

The Influence of Puritanism on the Sin and Punishment in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

“*The Scarlet Letter*”, written by 19th century American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, tells the story of the triangle love affairs of heroine Hester Prynne, her husband Roger Chillingworth, and her lover Arthur Dimmesdale.” This paper attempts to interpret *The Scarlet Letter* from the aspects of sin and punishment. It discusses how Hawthorne arranges the fate of each character and the influence of Puritanism on people's thoughts and life. Under the influence of Puritanism, the three characters pay a heavy price for their sins and receive emotional and moral punishment, and finally each has a different way to get salvation of the soul.

Keywords: “*The Scarlet Letter*”; Puritanism; Sin and Punishment; Salvation

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne ranks among the best 19th century American novelist with Herman Melville, Henry James, and Mark Twain. Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts. His father was a sea captain and descendant of prominent men in the Puritan theocracy of the 17th century.

Hawthorne anonymously published his first work, a novel titled *Fanshawe*, in 1828. In 1837, he published *Twice-Told Tales* and became engaged to Sophia Peabody the next year. He worked at a Custom House and joined a Transcendentalist Utopian community, before marrying Peabody in 1842. The couple moved to The Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts, later moving to Salem, the Berkshires, then to The Wayside in Concord. “*The Scarlet Letter*”, was published in 1850, followed by a succession of other novels. A political appointment took Hawthorne and family to Europe before returning to The Wayside in 1860. Hawthorne died on May 19, 1864.” (Wang Zhuo, 2010:77). In Hawthorne's fictions, he pays more attention to the puritanical insight into human nature and examines the development and results of evil. The dark side of human character attracts him profoundly as he is haunted by his sense of sin and evil in life.

1.2 A brief introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*

“*The Scarlet Letter*”, which is set in Boston around 1650 during early Puritan colonialization emphasizes the Calvinistic obsession toward morality, sexual repression, shame and declaration of guilt, and spiritual salvation” (Van Spanckeren, 1994: 37). “A strong atmosphere of the Puritan New England became the characteristic of Hawthorne's best work” (High, 2004:50). The story is about a triangle love affair in New England, where Puritanism is fully developed. It is also a story about adultery, revenge and redemption which set against the harsh backdrop of the strict Puritan colony in 17th century Boston. The story is short but moving. Hester Prynne, a young, beautiful woman, arrives at New England before her husband, an old, ugly scholar who is unable to give her happiness. She has not got any information from him for two years. Therefore, she thinks that he might be dead, and then she falls in love with Arthur Dimmesdale, a young, handsome clergyman and gives birth to a baby. When her sin is discovered, she is punished to wear the letter —“A” on her breast all her rest life. But Dimmesdale prevents himself from acknowledging his guilt in public; instead he hides the “A” in his heart and suffers from the inner anguish. Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband then appears and decides to revenge the partner—Dimmesdale. That is why Dimmesdale suffers both physical and spiritual torment from the old man, and dies at last. Roger also withers at last.

In “*The Scarlet Letter*”, Puritanism is the most prominent characteristic and it exerts great impact on people's life and thoughts. Hawthorne expresses the influence of Puritanism from the perspective of sin and punishment in the 17th century Boston.

2. Puritanism

2.1 The definition of Puritanism

“Puritanism is a religious political movement in the late 16th and 17th century that sought to “purify” the Church of England of remnants of the Roman Catholic “popery” that the Puritans claimed had been retained after the religious settlement reached early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009:26). It teaches men to distrust their natural inclinations as well as their natural faculties, and to find their origin and their salvation in supernatural order.

Puritanism seeks to purify, or reforms the Church and establishes a middle course between Roman Catholicism and the ideas of the Protestant reformers. Those who advocate Puritanism are called Puritans. The Puritans believe in the majesty, righteousness and sovereignty of God, they see him as omniscient and omnipotent. They believe that God has predestined some of these fallen creatures for the gift of salvation. This elected or non-elected status signifies God's choosing of those to whom the grace of salvation is to be offered. The Puritans take the scripture, the sacraments and the sermons as Gods own words, which they interpret. But that does not mean that sinners can save themselves, but the election can improve their souls. Two of the main points of Puritan theology are the covenants of grace and work. The covenant of grace requires a faith in God, which God himself give the election to grasp.

