A Reflection On Sin And Repentance Essay, Research Paper

A Reflection on Sin and Repentance

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Nathaniel Hawthorne is certainly at his best when writing about sin, the supernatural and the New England past. Among all his works dealing with sin, The Scarlet Letter is unanimously considered to be his most successful attempt. In this nineteenth-century American classic, the author is predominantly concerned with the moral, emotional and psychological effect of sin on the people in general and those complicated in it in particular. What baffles my best understanding is how the writer is trying to interpret the sin in this tragedy. Is sin degrading or can it occasionally be elevating?

To explore the different roles that sin plays on the three major characters of the love affair, we then need to take a look at the interpersonal relationships between them.

The Interpersonal Relationship

Legal is the marriage between Hester Prynne and Roger Chillingworth, but it is not a happy one. While the aged man deludes himself with the idea that intellectual talents might shade his uninviting appearance in a young girl??s fantasy, Hester declares that she feels no love, nor feigns any. If at the very beginning the matrimonial scale is thus unbalanced, it is not at all surprising for us to observe the hatred blazing at the bosom of the husband towards the two culprits who have inflicted upon him the deepest and most irreparable injury.

Hester and Dimmesdale, having committed adultery, share true love. Yet, the Puritan society of that time can not bear such a transgression of a married woman, hence her subsequent life of public ignominy. Neither can Dimmesdale enjoy peace after the adultery is committed. At least his own conscience, being a clergyman, will not leave him alone. Their story is sad to such a degree that one cannot help sympathizing or even respecting them just as Hawthorne comments in the book:

Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a death-like slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world. (P.243)

At the bottom of the triangle, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, the two rivals in love, consciously and unconsciously destroy each other. According to Richard Chase, ??They are the two aspects of the will which confused Puritan thought in New England??the active and the inactive.?? (P. 77) When Chillingworth unites intellect with will and coldly with sinister motives analyses Dimmesdale, the latter is totally blinded about his true character, and continues to receive him as the most intimate friend!

Finishing the book from cover to cover, one can easily realize that instead of unfolding the love as well as the sin of the story, Hawthorne seems to be obsessed with the moral and psychological results of sin??the isolation and morbidity, the distortion and thwarting of the emotional life. Yet, besides these, can sin also create something good, something desirable in people?

Hester: Sin??A doorway to virtue

In the opening chapters the scarlet A is the object of hundreds of eyes. The absolute morality of the Puritan community demands Hester??s perpetual penance in the wearing of the letter. Nevertheless, the very way she makes the symbol betrays her:

It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. It had the effect of a spell taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself. (P.73-74)

By now, we see in front of us a woman with state and dignity, a woman in the desperate recklessness of her mood, make a pride out of what the authority meant for a punishment. Is she really guilty? Is it really right to condemn a woman for her sincere love towards an individual other than her husband who she doesn??t love and who is believed to be lying at the bottom of the ocean after their two years?? departure? Sadly enough, the seventeenth century New England says ??Yes??. Then, looking down at her bosom and touching it with her finger, she feels that this hostile society and its judgment upon her are her realities, which she begins to face readily and bravely hereafter. Although she feels her very birth is too much a torture for her, she sustains herself as best a woman might, being the focus of a thousand merciless eyes. During her life-long ordeal, her beauty has undergone a sad transformation. Her rich and luxuriant hair has been completely hidden by a gray cap. There is deliberate austerity in her dress, and lack of demonstration in her manners. How can she do otherwise when the surrounding human sphere is but a darker world for a woman??s beauty? Yet, when at the beginning of the story Hester conquers her apparent impulse to conceal the scarlet A by clasping the infant closely to her bosom, ??wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another??(P.73), we know she is going to face her destiny gracefully. Although she is totally aware of the fact that the shame accompanied with the accumulating days and added years would be biting her nerve, she is not going to flee. She chooses to continue a resident of New England, as she convinces herself that it is the scene of her guilt, and should be the scene of her earthly punishment. Luxurious might the hope be, she can??t help dreaming that in return for her martyrdom, she would at length achieve certain saint-like purity in her soul. Thanks to this perception, Hester Prynne??s behavioral response to the scarlet A is a positive one. Though abandoned by the community of her fellow citizens, she doesn??t abandon herself from it. Instead, she does her best to regain their fellowship on a new honest basis:

