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THE SCARLET LETTER: A TALE OF HUMAN FRAILTY AND SORROW

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Abstract

'The Scarlet Letter' is indeed the cornerstone of Nathaniel Hawthorne's genius. The novel depicts intriguing symmetries between social oppression and psychological repression in terms of the central conflict between the impulse and the conscience as well as between individual and society or cast and expressed in a highly artistic framework. This paper depicts how Hester Prynne (symbol of Heart); Arthur Dimmesdale (soul or the spirit) and Roger Chillingworth (Intellect) are the mediums by which Hawthorne portrays the ways of human frailty and sorrow.

Keywords: Frailty, death, contorted soul and psychological frame of mind.

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter' is a story of consequences of passions explored within the socio-cultural and psychological frame of the mind, heart, soul and body through the action of adultery. It is a book mainly about sin and stigma. The novel is an exploration of conflict depicted in terms of the sin revealed (Hester Prynne), the sin sealed (Roger Chillingworth) and the sin concealed (Arthur Dimmesdale). The novel shows the concept of sin, crime and punishment through the lives of Hester, Author and Roger. Hawthorne has singular power to reveal the dark vision which exists in the human heart.

Although 'The Scarlet Letter' is about Hester, the book is not so much a consideration of her innate character as it is an examination of the forces that shapes and transforms her. It deals with her punishment, with her transformation from a sinner to a saint or the symbol of charity. She speculates on human nature, society and its organization, religion and moral values. The letter 'A' signifies that Hester is an adulterer. Hester is

married to Chillingworth who is reportedly lost at sea, leaving Hester alone among the Puritan society while waiting for him; she had an affair with a Puritan minister named Arthur Dimmesdale after which she gave birth to Pearl. She endures years of shame and scorn which makes her strong and passionate. Hawthorne portrays her remarkable character through her public humiliation and subsequent, isolated life in Puritan society. She displays a sense of irony and contempt on the scaffold with Pearl in her arms. The first description of Hester notes her '*natural dignity and force of character*'. Hester's self-reliance and inner strength are further revealed in her defiance of the law and in her iron will during her confrontation with the governor. When the governor determines to take her daughter pearl away from her, Hester says,

"God gave me the child! He gave her in requital of all things else, which he had taken from me.... Ye shall not take her! I will die first."

Hester's strength is noticeable in her dealings with both her husband and her lover. Even

Dimmesdale acknowledges that she has the strength he lacks. She is the only character who makes her sorrow and pain, her strength. She considers how she can support herself and Pearl, a problem that she solves with her needle work.

Arthur Dimmesdale is the perfect example of 'human frailty and sorrow' in this novel. Hawthorne's psychological perspective presents him as a tragic character. He is devoted to God, passionate in his religion, however, he knows he has sinned. His agonized suffering is the direct result of his ability to disclose his sin. The vigils he keeps are representative of this inward struggle. He commits adultery with Hester, even then he shamefully asks Hester to confess publicly the name of her lover. He is a greater sinner than Hester. He tries to conceal his sin from the public. He adds hypocrisy to his sin. His effectiveness betrays his desire to confess. Arthur Dimmesdale is too frightened, meek and selfish to reveal his sin and bear the burden of punishment with Hester. Arthur's irresponsibility is the mother of his evil which affects both his physical and spiritual heart. The more he suffers, the better his sermons become. He whips himself privately rather than accepts his sin publicly. Later, he realizes that he should ask forgiveness and do penance openly. That is why, his Election Day sermon, is filled with the passion of his struggle and humanity. Dimmesdale's confession of his sin ensures his salvation. The fact that Hester takes all of the blame for their shared sin, shakes his conscience.

Roger Chillingworth develops from a scholar into an obsessed fiend. Unlike Hester and Arthur, Roger is a flat character. His obsession with revenge can be seen throughout the novel. When he arrives and finds his wife suffering public shame for an adulterous act, he has many choices to act but he chooses revenge. He single-mindedly pursues Dimmesdale. In Roger Chillingworth, Hawthorne has created a man of pure intellect with no concern for feelings. Hester agrees with his description of what he used to be and what he has become,

"You search his thoughts. You burrow and rankle in his heart! Your clutch is on his life,

and you cause him to die daily a living death."

In his role of friend and physician he ironically does more harm than good to Arthur. His obsession with vengeance makes him greater sinner and he has taken on the desire's job. His passion for revenge consumed him.

Hawthorne's description of 'human frailty and sorrow' is appropriate on these characters. Dimmesdale dies having never confessed his sin and having only found the courage to admit it publicly just before his death. Even when Pearl asked him if he would stand with them on the scaffold during the day, he refused her. He punishes himself for years rather than confess.

On the other hand, Hester could have moved away but she chooses to remain alone and to be punished. She is guilty of not naming her lover. She is treated like an evil by the Puritan society. Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband was the most selfish person in the novel. He married her without love in return. He chooses revenge rather than support his wife. The novel is a 'tale of human frailty and sorrow' implying both that the unhappy ending of protagonists is the inevitable result of human nature.

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