“After the 17th century, the Puritan as a political entity disappeared largely, but Puritan attitudes and ethics continued to exert an influence on American social value. They made a virtue of qualities that made for economic success—self-reliance, frugality, industry, and energy—and through them influence modern social and economic life” (Cody, 2008: 95). Their concern for education is important in the development of the United States, and the idea of congregational democratic church government is carried into the political life of the state as a source of modern democracy.

2.2 The influence of Puritanism on Hawthorne's life and works

Nathaniel Hawthorne is affected by Puritanism in many different ways, especially in his childhood and works. After all, Hawthorne was born and raised in New England, a part of the country in which the Puritan heritage is very strong. Moreover, Hawthorne's ancestors are all Puritans and they are deeply influence by New England Puritanism. And in fact, the affection have been involved in the infamous witch trials at Salem, Hawthorne seems to have been quite troubled by the conduct of this ancestor in particular.

“Massachusetts and his Puritan ancestry are evident in his literary works. Many of his writings are expressions of Puritan ideals and the correlation of those ideals with human nature. Considered serious and solitary by nature, Hawthorne uses these character traits to clearly portray his feelings toward Puritanism” (Gervens, 2006:96). The influence of Puritanism can be seen in Hawthorne's writings involving his deep interest in sin. Hawthorne's works are mostly dark and gloomy, because Puritan are also mostly morally serious. In other words, they always deal with the right and wrong matters, the good and bad behavior. Hawthorne is highly aware of the grim legacy of Puritanism, and he is also interested in the hypocrisy that Puritan beliefs can sometimes produce among some people.

Hawthorne comes from a puritan family and also influenced deeply by New England Puritanism. Hawthorne is not Puritan, he understands the Puritan beliefs, but he expresses deep suspicion for the harsh religious rules. Hawthorne is a young man who is aware of the sin of his ancestors believing in Puritanism, and with skeptical attitude towards his Puritan ancestors. He believes the cramp style of Puritan society which is against the essence of society. Later he writes many works such as *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* to show the attitude, hoping to compensate the sin of the ancestors. He regards American Puritanism as the theme of his works, the geography and cultural backgrounds of New England are closely linked. His works show the Puritan views of life, but they also strongly criticize those views.

“*The Scarlet Letter*” has been considered as a literary masterpiece which reflects the American Puritanism. Hawthorne selects a special living environment for his description of the characters in *The Scarlet Letter*—Boston, a colony of New England in the 17th century. Hawthorne choose the atmosphere of Puritanism as well as his background, he regards Puritan characters as all Bostonians. In *The Scarlet Letter*, though Hawthorne doesn't deny the sin that committed by the characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, he shows the readers a sense of sympathy for the couple and their gross shortcomings by referring to them with adjectives of positivism while the Puritan hierarchy is regarded as an evil malefactor. Hawthorne also goes beyond Hester's

undisputed charitable qualities and implies that her inward rebellion is also heroic and brave. “Her personal moral strength transcends her suffering and transforms her punishment into self-designed grace” (Scharnhorst, 1992: 224). It gives readers a sense of admiration and respect for Hester which counteracts the negative stigma that gives to Hester by the Puritanism.

3. Analysis of sin and punishment in the novel

“The starting point for Puritan Theology was an emphasis on the majesty, righteous, and sovereignty of God” (Eliade, 1987: 103). God has absolute authority and arbitrary to create and maintain the universe. God is omnipotent and impartial, and all human beings by contrast are depraved sinners. They all believe in predestination, which can be concluded into two points, (1) the original sin. Puritans believe that all people are innately evil and man is a creature born with sins. (2) Unconditional select and limited salvation. In puritans’ eyes, God decides their future, everything that happens is at God’s will, so that the belief plays an important role in human life. Good deeds will not sure a person go to paradise, and the community will be condemned for a person’s bad behavior. Puritans think only the selected person who obeys the God’s rule can obtain salvation. The beliefs make them intolerant of any kind of pleasure. To the Puritans, there are many strict disciplines for daily behavior and punishment for the smallest sin, which has always been an apart of human life. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the sin that committed by the characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, which is the biggest sin—adultery. In Puritan society, adultery is considered the ultimate sin, punishment for sexual crime is particular harshly. Hester is harshly punished by the Puritans who have committed unseen crimes themselves. These puritans believe that only God is faultless, all the mortals are sinful. Puritans believe their belief and trust missionary, as a result, the religious rule become more and more authoritarian. Nursery rising