None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty one so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town. In all seasons of calamity, indeed, whether general or of individuals, the outcast of society at once found her place. She came not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble\_ She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy much helpfulness was found in her??so much power to do, and power to sympathize??that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original significance. They said that it meant Able. (P.195-196)

Here lies the eternal woman, perhaps indeed, the eternal human. About her, there is something queenly, imperious and barbaric, as well as fallible, appealing and enduring. The moment when Hester puts on her gray cap and becomes a kind of social worker, controlling her color and passion, her indeterminate, instinctual being, she is unconsciously imparting the letter on her bosom a new meaning. Is the author revealing by this characterization why not only he but all men must love Hester? Is he really indicating that sin, through public and constant confession, can be a doorway to virtue?

The effect of the adultery on Hester??s mind is, however, not one in favour of the Puritan morality. Her life has turned in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought. In an age when the human intellect is newly liberated, she assumes a freedom of meditation. This, had her Puritan judges known it, would have been held to a deadlier crime than that denounced by the scarlet letter. With no longer any faith in the God who frowns on her in such a rigid way, Hester Prynne begins to wander in a moral wilderness far away from the conventional Puritan orthodox discipline. The scarlet letter, beyond everyone??s expectation, enables her to escape the Puritan world, extending the lawlessness of adultery into all her habits of thought, and reshaping conventional values into her own reality. With this regard, it seems to us just natural when we hear Hester, instinctively exercising a magnetic power, urge Dimmesdale to leave America with her. We simply can??t help marveling at the rightness of the author??s remark in the case of Hester Prynne: ??The whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a preparation for this very hour.??(P.240) What a mockery those godly magistrates in the puritan settlement have made themselves of by such a contrivance as confining a woman??s passion beneath a symbol of infamy! Deep inward, does Hester really repent of her sin, or even does she consider herself guilty?

Dimmesdale: Being true is the only thing that the sin teaches him

While Hester is able to reconstruct her life and win a moral victory, Dimmesdale, on the other hand, undergoes the tragic experience of physical and spiritual disintegration. The result of the scarlet letter on him, therefore, is turning his life into an obsessive dilemma??to speak out the truth or not. Dimmesdale wishes he could confess and share her punishment but does not have the courage to proclaim his shame. Every time he mounts the pulpit he longs to tell the congregation the shocking truth but he is never brave enough to do so. His mental conflict is so intolerable that he penalizes himself in the forms of constant fast and vigil, which eventually leads to his breakdown and death. With this acknowledged, it would be safe to judge that the agony inflicted by the adultery on the minister is much more intense than it is on the wearer of the scarlet A, whose ordeal of public ignominy, though bitter indeed, brings her a retribution. When Dimmesdale admires Hester for wearing the scarlet letter openly upon her bosom, he is fully aware of his moral degeneration in keeping his part in the sin as a secret while appearing to the world as a spiritual leader. Yet he is so remorsefully hypocritical that it is beyond his power to repent in front of his congregation. Consequently, the symbol in Dimmesdale is diverted from its normal course and emerges obliquely as the psychosomatic mark on his breast. If he is to win back his spiritual quietude, he has to comply with either one wing of the two conflicting morals and stick to it hereafter. For this, Hawthorne illustrates:

No man, for any considerable period can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true. (P.258)

Dimmesdale doesn??t have the courage to confess his sin until the last moment of his life. After lamenting over the short life of the beloved minister we feel compelled to assert that late as his revelation is, it is better than never. Although he makes his way to salvation at such a dear cost as his life, he finally achieves a moral purification. Between him and Hester they point to a moral that the best policy in life is to be true, honest, and ever ready to show one??s worst to the outside world, as Hawthorne apparently intends them to do through his earnest appeal:

Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred! (P.307)

Dimmesdale dies an honest man with an easy soul, and the sin has done its work!

