



Discipline and Punishment in the Scarlet Letter: Based on Foucault's Disciplinary Theory

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Abstract

Most of Hawthorne's works were created from the 1830s to the 1860s, roughly corresponding to the reform era in the United States. The Scarlet Letter sharply reflects the impact of punishment and discipline on Hester and other Boston residents in society. Based on Michel Foucault's theory of discipline and punish, this thesis analyzes the causes and people's attitudes towards punishment and discipline. This thesis explores how the power system in The Scarlet Letter works. Power holds the supreme decision-making right, and laws, morals, religions, and other systems construct and embodies the operation of power. Hester was punished and disciplined. At the same time, the self-discipline of Hester and, with the attention of members of society everywhere, in turn, strengthened the operation of power and shaped a discipline system. The meaning of this thesis is to convey the importance of being critical and alert because discipline is everywhere and everyone is an individual with an independent mind and free will.

Keywords

The Scarlet Letter, Foucault, discipline, punishment

1. Analysis

1.1 Discipline and Punishment of Hester

1.1.1 Reasons

The Scarlet Letter tells the story of the protagonist, Hester, who committed adultery with the priest Dimmesdale and was punished by a scarlet "A" imposed by the external society and disciplined by her inner self. From the narrative in the novel, Hester was punished because she committed adultery. Shang Xiaojin (2018) mentioned that the law passed in May 1694 required the following punishments for those who committed adultery: sitting on the gallows for one hour with a noose around their neck, being severely flogged not more than 40 times, wearing the capital "A" for life. The purpose was that others can see it no matter where the sinner goes. Thus, wearing the letter was accompanied by physical punishment, but Hester was not physically tortured. Her punishment included imprisonment, public display on the torture platform, and wearing a red letter "A". Therefore, wearing the red letter constituted the focus of the entire novel. The red letter A is a symbol of punishment. It is the initials of the word "adultery", which explicitly refers to the crime for which it is to be punished. This type of punishment is directed at the mind first, and then the body is controlled by controlling the mind. It is a punishment that penetrates deep into the soul, mind, will, and desire of the person who breaks the social norm and makes him constantly examine his behavior. Whenever a crime happens, punishment comes with it. This process embodies the discourse of the law, showing signs that are linked both to ideas and reality.

Hester made her way through the crowd to the execution ground at the west end of the market in obedience to the magistrate's orders. She was sentenced to stand on the scaffold for three hours as a public display. She was tasked with proclaiming and proving her charges, making this crime and justice known to the public. The whole process from conviction to punishment is a process of all-around denial of Hester. In this way, legislators not only seek to control crime, but also to control individuals, not just their behavior, but also their current, future, and possible situations. The use of disciplinary measures is not only to achieve the effect of suppression, prevention, and exclusion but also to maintain the effective operation of the disciplinary mechanism and its functions. It is a kind of obligation or imprisonment imposed by the ruling class on the "powerless". At the same time, punishment measures also spread through the ruling class to control and punish the whole society.

1.1.2 Hester's Attitude

From the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century, whether inside or outside the judiciary, whether in the daily punishment practice or the critique of the current system, we will find a new strategy for the operation of the power of punishment. Its primary goal is to make the punishment and repression of illegal activities a regular function, synchronized with social development. Still, the purpose is to make punishment more universal and necessary and to embed the power of punishment into society. As written in *The Scarlet Letter*: Whenever Hester lifted her eyes toward the balcony, the miserable woman grew pale and trembled. The sympathy she might hope to find lay in the larger and warmer hearts of the multitude. In terms of quantity, the punishment of wearing the scarlet letter for life does not have complicated implementation procedures or cumbersome penalties, and it does not seem to be very harsh. But the scarlet letter shaped the rest of Hester's life and became the symbol of her life. The punishment, making herself feel that she was evil unconsciously and doesn't deserve a happy life, had been in full effect, and had kept her in check, depriving her of her optimism about life and everything around her.

Lamberton (2017) mentioned that every trial was different and yet it was still the very same that was so unimaginably painful to endure. Even in the future, she would be faced with the same burden to carry, and never fling it down. As the days accumulated, and the years added, they saw their misery piled high onto the heap of shame. In the Puritan society in which Hester lived, she undoubtedly became a typical example of a disciplined believer. She directly saw and felt the scene where she became a harmful teaching material in her life.

