



Interpreting American Literary Works and Improving English Literary Competence—On Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

The Scarlet Letter is the masterpiece of Nathaniel Hawthorne who is an American romantic writer. The novel tells a tragic love story during the Puritan rule of North American colonies. The female protagonist, Hester Prynne is arranged to marry the old and weak Roger Chillingworth, and their marriage is devoid of love. In her loneliness, Prynne falls in love with the young, handsome, and erudite minister Arthur Dimmesdale and gives birth to their daughter Pearl. Prynne is punished publicly but she refuses to reveal the father of her child. Many critics hold the opinion that what Hawthorne advocates in *The Scarlet Letter* is the Puritan doctrine of original sin and Puritan morality since his thought is deeply affected by Puritan ideology. However, the authors conclude that Hawthorne's religious thought is both complex and pluralistic. What he expresses in his work *The Scarlet Letter*, is not Puritanism but non-Puritanism and anti-Puritanism.

Keywords

Puritanism; anti-Puritanism; religious thought

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne has been considered to be a great American novelist and his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* is a wonderful work. In the novel, Hawthorne discloses that religious bias twists human nature and suppresses the natural needs of human beings, which results in people thinking in one way and behaving in another. This description not only criticizes Puritan domination of human thoughts but also hints at people's complex and contradictory psychology, crisis of old morality, and falsehood of goodwill. *The Scarlet Letter* leads people to think in profound contradiction: How to eliminate people's mental crises? The social significance of *The Scarlet Letter* is obvious and great. To correctly and clearly know Hawthorne's thoughts and find the nature of the crisis, I have made a detailed study of *The Scarlet Letter* and the author. Through a careful analysis, I have got a rough understanding of Hawthorne's religious thought and found his non-Puritanism and anti-Puritanism.

2. An Analysis of Hawthorne's Religious Thought

The creation of the leading characters in a novel is the main means of expressing the theme. The nature, moral character, and mental attitude are usually the main content of the theme. As a sensitive writer, Hawthorne creates a lot of vivid figures and all of them embody Hawthorne's thinking of history, criticism of reality, and pursuit of the future. Also, these figures are very helpful for us to know Hawthorne's religious thought.

2.1 Hester

The heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, is a beautiful woman who is strong-willed. Because she is dissatisfied with her marriage and bold in pursuit of a happy life, she falls in love with her pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale in their contact with each other and gives birth to their daughter, Pearl. Therefore, Hester is given the charge of adultery. But the figure of Hester we see throughout the whole novel is more a Madonna than a criminal. The impression of Hester is as follows after appearing on the scene.

“Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, and object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was so redeem the world. Here, there was the trait of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman’s beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 56)

Let’s make a further analysis of Hester. In the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester’s spirit of revolt can be seen everywhere. When standing on the pillory scaffold, Hester publicly refuses to reveal the identity of her lover. “Never.” “I will not speak.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 68). Then Hester vividly remembers the scenes from her childhood and girlhood to her unhappy marriage. Just like many other women, Hester’s marriage is also arranged by her parents, and at the very beginning of the marriage, she is robbed of the right to live a happy life. Hester and his husband, Chillingworth both clearly know their marriage is false. When asked in prison, Hester answers frankly, “Thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt not love, nor feigned any.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 74). Although Hester doesn’t directly point out that an unhappy marriage is the cause of the affair, the connection between them is clearly presented before the readers. Hester is determined to escape his unhappy marriage. She continues to refuse to tell her lover in prison when faced with her husband’s question. “Ask me not! That thou shalt never know!” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 75). Besides, “Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most somber hue; with only that one ornament—the scarlet letter.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 83). And it seems that Hester has submitted to the suppressed religion and common customs. Indeed, to survive one has to conform to the environment and follow the common customs; at least, one has to do so on the surface. In fact, Hester’s heart is still filled with zeal, love, and the pursuit of beauty which has been fully expressed by the scarlet letter “A” on the breast of her gown.

“In fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborately embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter ‘A’. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 89)

And when Hester realizes that Pearl is the scarlet letter in another form, the scarlet letter endows with life, she expresses her feelings through Pearl.

“Hester, in contriving the child’s garb, had allowed the gorgeous tendencies of her imagination their full play; arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic, of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread. The mother herself—as if the red ignominy were so deeply scorched into her brain, that all her conceptions assumed its form—had carefully wrought out the similitude, lavishing many hours of morbid ingenuity, to create an analogy between the object of her affection, and the emblem of her guilt and torture. But, in truth, Pearl was the one, as well as the other; and only in consequence of that identity had Hester contrived so perfectly to represent the scarlet letter in her appearance.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 102)

The scarlet “A” is just like a brand that is stamped on Hester’s heart; meanwhile, in Hester’s eyes, it is also a brand of love, which stands for her lover “Arthur”. When she steps out of the prison-door, Hester’s suffering doesn’t end but just begins. She has been able to leave the Puritan community for there is no restriction of her condemnation within the limits of the Puritan settlement and Hester can be free to return to her birthplace or to any other European land and hide her character and identity under new surroundings. But she still chooses to stay in the place for her lover.

