

The Feminist Idea of Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter

Zinuo Zuo

North China Electric Power University (Baoding), Hebei, 071000, China

zuozinuo1999@163.com

Abstract

The scarlet letter was conceived by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was influenced by the first USA feminist movement in 1840s. Hence, the novel contained the consideration of the feminist idea. In this paper, the characters of both genders in the novel are analyzed and the comparisons of the characters are provided to demonstrate the feminist imprint of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Keywords

The scarlet letter, feminism, characters comparison.

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece The Scarlet Letter was first published in 1850. The novel concerns the life and struggle of a beautiful lady Hester Prynne after she committed adultery between 1642 to 1649. Although the story happened during an age when puritanism dominated the public's ideology and patriarchal society suppressed female's rights and status, the female character Hester actually possess a variety of merits and certain qualities that are scant in other male characters. As a protagonist in a world masterpiece, there is no doubt that Hester Prynne has both merits and flaws, which has been probed by an abundance of papers. However, this paper intends to illustrate her good virtues through comparison with other male figures to reflect Hawthorne's feminist idea.

2. Hester Prynne VS Arthur Dimmesdale: Bravery and Adamancy VS Cowardice and Weakness

Hester's first appearance in the novel was the most ignominious day in her life when a large number of the inhabitants of Boston gathered in the market place to witness her trial. Although she was in agony when facing the contempt and malicious judgment from the crowd, she still maintained a "haughty smile" to conceal her abashment. On the scaffold, both clergyman John Wilson and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale delivered convincing and persuasive speeches to elicit information of her lover and promised that her repentance may avail to take off her scarlet letter. But she was unyielding and rejects this offer.

"Never!" replied Hester Prynne, looking, not at Mr. Wilson, but into the deep and troubled eyes of the younger clergyman. "It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine." [1]

Not only did she refused to reveal his name in front of the public, but she also kept the secret when her husband who had escaped from the Indian tribe interrogated her in the prison. From the day she committed adultery to the time Arthur Dimmesdale confessed their crime in public, she never revealed this secret to anyone. The choice that she refused to reveal this secret can also be taken as a rebellion toward authority and patriarchy. She firmly believed

that her adultery was although a sin (in the puritan world) but had its own consecration, which offered her vital strength to endure all the sufferings. Although there was no restrictive clause to force her to stay within the puritan settlement, after her confinement was at end, she still stayed at the outskirts of the town with her daughter. No matter what was her reason to stay, this behavior itself required strength because the life in the future held great toils and burdens in store and the pain would only add up as time went by.

She raised pearl all on her own, replying on nothing but her handiwork. This was a difficult cause because although her art was sufficed to provide subsistence, pearl's existence was a torture for her. For Hester, pearl was more like an elf than a human, her smile, look, and her changing mode terrified her mother. What is more, the very first thing pearl noticed in her life was the scarlet letter on her mother's bosom. She showed great interest in the letter "A" during the whole novel. She would stare at it, throw flowers at it, place prickly burrs around it, and constantly ask questions about it. All these behaviors inflicted great pain on Hester.

Gazing at Pearl, Hester Prynne often dropped her work upon her knees, and cried out with an agony which she would fain have hidden, but which made utterance for itself betwixt speech and a groan—"O Father in Heaven--if Thou art still my Father--what is this being which I have brought into the world?" [1]

Although Hester was sometimes overwhelmed by pearl, she still did not willing to leave her and had some "decent people" to raised her. She took pearl to the governor's house, and pleading for pearl's stay, which is her another attempt to fight against the authority. In front of the reverend governor and clergyman, defying required great bravery. Contrary to Hester's bravery and adamancy, Arthur was man of weakness of cowardice. The perfect description for Arthur Dimmesdale is from pearl "*Thou was not bold!-thou wast not true*" [1].

As a devoted priest, he knew that adultery was sinful yet he could not resist the temptation of this passion, which is a reflection of his weakness. Although they both agreed what they did had a consecration of its own, he experienced regret and remorse everyday. The same mistake happened twice. When he met Hester in the forest, he agreed to leave and build another home, which was a choice that completely against his intention of keeping his secret: "guilty as they may be, retaining, nevertheless, a zeal for God's glory and man s welfare.[85]". Adultery is sin, running away from his responsibility is also a sin. Nevertheless, he still chose to escape, which is another reflection of his weakness. Consenting to leave is weak, feeling regret after making the promise of leave is cowardice. When he was back in town, he mood turned from excitement to terror.

"Am I mad? or am I given over utterly to the fiend? Did I make a contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood? And does he now summon me to its fulfilment, by suggesting the performance of every wickedness which his most foul Imagination can conceive?" [1]

The moment he committed adultery; he knew this is sinful. However, he did not dare to admit it and received just sentence, which was another reflection of his cowardice. From the beginning, he was afraid of being exposed, this is why he told the reverend John Wilson "*it were wronging the very nature of woman to force her to lay open her heart's secrets in such broad daylight, and in presence of so great a multitude.*"[1]. Meanwhile, he had his redemption. Unlike Hester, who was in trail publicly and sentenced to wear the scarlet letter forever, all his punishment was secretly conducted by himself. He had a secret closet where he piled scourge on his shoulder; He fasted until his knees trembled beneath him; He kept vigils night after night; and he even went to the scaffold and stood besides Hester and pearl. However, all these

redemptions were proceeded confidentially. When in the scaffold, pearl asked him whether they could stood there like this night at the next noon, he only replied: not then, the other day, at the great judgment day. From the end of the story, we know that “the great judgement day “does exist, but when he made this promise, did he had envisaged this exact day already? From the forest part where he accepted the idea to leave with Hester and pearl, the answer is obvious. Even when the “great judgement day” eventually came, which was the day he revealed himself and died, he still did not have the audacity to explicitly speak out that he was the lover of Hester, father of pearl. His weakness fully displays itself in the forest. During the meeting with Hester in the forest, he constantly required Hester to advise him what to do because he knew she was stronger than him. He thought he was the most miserable one because although people revered him, under the disguise of a priest, he was a sinner. However, when he realized that Roger Chillingworth knew Hester’s revealing, he was in horror of him exposing their secret. Even when they had agreed to leave together, he was still unable to speak it out. Hester had to speak “*what he vaguely hinted at, but dared not speak*” [1].