In any society, the human body is controlled by highly extreme power. Those powers impose on it various pressures, restrictions, or obligations. A "mechanics of power" is emerging. It prescribes how people can control the physical bodies of other people, through chosen techniques, with a predetermined speed and effect so that the latter conform not only to the wishes of the former in terms of "what to do" but also in terms of "how to do it." Hester felt in her mind that her entire world, both before and after, was connected to this spot, as if with the point that connected it all. Hester was questioned on the execution platform and received contempt from the public. She never had hope for those in power. Her crime was fully revealed on the execution platform, where it became a place where her painful memories could be awakened, and it became a symbol of sin.

1.2 Changes in Boston Residents' Attitudes toward Hester

1.2.1 The Reasons

The execution ritual Hester endured was only supposed to show the deterrent power of religious law, but it had a carnival aspect. On the morning that Hester was to accept the punishment of appearing on the scaffold, a large crowd of Boston residents had gathered on Prison Street early. They had a heated discussion about Hester's crime and how she should be punished more brutally. The local Boston school also gave students a day off because Hester was to be punished. People looked at her with stern eyes in the market and mocked her with unkind words. Pu Lixin (2015) mentioned that if the punishment is carried out in secret, it isn't significant, even if it is widely known. The purpose of public executions was to emulate, not only to make the public aware that the slightest crime could be punished but also to evoke terror by the use of the power to vent anger at the sinner. People are interested in the moment when the truth comes out: every word, every cry, and the duration of pain, all of which constitute a symbol of discipline. On the one hand, the populace was called a spectator, who came together to watch public executions and public confessions. The scaffold used to show the prisoners to the public can be set up in the square or by the roadside so that the public can hear and witness, making them witnesses to the punishment. On the other hand, the

people also have the right to participate. When the prisoner was paraded through the streets and displayed in various ways to show the enormity of his crimes, he was deliberately offered to the public to insult him and sometimes even attack him. The widespread desire for revenge is summoned as a secondary component of legal punishment.

After Hester returned to Boston, the scarlet letter became something daunting and awe-inspiring. The criminal law system reformers are eager to ban police propaganda. That's why there's so much interest in what is, to some extent, folklore about illegal activity. This is also why these warning propaganda materials lose their meaning when the political function of illegal civil activities changes.

1.2.2 The Impact of Changing Attitudes among Boston Residents on Hester

Foucault once said with emotion (2021): Today, we live in the surveillance society that Bentham planned. The design of this panopticon ensures that while the gaze is performed, the power is automatically exercised. It does not matter who exercises power, and everyone can play the role of a guard. Power has become visible, but it cannot be known for sure.

After she was released from prison, Hester was on such a network and would be monitored by society anytime and anywhere. Hester was at the center of the surveillance, under the eyes of all sorts of observers. Whether or not these eyes were present, she felt the pressure that the disciplinary society put on her all the time. Because of this pressure, she learned to monitor herself.

By such a decision, the magistrates put Hester under the surveillance of society, and the leaders of the colonies knew this well and knew that at a particular time, power was more dependent on observation than punishment and that it resulted in "spirit to spiritual power." In observation, power gradually diffuses, hides in daily life, and progressively converges with morality, making people feel that it is not beyond the disciplinary role of power but violates the character's restraint. In this way, power becomes ubiquitous, and ubiquitous power turns society into a disciplinary society. Then, the previously mechanical violence and power become mild and continuously visible disciplines.

In a word, the punishment for Hester has a dual effect. It not only allows the viewer to accept discipline and instruction again but also makes Hester recognize and accept discipline and instruction, making her feel deeply responsible, guilty, and educated and allowing her to reshape herself. While the principle of the supremacy of law may appear to limit the exercise of power in society, widespread panopticism permits it to operate a machine that is both grand and fine-grained below the level of law to maintain, strengthen and expand the asymmetry of power and destroy the boundaries defined by law.

2. Conclusion

"Modern power is capillary-like. It does not emanate from a central source but pervades every tiny part and seemingly tiniest extremity of the social organism, from which no one can escape." Foucault took this to reflect more deeply on some of the theories and institutions that we still take for granted today. We live under this discipline, and there seems to be no way to resist. Foucault put forward the problem but did not give concrete solutions so that we will always be critical and vigilant. When we want to break away from social stereotypes in our lives or explore a path to success that is not in the ordinary sense, we can more clearly see and reflect on the power of social discipline to make decisions that genuinely match our inner thoughts.

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