The above-mentioned revolt is silent and it’s the first time for Hester to put her spirit of revolt into effect that she spares no efforts to defend her motherhood. After living in solitude for seven years, Hester not only hasn’t been crushed but also has become more determined and mature. She has deeply understood life, society, herself, and others and her personality has also become complete. Now, she begins to challenge to the officials’ indifference to motherhood and deprivation of

mother's rights. When rumor comes that Pearl will be taken away from her in the name of receiving better moral and religious elements for ultimate salvation, Hester is full of concern and sets forth to visit Governor Bellingham. Confronted with high pressure from the governor, Hester firmly defends her motherhood.

“Hester caught hold of Pearl, and drew her forcibly into her arms, confronting the old Puritan magistrate with almost a fierce expression. Alone in the world, cast off by it, and with this sole treasure to keep her heart alive, she felt that she possessed indefeasible rights against the world, and was ready to defend them to the death. ‘God gave me the child’ cried she. ‘He gave her, in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness!—She is my torture, nonetheless! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin? I will die first!... God gave her into my keeping, I will not give her up!’ Repeated Hester Prynne, raising her voice almost to a shriek.” (Hawthorne, 1994, pp. 112-113)

Here, the direct conflict between Hester and Puritan representatives further reveals Hester's spirit of revolt. Later, Hester's other behavior makes her spirit of revolt fully reveal to us. When Hester finds that Dimmesdale's soul is tortured by Chillingworth, she cannot keep silent and wait any longer. To destroy Chillingworth's plan of revenge and pursue a happy and free life, Hester risks severe condemnation to encourage her lover to leave the Puritan settlement with her and their daughter Pearl. This kind of bold idea is just an affirmation of inmost love and shows her determination and courage. For the love, she can suffer all shame and ridicule; for the love, she dares to experience all sadness and pains. Hawthorne describes it many times in the novel, which shows Hawthorne's praise for the finest and the holiest emotion in human nature. Without a doubt, Hawthorne holds a positive attitude to Hester who is a typical character of anti-Puritanism.

2.2 Dimmesdale

Contrasted with Hester, the figures of young minister Dimmesdale are dark. Hester is gradually rising, while Dimmesdale is falling and becoming paltrier and lamentable.

“Divine was the profession, at that ear, in which intellectual ability displayed itself far more than in political life; for—leave a higher motive out of the question—it offered inducements powerful enough, in the almost worshipping respect of the community, to win the most aspiring ambition into its service. Even political power was within the grasp of a successful priest.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 238)

Since religion plays a leading role in that society, young minister Dimmesdale lives in the upper circle and becomes a pure idol of his parishioners. His duty is to defend the system of Puritan morality, but he himself has violated it. Dimmesdale has been conscious of his sin. He has been struggling between the desire to continue in his ministry and his natural moral feeling that he should share Hester's shame, which costs him great suffering. Hawthorne describes more of what goes on in his troubled mind than he does in the case of Hester. In order not to lose his honor and high position, he has been unable to defeat his hypocrisy, self-respect, and egoism. For fear of being expelled from the then society, Dimmesdale hasn't enough courage to stand besides Hester and share her shame, let alone offer her father's love to Pearl and help Hester bring Pearl up. As a father, Dimmesdale seems to be a little lamentable.

“Pearl, that wild and flighty little elf, stole softly towards him, and, taking his hand in the grasp of both her own, laid her cheek against it, a caress so tender, and withal so unobtrusive, that her mother, who was looking on, asked herself, —‘Is that my Pearl?’ Yet she knew that there was love in the child's heart, although it mostly revealed itself in passion, and hardly twice in her lifetime had been softened by such gentleness as now.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 115)

Nothing is sweeter than the child's inmost intimacy for a father, While Dimmesdale looks flurried; “The minister looked round, laid his hand on the child's head, hesitated an instance, and then kissed her brow.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 74). Even though the kiss is purely out of a minister's normal manners, he is still very nervous for fear of betraying the intimate relationship with Pearl. At this time, “Litter Pearl's unwonted mood of sentiment lasted no longer ...” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 89). From Pearl's reaction we can see little Pearl has felt the minister's falter and fear, therefore, she no longer shows his zeal to him, “She laughed, and went capering down the hall ...” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 116). Here, we can sense Pearl's sneer at Dimmesdale. As a father, he daren't caress and kiss his child before others and perhaps he would forever lose the right to enjoy the love between father and daughter. Nothing is more sorrowful than this for a father.

Through Dimmesdale's behavior and the contrast with Pearl, Hawthorne successfully presents us with the figure of a

minister—flurried, hypocritical and coward. Besides, we can also consider it from the angle of religion. As a puritan and minister, Dimmesdale preaches before his parishioners and induces them to confess their sins to save their souls. But for himself, to keep status and a bright future, he hides his own sin deeply over the years. And before God and man, he has the appearance of being kind and pious to religion, publicly showing his “moral excellence” (Wuweiren, 1990, p. 58). All those ways of redemption that Dimmesdale designs for himself are all deceitful. On the pulpit, he condemns himself with obscure words.