Roger Chillingworth: The Sinner of the Unpardonable Sin

When the two chief sinners, Hester and Dimmesdale, turn out to be saints, or nearly so by their ultimate penance, the injured husband becomes a devil. Here we are made to feel, though we may not translate our feelings into ideas, that it is a greater sin for the old husband to marry the young girl who does not love him than for her to love the young minister. By persuading a young girl with no mental maturity to fancy herself happy by his side, Chillingworth seems to have committed a fouler offence than any which has since been done to him. After the adultery inflicts on him great injury, his intellect and knowledge do him justice in the confession that:

It was my folly, and my 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! (P.96)

But in spite of this, he takes the role of a vicious avenger. The scholar, then, under the disguise of a man of skill, a friendly physician, exerts his almost hypnotic control over the young minister and deliberately causes his ruin. Embarking on his obsessive quest for the ??A?? in Dimmesdale, he is unconsciously throwing himself into the character of Satan . It is true that the old man is the unhappy husband who has been most vilely wronged, nevertheless, he makes a fiend of himself when his only purpose of life becomes retaliation. His aspect undergoes a remarkable change through his seven years devotion to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture. We feel we are haunted by the lurid expression at his secret discovery of the scarlet A on the minister??s bosom:

With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by the eye and features and therefore bursting forth through whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms towards the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor! (P.169)

Here is another ruin. It is what Hawthorne calls the Unpardonable Sin and it is worse than sins of passions. Dimmesdale says when the physician??s true character is revealed to him:

We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man??s revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so! (P.234)

Roger Chillingworth is the only sinner in the story who does not repent. When we stand by Hester??s side to pity him for the hatred that has transformed a wise and just man to a monster, we tend to assume he would relinquish the wicked motive and be once more human at her emotional appeal:

Forgive, and leave his further retribution to the Power that claims it. There might be good for thee, and thee alone, since thou hast been deeply wronged, and hast it at thy will to pardon. Wilt thou give up that only privilege? Wilt thou reject that priceless benefit? (P.209-210)

Sadly enough, he prefers to take a devil??s office. After he becomes aware of what has happened to him, Charles Feidelson says, ??he turns to Calvinism for comfort, asserting that a dark necessity beyond the human will has determined the whole action??(P. 12). We realize there would be no salvation for him when we hear him reply with gloomy sternness to Hester??s persuasion, refusing to pardon the two sinners who have greatly wronged him.

Chillingworth withers after Dimmesdale??s death. What??s the meaning of life for him when he loses the object where he exercises his intellectual power?

The last time we see him, he is kneeling down beside Dimmesdale, with a blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed. Isn??t here another moral that the author tries to point to that one must recognize and courageously combat the evil possibilities in every human heart?

Another Cause of the Tragedy??Puritan Moralism and

Puritan Doctrines

The Scarlet Letter is certainly a tragedy with Hester leading a life of disgrace, with Dimmesdale??s death after years of penance and with Chillingworth ruined by the obsessive motive to revenge. However, is the adultery, which seemingly sets everything going in the story really the cause of such a tragic ending? Is there something else pulling the strings?

The setting of the story is seventeenth-century New England. It is an elaboration of a fact that the author took out of the life of the Puritan past. We know that in the early days of New England, the Puritans lived a life of strict and rigorous moral discipline.

The Puritan creed has the strongest impact on Dimmesdale. He was born and brought up in the church, which has largely developed in him the reverential sentiment. He is a true priest, a true religionist. At the head of social system, as the clergymen of that day stand, he is only the more trammeled by its regulations and principles. Here lies the tragedy??the very man who has been denied any sexual pleasure by the Puritan society has so fearfully transgressed the most sacred law. Although for Dimmesdale, the adultery is a sin of passion, ??not of principle, nor even purpose??(P.240), he is too much a Puritan, too much a minister to forgive himself. The load of doctrines is nowhere heavier and the desire to elevate nowhere stronger than it is, perhaps, in this righteous priest. Reading the book, we feel that it is the young clergyman??s nature to speak out the truth. But he is not able to do so until the very end of his life either because he is cowardly or because he fears the revelation of his guilt might shake the congregation??s faith in the church.

