Hawthorne’s Humanism in *The Scarlet Letter*

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*The Scarlet Letter* is a novel written by the American romantic writer Nathaniel Hawthorne in the 19th century. It is not only the American romantic fiction masterpiece, but also known as the American psychological analysis novel set article. And this paper aims at deploring Hawthorne’s humanism by analyzing the paradox of good and evil among the three main characters, Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, which reveals in his praise for human dignity, his sympathy for the pressed, and his yearning for a more understanding society.

*Keywords: The Scarlet Letter*, humanism, human dignity, sympathy, understanding society

**Introduction**

Nathaniel Hawthorne, as one of the most famous writers in the period of American romanticism, is heatedly studied by readers as well as scholars. The sin of ancestors, sin and redemption, feminism, morality and ethics, such themes are main concerns of the researchers. Nevertheless, the most striking thing that I have savored from *The Scarlet Letter*, the masterpiece of Nathaniel Hawthorne is his humanism which overflows in the through and out of *The Scarlet Letter*.

**The Humanism of Hawthorne**

The humanism of Hawthorne mainly manifested in three aspects. They are his frank praise for human dignity, passion, intellect, and courage, his unaffected sympathy for human sin, crime, and suffering, his sincere yearning for humanistic society, respectively.

**Hawthorne’s Frank Praise for Human Dignity, Passion, Courage**

Hawthorne’s frank praise for human dignity, passion, courage mainly showed in the character of Hester whose dignity before social censure, passion in true love and courage confronting public isolation will make every heart of humanism vibrate. When the heroine, Hester, the generally supposed fallen and sinful woman first made her appearance in the public, there is nothing like shame, pain, and fear occupied her face but the pride, dignity, calmness, and patient that dwell on her face. In the market place, the moral puritans of the town, young and old, female and male all expected to see the sinful woman dulled and dimmed by her sin of adultery; however the degraded woman was shining under the sunshine with the unshaken dignity. She is still lady-like. Her beauty is still flowering; her pride is still possessing; her skills of living—the needlework is still showing on the scarlet letter “A”. “Sunshine” the bright and humanistic enough word appeared three times in Hester’s first show up, which laid the basic tone of Hawthorne’s humanistic attitude towards Hester.
Undoubtedly, Hester is a noble of dignity. A dignity woman is she who embodies real passion in true love rather than a docile wife in the marriage without love. Hester married the old scholar without love and lived a lead-peace life with no stir of passion, thus its natural human passion for her to fall in love with the knowledgeable, feeling, and sensible minister, Dimmesdale when she lost connection with her husband. And for Hawthorne, this passion is not passion of luster; it is human instinct and right of love. When interrogated of her paramour, she is so steadfast and solid that the only answer they got is the firmly uttered “Never”. This simple word showed us Hester’s true love for Dimmesdale whom she wanted to protect even in the danger of severe punishment. “It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine” (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 110). This powerful declaration of Hester still showed us her passion in love that she can endure all kinds of agony for true love. It is obvious that Hawthorne is positive about Hester’s passion for true love for it is a part of humanism to advocate the union of true love.

And a woman of dignity and passion will have the courage to face the public isolation. Hester, a deprived woman of adultery, is the immoral warning for every moral puritan in the town. When she was punished to stand on the market place with the scarlet letter on her bosom, the whole society, especially her fellow females were infuriated. They scolded her for bring shame on them and worried about her bad influence on their younger ones. Even some of them declared a woman as sinful as Hester should die a harsh death. Clearly, as the shame of puritanic society, she was completely driven out of the public life of the town, let alone the public affection, neighbouring feeling. However, she was not collapsed and broken; she lived alone but firmly. Whenever the public censures storms she never dodged; instead, she quietly gave them, all puritans time to make their moral judgement. Human dignity, passion, and courage that Hawthorne lent pen to Hester revealed Hawthorne’s frank praise for humanism.

