cold-blooded criticism, founded on a shallow interpretation of half-perceptions; a monstrous skepticism in regard to any conscience or any wisdom, except one’s own; a most irreverent propensity to thrust Providence aside, and substitute one’s self in its awful place—out of these, and other motives as miserable as these, comes your idea of duty! (118)

Zenobia’s words discredit Coverdale just as much, if not more so, than any of his do to her. This is masked, though, through Coverdale’s position in the text as narrator, as he is able to steadily feed the reader his thoughts—regardless of how “truthful” they actually are.

Coverdale’s thoughts aim to undermine Zenobia’s credibility. It could be that Hawthorne privileges Coverdale’s perspective within the narrative; I would argue, however, in relation to *The Blithedale Romance*, privileging one character’s perspective over another’s is largely based on reader interpretation, and is perhaps most dependent on personal bias as opposed to how the text, itself, is written. Before Coverdale confronts Zenobia in the city, he reveals “I reasoned against [Zenobia], in my secret mind, and strove to keep my footing. [...] I malevolently beheld the true character of the woman,

passionate, luxurious, lacking simplicity, not deeply refined, incapable of pure and perfect taste” (114). As Mary Suzanne Schriber writes in her essay “Justice to Zenobia”:

Coverdale’s gentility, conventionality, and preconceptions of women must be taken into account. [...] to read Hawthorne aright we must take pains to read Coverdale accurately. When Coverdale’s character and the biases Hawthorne builds into it are considered, we must frequently amend Coverdale’s judgments. (66)

Coverdale’s criticism of Zenobia’s feminism is conceivably a device used by Hawthorne to develop Coverdale’s character, as well as Zenobia’s. Presuming Coverdale is a stand-in for Hawthorne, or even that Coverdale serves as a vehicle for Hawthorne to voice his personal opinions in relation to Margaret Fuller’s feminism seems an erroneous assumption. If anything, Hawthorne consistently makes space for Zenobia to express feminist ideals.

In one of the final chapters, “The Three Together,” Zenobia speaks passionately, telling Hollingsworth:

At least I am a woman—with every fault, it may be, that a woman ever had, weak, vain, unprincipled (like most of my sex; for our virtues, when we have any, are merely impulsive and intuitive) passionate, too, and pursuing my foolish and unattainable ends, by indirect and cunning, though absurdly chosen means, as an hereditary bond-slave must [...] (150)

While Zenobia’s words may appear to be self-deprecating, Schriber posits that Zenobia, “in her anger [...] expresses, in hyperbolic fashion, what she knows Coverdale and

Hollingsworth think women to be, only to drive home [...] a feminist charge against male society—namely, that their images of women finally make women slaves” (73).

Zenobia’s use of this rhetoric recalls Fuller’s stance that

there exists in the minds of men tone of feeling towards women as towards slaves, such as is expressed in the common phrase, “Tell that to the women and children,” that the infinite soul can only work through them in already ascertained limits; that the gift of reason, man’s highest prerogative, is allotted to them in much lower degree; that they must be kept from mischief and melancholy by being constantly engaged in active labor, which is to be furnished and directed by those better able to think.

*(Woman 18)*

Just as Zenobia critiques the misogynistic belief that woman is “less than” man in her satirical declaration, Fuller details the same concept, equating man’s relationship with woman as that of master to slave. Zenobia is far from capitulating to Hollingsworth, and instead, vehemently communicates her contempt.

Zenobia’s determination and strength engages in a feminist discourse within the text and also with the readership. To blame Zenobia for her demise is to hold her accountable for the structural forces that serve to oppress her. In creating Zenobia’s character, I do not believe Hawthorne’s intention was to insult Margaret Fuller. Instead, I argue that Hawthorne, because of the textual space given to Zenobia’s feminist beliefs, understood the significance of her ideology. In the very least, Hawthorne’s depiction of the societal underpinnings on which Zenobia’s weaknesses are based serves as social commentary in relation to female subjugation.

## Conclusion

While it appears Hawthorne has written Fuller's ideology into his fiction, there isn't any textual or historical evidence to prove that Hester Prynne, Pearl, and/or Zenobia should be regarded as direct representations of Fuller. Moreover, it would be specious to assume Hawthorne himself is fully represented by Coverdale and/or Dimmesdale. Henry James speaks to this issue when he writes:

It is idle to inquire too closely whether Hawthorne had Margaret Fuller in mind when constructing the figure of [Zenobia]. There is no strictness in the representation by novelists of persons who have struck them in life [...] The original gives hints, but the writer does what he likes with them.  
(130)

When reading Hawthorne's *Notebooks*, it becomes evident that he is influenced and affected by the world around him. For instance, Hawthorne's *American Notebooks* include an entry titled "For the Want of Sympathy" in which he details "a search for the dead body of a drowned girl" (221). Just as Henry James reasons, "the original gives hints," many of the specific details describing this young woman's dead body are recreated in the description of Zenobia's death in *The Blithedale Romance*. Furthermore, Margaret Fuller also died by drowning, adding to the Zenobia/Fuller correlation. The end result, however, is a character depiction created through the imaginative process of the author. Regarding literary characters showing similarities to actual people, and in this case, Margaret Fuller, it seems most productive to interpret these parallels with the viewpoint that they represent only a partial perspective in relation to the character as a

whole. All likenesses aside, Zenobia, Hester, and Pearl are all creations of Hawthorne's imagination and are likely to be most appreciated within that context.

In terms of feminist and gender studies, it's commonplace to regard the "personal as political." As Hawthorne's characters depict a range of personal variability, the act of synthesizing Margaret Fuller's feminist theory with Hawthorne's fiction functions to link the personal with the political. Fuller's theory and rhetoric is reflected throughout Hawthorne's fiction; his construction of unconventional female characters substantiates the notion that the "infinite vagaries of human diversity" exist beyond binary categorization (Rubin 248). In relation to this point, Nina Baym states:

In using this symbolism, Hawthorne returns [in the *Blithedale Romance*] to an important concept in *The Scarlet Letter*: the idea that man's liberation and fulfillment require his accepting a more fully sexual image of woman than the culture allows. The woman's sexuality (she is a secondary being in a patriarchal system) is suppressed in society as a means of inhibiting the male; both sexes suffer. ("Passion" 289)

In the same vein, Fuller's "decentering of authority and multiplication of female roles [within *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*] makes an important political statement in an age when women found their choices and their roles severely limited" (Steele 287). Fuller is aware that female oppression and rigid gender specifications operated in ways that degraded both sexes. Fuller's theory of the "great radical dualism" that blurs gender distinctions and opposes universality, simultaneously allows for fluidity between the masculine and the feminine. This ideology is in response to oppressive societal gender norms, many of which are addressed in Hawthorne's writing, as well as in Fuller's. In the

specific ways detailed within this study, Hawthorne's fiction and Fuller's prose challenge the existence of a universal gender model, and moreover, position both of them within in a feminist discourse as proponents of gender equality.



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## **Vita**

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