In “*The Scarlet Letter*”, the three main characters liberate sin in different ways, Hester takes punishment and gets free from the sin, using it to rebuild herself, Dimmesdale conceals his sin and suffers tremendously, finally, he is released by confessing the sin, Chillingwirth uses deception and manipulation to make the life to another miserable situation, and last he gets rotten from the sin.

3.1 Detailed analysis of Hester prynne’s sin and punishment

“*The Scarlet Letter*” focuses on the heroine—Hester Prynne, the most important main character of the novel. Hester, who betrays his elderly scholar husband—Chillingwirth and loves another Puritan minister—Dimmesdale. Later she gives birth to Pearl, which is an evidence of having committed the sin of adultery. Hester Prynne is punished for adultery which is the representation of evil of human nature in Puritans’ eyes. Because it clearly breaks the common marriage contrast between husband and wife, to the Puritans, adultery threatens the bonds of marriage, and it also threatens social order. So she has to accept the punishment in the Puritan society, wearing a Scarlet Letter “A” on her breast all her life which means “adultery”. The Scarlet Letter eventually A” reminds Hester, “you are an openly published sinner” (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2010:158).

Hester’s punishment is to endure a public shaming on the scaffold for three hours, she commits a kind of very serious guilt which is strictly forbidden by the Puritan rules. In other words it is a kind of moral sin. Generally speaking, this kind of sin is worse than other crimes, such as robbery or murder in Puritan’s eyes. Under such circumstance, a public sentence is really cruel for her who has to face all kinds of condemnations from public, and wear a scarlet letter “A” on her chest for her whole life in the town. When Hester Prynne finally stands on the scaffold, she is insulted by somber and vicious people, she tries her best to support herself to face thousands of relenting eyes, all fastening upon her, and concentrating on her bosom. People insult her with terrible words, however, Hester feels much more suffocating in the solemn mood. She is so uneasy that she even wants to be insulted by venomous words rather than to bear all those rigid countenances.

The people’s vicious curse is the supplement of the puritanical code of law. To the Puritans, Hester has been forced to wear a scarlet Letter “A”. The stockade force the humiliated guilty Hester to sit in the public square, while onlookers spit or laugh at her. Puritans feel no remorse about administering punishment. They believe in Old Testament methods. Surely God’s correction will be far worse to the individual than any earthly penalty. However, Hester never appears more ladylike, “The door of the jail being flung open from within, there

appeared, in the first place, like a black shadow emerging in to sunshine. The grim and grisly presence of the town beadle, with a sword by his side and his staff of office in his hand” (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1992: 98).

In the story, Hester generally keeps silent, and accepts the insult from adults to children in the puritan society. In fact, she shows strength and courage to resist the bias of the Puritanism.

3.2 Arthur Dimmesdale's sin and punishment

Arthur Dimmesdale is a holy clergyman who has high social status and a lot of parishioners, a performer of love who attributes love to sin, a thoroughly submissive member of the puritan community who generally accepts laws. However, as the representative of Puritanism at that time, he violates the discipline of Puritanism.

Dimmesdale's sin originates from his being Hester's partner in their love affair resulting in an illegal sexual intercourse, which is forbidden by scriptural law. Hester and Dimmesdale are not husband and wife so that what they do is categorized as adultery. In the Puritan period, adultery is a great sin which must be seriously punished. “Puritans did, however, scorn what they viewed as the libertine excesses of many of their peers, condemning not the drink but the drunkard, not the expression of sexual love between husband and wife but extramarital sex” (Eliade, 1987: 106). However, Dimmesdale keeps hiding his sin from society and still acts as a good reverend, while Hester—his partner in adultery gets humiliated punishment

Dimmesdale's tragedy is caused by himself, he denies his relationship with Hester Prynne and abandons the love and chooses to be indifferent to Hester Prynne's love. In the Puritan society in the 17th century, a person must be either a faithful believer, or honest confessor. Dimmesdale denies his relationship with Hester Prynne, but the secular relationship will contact with him closely. The farther he leaves away from Hester Prynne, the deeper pain will be, and the heavier guilt will be.