Unlike Hester, whose mind is too radical and rebellious to conform to any Puritan doctrines which have made her the people??s victim and life-long bond-slave, Dimmesdale is such a Christian that he deems that adultery an Unpardonable Sin and thereby preys on himself as Chillingworth preys on him. Had he revered the Puritan laws less, he would not have been trapped in such a miserable mental state. Hawthorne says here:

Crime is for the iron-nerved, who have their choice either to endure it, or, if it press too hard, to exert their fierce and savage strength for a good purpose, and fling it off at once! This feeble and most sensitive of spirits could do neither, yet continually did one thing or another, which intertwined, in the same inextricable knot, the agony of heaven-defying guilt and vain repentance. (P.180)

Leading a double life, Dimmesdale is irrevocably doomed to his collapse. His torture is more psychological than physical as there is so weighty a load of guilty conscience on him because all his principles are Puritanical which, most to his remorse, he has violated. He reveals to Hester:

Were I an atheist, –a man devoid of conscience, –a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts,–I might have found peace, long ere now but, \_ whatever of good capacity there originally was in me, all of God??s gifts that were the choicest have become the ministers of spiritual torment. Hester, I am most miserable! (P.229)

As for Hester Prynne, the tragedy goes in large account into women??s role in the Puritan community. Early in the ??Custom House??, Hawthorne hints at the women??s status by writing about the office room: ??this is a sanctuary into which womankind, as very infrequent access??(P.22). It is then not hard to infer that the responsibility that women were expected to share was no more than guarding the household and making compliance with whatever regulations and disciplines the Puritan society has imposed on them. Hester??s transgression, therefore, is viewed by the Puritans as the sin of a woman??s frailty. When Hawthorne makes a sharp contrast between Hester??s graceful endurance of the scaffold punishment for her disgrace and the women spectators?? unrefined manners, we know he is not going to share the general morality of the Puritan New England which catalogues the adultery sin of the most unpardonable. Undoubtedly then, as Richard Chase declares, The Scarlet Letter has a feminist theme. In her lonely life, Hester becomes a radical. She believes that at some brighter period, a new truth will be revealed and that the whole relation between man and woman will be established on a surer ground of mutual happiness. She even comes to think in feminist rhetoric, and we can hear her talking firmly about ??the whole relation between man and woman??(P.311). Nevertheless, Robert E. Spiller would rather define the tale as a ??Greek tragedy?? because Hester Prynne is ??the woman of earth who has defied man-made law and has risen to heroic statue through the tragic flaw that must at last destroy as well as ennoble her.??

The Scarlet Letter??A hymn to the moral growth of Hester and her lover

In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne is at his best in treating the old problem of sin. All his life, he seems to be haunted by his sense of sin and evil in life, which naturally leads to a blackness of vision in his works. In The Scarlet Letter he studies sin only to ask whether some forms of conduct called sin may after all be innocent or even virtuous, and whether some popular virtues may not be, in some cases at least, great wrongs.

On the part of Hester and Dimmesdale, Hawthorne obviously thinks that sin educates rather than degrades them. Hester??s life eventually acquires a real significance when she reestablishes a meaningful relationship with her fellow humans Dimmesdale??s ultimate revelation purges his soul. One feels that he dies to go to heaven, and that he is too good for a world which cannot accommodate him. As for Chillingworth, the real villain, the sin is unpardonable–the violation of the human heart. There is every reason to assert that what Hawthorne means here is an admonition that every one has the responsibility of examining his own motives and actions in the minutest detail, and should confess his sins and strive for salvation by doing good. Although it is salient that Hawthorne condones sin in this book, The Scarlet Letter is not a praise of a sinning Hester Prynne and her lover, but a hymn to their moral growth when sinned against.