

Human Goodness of the Main Characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Novel "The Scarlet Letter"

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Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of human goodness of the main characters Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel "The Scarlet Letter". Through the analysis, the following conclusion can be reached. Despite the sins the three characters have committed, they are in nature good human beings or they always enjoy a chance of being transformed to good human beings.

Keywords

Human goodness, sins, main characters, "The Scarlet Letter".

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece "The Scarlet Letter" is one of the most representative romantic novels in American literature. The novel mainly revolves on the sins the three main characters Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth have committed and their final redemption from their sins. Some critics hold the view that Hester is a sinner who has repented; Dimmesdale is a sinner who has partly repented; and Chillingworth symbolizes a true sinner. [1] By and large, many critics focus on either the negative aspects or even evilness of the two male protagonists or the female protagonist's human goodness and her struggle against Puritan beliefs. Actually, all the three main characters in the novel are able to justify their "wrong" doings and present their human goodness by acting out of human nature, which deserves our special attention and specific exploration.

2. Body

2.1. Hester Prynne's Human Goodness

It is obvious that Hester Prynne is portrayed as a positive figure by the writer. Despite the fact that she falls in love with Dimmesdale without knowing for sure if her husband Chillingworth is still alive, she presents her human goodness in many aspects and generally leaves a very positive impression on the people of her community and the readers as well. First of all, Hester tries her very best to protect her lover Dimmesdale's reputation and has never intended to betray him. Hester has a deep affection for Dimmesdale, which can be indicated in her deep love for the fruit of their love---their daughter Pearl. Hester would rather die than let the authorities take Pearl away from her. Also, in the face of a large crowd of Puritan villagers, she decisively refuses to sell her lover out, accepting and enduring all the humiliation herself. When her husband Chillingworth threatens her with ruining Dimmesdale's reputation, she agrees to keep Chillingworth's identity a secret without any hesitation for her lover's sake.

Secondly, being an optimistic and undefeatable woman, Hester never regrets for what she has done and is brave enough to embrace a future full of challenges and uncertainty. So instead of keeping looking back on the past, she is looking forward. For common folks, the letter "A" forced on her dress symbolizes the shameful "adultery", while for the strong-willed Hester, the letter "A" just serves as a starting point from which she resolves to change the meaning of it. Hester finely embroiders the scarlet letter with gold-colored thread to highlight this very symbol,

which shows her strong opposition to and rebel against such unjustifiable labeling and at the same time her determination to “nourish” the transforming scarlet letter. Hester eagerly awaits the reevaluation of her from the society in the far future. For Hester, a person should not be defined by authority’s labeling but by something within which is shown by the kind and heroic behavior of that very person.

Thirdly, Hester is an independent woman both economically and mentally, without relying on others for a living or begging for people’s forgiveness and sympathy. Hester manages to shoulder the responsibility of raising her Pearl and living a comfortable and respectable life. She is an “able” woman, doing embroidery work for the majority of the people in the neighborhood for her skillfulness. Hester is always willing to give a helping hand when her neighbors who used to discriminate against her are in need. Though not quite well-off herself, she helps those in financial trouble whenever possible. A woman who has experienced ups and downs over the years, Hester has acquired a new role---a soul mate and spiritual guide for those in the neighborhood who need to be comforted and guided. As a result, people in the community begin to form new and favorable impressions on Hester over time.

Lastly, Hester shows her very commitment in doing good, and consequently has exerted great influence upon the whole society. For some years, she lives a new life with her daughter in Europe. However, she returns to New England years later after Pearl’s settling down, and continues to wear the scarlet letter. Unlike most common folks who would like to destroy history by leaving the place for good and throwing the shameful scarlet letter into the garbage bin, Hester chooses to keep the record of everything and leave everything to the subsequent generations to judge and comment on. By her coming back and wearing the scarlet letter all her life, Hester manages to make herself a legendary figure. And by doing good all her life, Hester acquires a peaceful mind and inner calmness in her redemption process and teaches people in the community a historic lesson.