Dimmesdale and Hester commit the same sin; they both suffer from the same torment "A". Because his own activities violate his doctrine which causes a split personality, he suffers even more than Hester Prynne. He has two self: overt and covert; He has two wishes: Public true self and holy priest profession; but when he knows love and dignity no longer coexist, Dimmesdale's inner world is full of conflicts between repentance honesty and hypocrisy, love and religious doctrine. He wants to confess the sin, but he is afraid how public would view him, so he chooses to hides his sin, and because he is weaker and more dependent on Puritan creed. For seven years, Dimmesdale hypocritically conceals his sin. But finally he submits to God and gives up love. He confesses his sin in public, and he will destroy his character flaws: hypocrisy, weak, and being afraid to admit his aspirations and requirements, rather painful struggle at the back of the mask, even self-torture. Dimmesdale has experienced great pain from the body to the soul, he attempts to ruin himself to seek extrication and he believes that death is the best way to save himself.

3.3 Roger Chillingworth's sin and punishment

Roger Chillingworth is Hester's husband. He is small, thin, and slightly deformed, with one shoulder higher than the other. Although he can hardly be termed aged, he has a wrinkled face and appears stricken in years.

Roger Chillingworth's sin is against nature. Selfishness makes him marry Hester, because Hester is a young and beautiful girl from an ordinary family. He knows Hester does not love him, and he is not intended to be a good husband. After marriage he does not care about his wife's life, only studying too long hours under lamplight, which results in Hester's betrayal, when he finds Hester betray him, what he cares is his identity and he is determined to track down the adulterer. He exhausts his energy and intelligence for crazy revenge for seven years. Gradually, he loses his humanity and makes himself from an emotional constancy, the erudite scholar into a devil, violating other's mind. Meanwhile, his conscience is also eroded in a helpless situation, and finally he burns his life with idea of revenge. After the death of his rival Dimmesdale, it seems that all his strength and energy desert him at once, he is totally withered, fade and almost disappear from the human vision. He likes uprooted weeds and withers in the sun, and death is his final choice.

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energy desert him at once, he is totally withered, fade and almost disappear from the human vision. He likes uprooted weeds and withers in the sun, and death is his final choice.

The punishment is most visible in his outward appearance and body. "Misshapen from his birth hour, how could I delude myself with the idea that the intellectual gifts might veil physical deformity in a young girl's fantasy!" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1992:158). His countenance grows even more threatening and scary as he becomes further entrenched in sin. He sees that he has become hopelessly engaged in sin but seems unable to do anything to stop it. Instead of letting his mind struggle with hope he simply allows it to remain in sin and thus his mind, remains focused and steady, even if it is on cruel revenge.

Conclusions

In "" Hawthorne focuses on the theme of sin and punishment, he expresses his viewpoint of sin as he study what is sinner and what is the fountainhead of sin. Hawthorne's ideology of "the evil of human soul" is portrayed vividly in three main characters of "*The Scarlet Letter*", However, his purpose is not to expose adultery, but discuss what the dark side of Puritan is: harshness, persecutions and absolute certainty. Puritanism reflects the attitude and values of the common people during that time. Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth have the same experience that they commit sin and accept punishment.

In the last chapter "Conclusion". Hawthorne exports people "Be true! Be true! Show freedom to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2010:260)! In the novel, each main character in "*The Scarlet Letter*", is able to be completely free from the punishment of sin. While they each deal with the punishment of sin in different ways, they fully reconcile the punishment with the sin. Hester eventually atone sin by way of kindness and self repentance, Chillingworth's death seems like a defeat because all he lived for now is to take revenge on Hester and Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale was consumed, in mind, body, and spirit by the effects of sin. The issue of sin and punishment is at the heart of this novel and through these three main characters it is possible to see what the punishment can be and what the outcome of living with it might be.

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