Hawthorne’s Unaffected Sympathy for Human Sin, Crime, and Suffering

A true humanist is one who feels the pains and pathos of sinners and criminals. Hawthorne showed great sympathy for the sinners and criminals for they are also sufferers. Hester, Chillingworth, Dimmesdale, there are three sinners as well as sufferers in The Scarlet Letter, but they all got redemption in their own way which unfolded Hawthorne’s humanism in a more profound way.

First of all, Hester, the supposed sinner of adultery, was deserted by the society as a punishment at very beginning, and the scarlet letter was seen as the symbol of shame by the public, but at the end of the novel, the scarlet letter fell away of its own nature and transformed into something that should speak a different purport, namely, able or angle. Hester got her redemption by public devotion. The needle work in her nimble and dexterous hands is her tool to strip off the distrust of the public towards her.

None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty; even though the bitter-hearted pauper threw back a gibe in requital of the food brought regularly to his door, or the garments wrought for him by the fingers that could have emboiled a monarch’s robe. (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 146)

Hester, as an angle, came to every one’s needs for goodness which is in her nature always, and Hawthorne showed great sympathy for her suffering from public censure; thus a final redemption is a certain.

Chillingworth, old-aged husband of Hester. At first sight, we may be frightened by the monstrous man with his snake-like shrewd and insidious smile flickering the light of evil. However, feeling deeper you will find that however monstrous he was however pitiful he was. Firstly, as a man of born deformity, Chillingworth
tried hard to improve himself in knowledge and learning in order to make up for his physical defect. However, old and deform he must feel inferior in the front of his young wife; thus it’s hard for him to show passionate love for young Hester. From this point of view, he is a victim of their marriage like Hester. Secondly, he is man of science and research. He did research on many things, humanity, human mentality, literature, medicine, chastity of wife as well as revenge. Appalled as we are, a pity will come forth. Generally, knowledge served as a powerful sword for man to fight with his daily difficulties and sufferings; man was the master of knowledge. While for Chillingworth, things are totally diverged. He became the slave of knowledge and education because the abundant knowledge he acquired did not bring him comfort and happiness but endless misery. Though not so deep a transcendentalist as Thoreau, not so deep a romanticist as Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne as man of American Romanticism share common interest with Thoreau and Whitman, they all oppose the man of science and experiment without human passion and emotion. Thus we can see Chillingworth is also a victim of “scientific” education. And thirdly, Chillingworth is the victim of empty. From beginning to the end, Chillingworth is in the image of an avenger and bloodsucking leech; he tortured Dimmesdale in all possible ways. However, no matter how evil he was, our sympathy would go for him when the revenge was done because he did not secure happiness or a little bit of enjoyment as the avenger but collapsed entirely. Revenge is the only purpose of his life; he pinned all his hope on revenge; thus when the revenge is done, his life became meaningless. As a result of deep sympathy for a man who led a meaningless and misery life, Hawthorne let the man get his redemption by bequeathing his property to Pearl, the child of Hester and Dimmesdale, two victims of his revenge.

Lastly, here comes Dimmesdale, the sinful but highly respected minister. He is not only “the reverenced” and “the respected” in people’s month but also in their heart. Each time the minister showed his face, there is reverence and respect followed him. For him it’s a bitter irony. And it is the bitter irony that revealed the great torture of the minister. For he can not reveal his sin to people who receive his preaching, his baptism, his moral guide as well as revelation from god. He is a man of double identity. On one side, as the earthly man his love for Hester will torture him severely for his weakness not to bear the sin and endure public censure himself rather than let the woman bear all sins alone. On the other side, as the heavenly man of minister, the messenger of God, his devotion and piety would torture him more severely. The revenge of Dimmesdale is the outer aspect of his destruction both mentally and physically; the inner also deeper reason for his decline is the dual torture of his feeling of guilty. He dreaded of the public disappointment and disillusionment of religious belief thus he can only let Hester shoulder all social censure; he feared of God’s punishment for not being honest and pure; thus he can only carve the scarlet letter on his body. The inner torture nibbed him bit by bit but he can only make his confession in the darkness secretly. It is not weakness that made him a hypocrite; it is his sincere devotion to the religion, his inner conflict between an earthly man and heavenly man that made him a seemly hypocrite. From the description of his inner torture we can see the profound sympathy Hawthorne harbored for the minister. And because of the deep sympathy, Hawthorne had the minister get his redemption by confessing his sin before the public and died peacefully. Hawthorne unveiled the hypothesis of Dimmesdale in the most pungent language but kept his sympathy for him also (Yao, 1996, p. 123).