2.2. Arthur Dimmesdale’s Human Goodness

Unlike Hester who is from the working class, Dimmesdale is a young minister of very high social status. He is highly respected and appreciated by the people in the neighborhood. Dimmesdale falls in love with Hester out of love rather than merely out of sexual attraction. Dimmesdale fully realizes and regrets the sin he has committed. When he is alone, he repents for the errors he has made and even carves the scarlet letter “A” on his chest. But when in public preaching, he has to pretend to be a person of high morals to keep his image. Actually, “the career climax he is experiencing in reality just further increases his inner pain.”[2] Dimmesdale keeps delaying confessing his sin to the public, which in my opinion is just a natural reaction as a human being out of humanity. Anyhow, Dimmesdale is not God or a saint. His behavior in solitude to some extent suggests his true human goodness.

Dimmesdale also gets the punishment he deserves, as he is getting increasingly ill due to Chillingworth’s constant mental torturing. In the end, Dimmesdale publicly confesses his adultery and dies in his lover Hester’s arms afterwards. Dimmesdale’s redemption is a natural and step-by-step process. It fits human nature when he gradually gives up the secular honor and glory instead of deserting all the human desires once and for all. After his public confession, he becomes a true minister or a saint whose outer deeds and inner thinking once again acquire consistency. Therefore, Dimmesdale, under certain circumstances, can be made to be a saint for his human goodness in nature.

2.3. Roger Chillingworth’s Human Goodness

Roger Chillingworth is generally considered by many as a complete evil figure in the novel. These critics support their view by claiming that Chillingworth takes revenge for nothing. Chillingworth, an ugly, old but learned scholar and doctor, marries the much younger Hester

against her will. Hester may not love Chillingworth at all, while Chillingworth may take Hester as his family. At least he never tortures Hester, let alone commit domestic violence. "Chillingworth has the good-natured aspects in his own character. He loves Hester deeply and is also yearning for a happy family." [3] So in some sense Chillingworth justifies his taking revenge on Dimmesdale for himself and Hester.

Chillingworth's taking revenge for Hester is in essence no different from Hamlet's taking revenge for his dead father in Shakespeare's tragedy "Hamlet". Critics rarely regard Hamlet as an evil person, so it is equally unfair to label Chillingworth as a complete evil person. In my humble opinion, Chillingworth is just behaving out of humanity, taking revenge for his wife Hester who has shouldered all the toughness and humiliation for her lover Dimmesdale. So Chillingworth keeps torturing Dimmesdale as a severe punishment, not as a means to getting something such as money in return. Chillingworth will not stop implementing his scheme until Dimmesdale confesses his sin to the public or until his wife Hester reclaims her partial innocence.

Chillingworth's love for his wife and his innate human goodness can be best shown at the end of his life. After finishing his torturing plan, Chillingworth also withers following the death of his rival in love. What is surprising is that he leaves all his fortune to Hester and Pearl, his rival's daughter. This act shows Chillingworth's love for Hester and his final forgiveness for his rival Dimmesdale's misconduct, an act that is definitely unimaginable to most common folks.

3. Conclusion

The three main characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece "The Scarlet Letter" all show human goodness despite the sins they have committed. Hester, an embroiderer representing the working class, defends and keeps her self-esteem and pride in a peculiar manner by sacrificing herself for her lover Dimmesdale's reputation, striving to transform the impressions of others imposed on her, living an economically and mentally independent life and helping and guiding neighbors in need. Hester tends to present her human goodness in a positive manner, and thus exerts great influence upon the Puritan society. Dimmesdale, a minister representing the upper class, passively responds to his sins. Dimmesdale in nature is a good man as he is constantly guilty of his sins and finally stands out to confess his sins to the public. Dimmesdale tends to present his human goodness in a passive manner, but has exerted equally great influence upon his followers who will definitely reflect and evaluate the whole matter. Chillingworth, a doctor and scholar in his senior years representing the middle class, defends his self-esteem by mentally torturing Dimmesdale in an extreme manner. Like Hamlet under Shakespeare, Chillingworth, whose taking revenge on Dimmesdale out of humanity, can well justify his "wrong" doings. He leaves his fortune to Hester and Pearl, which further shows his human goodness in nature. From the above analysis, we can get the conclusion that every human being has the good or positive aspects in his character, so we should make good use these good or positive aspects so that our society will become a more harmonious one with everyone showing human goodness.

References

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