“Dimmesdale well knew—subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was! —The light in which his vague confession would be viewed. He had striven to put a cheat upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but had gained only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame ...” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 114)

In the secret closet, he constantly tortures himself physically. On the scaffold, he directs the vain show of expiation. Even at last, Dimmesdale still couldn't clearly confess his sin. To portray Dimmesdale, Hawthorne adopts varied writing techniques including psychoanalysis, the author's aside, and bitter irony to criticize Dimmesdale's hypocrisy and cowardice. Hawthorne's negative attitude to Dimmesdale is clear.

“Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence: — “Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 260)

Through the character—Dimmesdale, Hawthorne makes a frontal attack to Puritanism, which awakens us again that Hawthorne is an anti-Puritan.

2.3 Pearl

Pearl is another important character in the story. She needn't make a choice about how to live, as the other central characters do. She simply reacts to her situation emotionally and mentally. She is graceful and beautiful, lively and imaginative but her bold and reckless acts trouble her mother—Hester. Hawthorne seems to agree with Hester's perception:

“The child couldn't be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 200)

Since Pearl was born, she has been a social outcast among the other children. Far away from Puritan society, she grows naturally and freely. Even the mother forest and its wild things which nourish all recognize a kindred in the human child. Several times in the novel Hawthorne mentions her being like a little witch, or an imp, or an elf. He also tells of her strange imaginative games—playing that weeds and trees are the Puritan children and their parents, who must be killed if she is to be safe. Pearl seems fiercely to train herself to struggle in a hostile world. Then what's the source of her hatred?

“The mother's impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life; and, however white and clear originally, they had taken the deep stains of crimson and gold, the fiery luster, the black shadow, and the untempered light, of the intervening substance. Above all, the warfare of Hester's spirit, at that epoch, was perpetuated in Pearl. She could recognize her wild, desperate, defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud- shapes of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart. They were now illuminated by the morning radiance of a young child's disposition, but, later in the day of earthly existence, might be prolific of the storm and whirlwind.” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 174)

With the growth of Pearl, her natural nature has become evidently incompatible with the then society; therefore, in the end, Pearl leaves New England and goes to Europe where she lives a happy life. Hawthorne's arrangement for Pearl shows his favoritism toward her. If Pearl hadn't left the Puritan settlement, she couldn't have been happy, which we can judge from her personality. Here, Hawthorne tries to escape reality, which is the flash of non-Puritanism in his thought.

Owing to the limitation of his time, Hawthorne's thought isn't mature. So occasionally we can read non-Puritanism and Puritanism out of his thoughts. The creation of Chillingworth betrayed this point.

2.4 Chillingworth

Hawthorne believes that the most serious sin is to violate the sanctity of a human heart. Chillingworth, the husband of

Hester, is an ugly and old scholar. He marries Hester but there is no happiness between them at all. Then Hester's unfaithfulness hurts the old man, which makes him decide to find Hester's partner and take revenge. Chillingworth is so intelligent that soon he finds Dimmesdale's secret and lives with him in the name of a doctor. On the surface, Chillingworth eagerly supplies help to the minister. And the two men are both lonely intellectuals, with every reason to be glad of intelligent companionship. Therefore, they seem to be living together in harmonious friendship. However, under the surface, the emotional reality is quite different from what it appears. Like a miner, Chillingworth tries his best to dig into the soil of the young man's heart and uses his knowledge to torture Dimmesdale spiritually until the minister dies on the scaffold.

In Hawthorne's eyes, Chillingworth violates the holy soul and breaks the law of God because only God can control man's soul and punish man's sin. This kind of Hawthorne's thought results from his bias toward religion. However, Hawthorne doesn't absolutely negate Chillingworth. He writes that Chillingworth leaves his considerable amount of property to Pearl, which somewhat surprises the readers. It also leaves some room for us to judge Chillingworth. In my opinion, Hawthorne's attitude to Chillingworth is ambiguous, which reflects Hawthorne's complex and plural thought.

3. Conclusion

Nina Baym said, "In any way, I couldn't believe Hawthorne was a Christian writer. His interest was clearly common, his doubt about religious belief was too obvious and his language was also publicly against the Bible. My students completely thought Hawthorne created Hester as a positive character, I couldn't refute because Hester undoubtedly had been a criminal considering from Christian angle" (Ian Ousby, 1979, p. 254). And through above detailed analysis of the four leading characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, the trend of Hawthorne's thought has been evident to us. What Hawthorne doesn't know affects him as well as what he thinks he knows, in two ways. One is Puritanism; the other is anti-Puritanism, between which is his non-Puritanism. In a word, Hawthorne's thought is mixed; therefore, *The Scarlet Letter* is multi-explanatory, which endows the novel with great charm.

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