3. Hester Prynne VS Roger Chillingworth: Leniency VS Revengeful

From the first day Hester wearing the scarlet letter, Hester had been outcasts of the society. All the world had frowned on her for seven long years. However, she bore it all. She never left for good or hold resentment towards other people. Instead, she lived a humble, frugal and aesthetic life.

“In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished” [1]

But the contempt does not limit to this; Little puritan frequently reviled her and pearl with their tongues and flung mud at them when they saw them because they sensed something outlandish and unearthly in the mother and child.; She stretched her life to succor those who were less miserable than herself, but they often distained the hand that fed them. Ill-treated as she was, she still dedicated herself to her community. Hester could have apply her handiwork to more artful project, but she bestowed her time in charity, employing herself in making coarse garments for the poor as a penance. Frequent receiving of insult from those she helped did not prevent her sacrifice. Dames of elevated rank, likewise, entered into her door for her work but meanwhile leaving drops of bitterness and malice in her heart. However, Hester had schooled herself not to respond to these attacks. In all seasons of calamity, Hester went into the house of sufferers’ and took care of the sick. Step by step, her blameless purity of life and virtues won over the heart of the public, from ordinary men to the rulers and the wise and learned of the society. The meaning of the scarlet letter transformed to positive side, even to love.

Hester was the symbol of ignominy in the first place, but her leniency and devotion allowed her to regain respect from her people. However, old Roger Chillingworth led a quite the opposite life. He was a learned man, a well-respected doctor. But he only focused on hatred and revenge which turned him into a monster.

Roger Chillingworth was person who was wronged in the first place. He was held in captive on his way to Hester. When he finally met the woman who could offer him comfort and a home, she was on the scaffold receiving trial for adultery. From this perspective, it was only just for him to seek revenge. The problem is that instead of bringing them to the court, he seeks revenge on his own and carry it to extreme. When he entered into the jail to calm Hester and Pearl, he confessed that Hester is not the only sinner in this incident:

The reason is not far to seek. It was my folly, and thy weakness. I, a man of thought, - the bookworm of great libraries, - a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge, - what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own! Misshapen from my birth-hour, how could I delude myself with the idea that intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in a young girl's fantasy! [1]

From the beginning when Hester was still young, he persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side using her ignorance. He used Hester to compensate his void and hence stole her happiness. He knew it as Hester knew it perfectly. None the less, he still sought revenge. He forced Hester to keep their relationship a secret and embarked on the journey of revenge.

Revenge for Hester: In the prison, he cured Hester because he wanted her to carry the ignominious badge and suffered from its pain forever. Meanwhile, he forced Hester to keep their relationship under wraps so that he could secretly find out his lover and took revenge which cast worries and horrors on Hester's life. She could bear all the pains from others but the pain of watching Arthur in misery was overwhelming.

Revenge for Arthur Dimmesdale: Roger did not know the true identity was Arthur in the first place. But from his instinct as a doctor, he realized Arthur's poor health was partly attributed to something on his mind. Thus, he constantly remained by the priest's side, dug into the poor clergyman's heart, groping for his secret like a sexton delving into a grave. As a physician, he treated Arthur with all he could but only in order to prolong his mental suffering. He psychologically tortured Arthur to the extent that he had a nameless horror of him. He put the priest in such a miserable position that Hester could no longer bear it and suggested their escape. However, their plan was perceived by Roger and he gave them the final blow: boarding the ship with them and haunting them forever.

His revenge not only destroyed the life of who he hated, but also sabotaged his own. From the vision of Hester, years of revenge had transformed himself into a devil: *the former aspect of an intellectual and studious man, calm and quiet, which was what she best remembered in him, had altogether vanished, and been succeeded by an eager searching, almost fierce, yet carefully guarded look. [1]*

4. Conclusion

Hester Prynne, as the sole female protagonist in this novel, is the center of the story. Hester is not perfect, but she possesses some precious qualities that were missing in other male protagonists. Her bravery can be seen as a rebellion against the unjust world, her leniency can be taken as her tolerance of the unjust world. Through the portrayal of the weakness of Arthur Dimmesdale and the mercilessness of Roger Chillingworth, Hawthorne emphasizes these key personalities in Hester and conveys his attention and admiration towards feminist idea.

References

- [1] Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, The United States 2010).
- [2] HU Chang-wen: Exploring Hawthorne's Social Ideal on The Characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, *Journey of Xuzhou Education College*, 2008(01): 118-121.
- [3] Doubleday N F: Hawthorne's Hester and feminism, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 1939: 825-828.
- [4] CHEN Wei: On the Interpretation of Feminism in American Literature: A Case Study of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, *Journal of Hunan First Normal University*, 2019, 19(04): 100-105.

- [5] YU Rong-fang: A Brave Female Image: Interpretation of Hester in The Scarlet Letter from the Perspective of Feminism, Overseas English, 2017 (1): 176-177.