Though sinned in different ways at some extent, Hester, Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale they all got their redemption at last either by doing good deeds or being honest to god, which showed us the humanism of Hawthorne by his sympathy with the sinners and criminals.
Hawthorne’s Sincere Yearning for Humanistic Society

A humanist like Hawthorne who praises human passion and intellect, who feels with the criminals and sufferers certainly harbors a vision for a society of freedom, humanity, and beauty.

Shackled in the puritan society of rigour morality, strict regulation, and harsh law, Hawthorne pinned all his longing for a society of freedom, humanity, and beauty on the elf child, Pearl who is the collection of native grace, endless vigor, faultless beauty, deep acuteness, and natural dexterity. Though for the public Pearl is a living symbol of Hester and Dimmesdale’s sin; however, for Hawthorne Pearl is a symbol of his humanism, which showed in three comparisons. They are the comparison between the dullness of the society and the vigor of Pearl, the comparison between the society’s obsession with moral judgement and Pearl’s intergration with nature, the comparison between the brightness and dimness.

Firstly, from the whole novel we can feel the comparison between the dullness of the society and the vigor of Pearl. Everything in the society is in dim light. The old and decayed jail, the public in dim colors, and the serious atmosphere of the puritanic town, all gave us the feeling of suppression and constrain. While whenever the elf child Pearl showed her face, the atmosphere became warm and bright. “Running”, “dancing”, “capering”, “skipping”, “frisking”, “leaping” all these worlds give us of picture of child who is the friends of carefree angles and form a distinctive contrast with the rather static society.

Secondly, here comes the comparison between the society’s obsession with moral judgement and Pearl’s intergration with nature. Each time the town people showed up, whether they are common town folk, ministers or magistrates, they all seriously concern themselves with the moral judgement. They are inquisitors, executors as well as onlookers outside of suffering. They censor the sinners with highly moral tone; they indoctrinate the sinners with heavenly doctrine. While, Pearl, the child, is like a creature from another world who cares and communes more with nature and beauty than the social morality. Squirrels, wolves, foxes, all animals and insects in the forest are her playmates for the children of the puritanic society who are already the participants of moral judgement. Her love for flowers is seen everywhere, especially roses whether in the forest or in the magistrate’s garden, as if she is a child of nature.

Thirdly, here comes the comparison between the brightness and dimness. The most obvious sign is the comparison between Hester, the mother and the child. Hester is always in gray and worn-out old clothes and with her hair hidden from the sunshine; the only colourful thing of her is the scarlet letter. While, Pearl is always in bright colors with decoration. The comparison between brightness and dimness also revealed in the comparison of surroundings and Pearl. The graveyard is a place often appeared in The Scarlet Letter, where it exists only bleakness, dullness, and lifelessness. However, whenever Pearl passed the graveyard, her hands were always occupied with bountiful of flowers in bright colors. These three comparisons unfolded us Hawthorne’s dislike of the rigorous puritanic society and his sincere yearning for a society of freedom, humanity.

Conclusion

His frank praise for human dignity, passion, intellect, and courage, his unaffected sympathy for human sin, crime, and suffering, his sincere yearning for humanistic society all together showed us Hawthorne’s spirit of humanism, and which is a critically inheritance of puritan spirit. What he inherited is the spirit for striving freedom, which is the original purpose of his puritan ancestors who leave Britain for new land. What he despised and dropped is the rigor and dogma of the puritans which represses humanism.
References