

On the Loneliness of the Protagonists in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a famous American writer, created a lot of classical literature works in his life. *The Scarlet Letter*, as one of Hawthorne's most representative works, has aroused many scholars' interest in its theme since its publication. This paper intends to analyze the loneliness of the major characters to help readers to understand the novel more.

Keywords

Loneliness; *The Scarlet Letter*.

1. Introduction

In Hawthorne's *the Scarlet Letter*, the four major characters are all lonely in the inner world. Hester can't live happily with her husband, so she feels lonely. Dimmesdale, who believes in asceticism falls in love with Hester but he can't publicize their relationship, so he is lonely, too. Chillingworth, Hester's husband, can't get Hester's heart and has to accept the fact that his wife loves another man, thus he is also lonely. As for Pearl, the living symbol of Hester and Dimmesdale's adultery sin, can't live a normal life as other children. Child as she is, she still feels lonely.

On the theme of Hawthorne's *the Scarlet Letter*, there have been many different kinds of research. Some research the symbolism in the novel, some the feminism, some about the personality of the major characters, some about the sin and salvation, some about the implied meaning of the major characters. This paper mainly talks about the loneliness of the four major characters to help readers to understand the novel better.

2. Analysis of the Loneliness of the Protagonists

2.1. Analysis of Hester's Loneliness

Hester spent her happy infancy and stainless maidenhood together with her parents in a village of rural England, later she grew up to be a beautiful young lady with an extremely passionate nature. With parents' permission, she married her husband Chillingworth, "well-stricken in years and with a pale, thin, scholar-like visage" (51). Chillingworth regarded himself as "a man of thought, the bookworm of great libraries-a man already in decay, having given the best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge" (65). In contrast, Hester was in her budding youth, and had "a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. [...] had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes" (46). She had an impulsive and passionate nature, whereas the husband devoted himself wholly to seeking the so-called truth in books and did not pay attention to Hester's youth and beauty. The unhappy marriage indicated that there was no mutual understanding and communication between Hester and her husband.

Roughly two years before the public humiliation in the market place, Hester's husband sent her to America, to the Puritan colony of Massachusetts. "To this purpose, he sent his wife before him, remaining himself to look after some necessary affairs"(54). Chillingworth thought that his study was more important than his wife's personal safety. Hester had to take a voyage from Europe to America, without her husband's company, which made her feel lonely easily. Besides,

her daughter Pearl seemed an enigma difficult to understand. Sometimes Hester was bewildered by Pearl's capricious mature and mysterious expressions. When Pearl was yet an infant, she often revealed a peculiar look which was "so intelligent, yet inexplicable, so perverse, sometimes so malicious, but generally accompanied by a wild flow of spirits" (81). Hester was always tortured by the illusion that an evil spirit possessed the child. In such a case, Hester could not resist questioning: "Child, what art thou? Art thou my child, in every truth?" (87) Such a question indicated that there was a huge mental gap between the mother and the little daughter. Therefore, Hester was lonely in many aspects (Peng Aimin 10-17).

2.2. Analysis of Dimmesdale's Loneliness

As a priest, Dimmesdale was guilty of the commission of adultery with Hester, so he tried to avoid a truly intimate relationship with his flock so that the community could not enter his world. He seemed to be at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could be only at ease in some seclusion of his own. He walked alone, often in shadowy bypaths. Besides, he had to pretend to be the eloquent and influential speaker but not to be the man who committed adultery with Hester. Even Hester could not interpret his inner minds. When Hester was enduring the public insult from the people of Boston, Dimmesdale was enjoined to exhort Hester to repentance and to confession. "Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin"(59-60). At the bottom of his heart, he would like Hester to confess him even he didn't want to be exposed. However, the townspeople didn't believe his protestations of sinfulness. This drove Dimmesdale to further expose his guilt and led to still more deterioration in his physical and spiritual condition. He could neither confide in anyone nor get the community to get closer to his interior heart. What's more, he had to remain aloof from his lover, Hester and his daughter, Pearl, which made him lonely, too. When he met Hester in the forest, he asked Hester, "Dost thou think the child will be glad to know me? [...] I have even been afraid of little Pearl! [...] So you thinkest the child will love me?"(186) All these revealed that Dimmesdale was lonely to a large degree (Peng Aimin 24-30).

2.3. Analysis of Chillingworth's Loneliness

Roger Chillingworth was an old and lonely scholar in England dehumanized by a life of abstruse studying. His twisted, stooped, deformed shoulders mirrored his distorted soul. However, his wife Hester was a young, beautiful and kind woman, who had a passionate nature and had no affection for him. Therefore, the moment he asked his wife to come to America alone indicated that he might lose his wife and the result proved this. During two years' time in Boston alone, Hester fell in love with a pastor, Dimmesdale, and had a daughter with him, which made Chillingworth sink into utmost disgrace and despair when he came to Boston to live with his wife.

When he found the man who had an affair with his wife, he began trying hard to take revenge on the man-Dimmesdale, or we can say from the time Chillingworth knew that Dimmesdale was the man he looked for, he began taking the revenge to Dimmesdale as his life principle. Thus, after Dimmesdale died, Chillingworth lost his life goal and had nobody to take revenge to, "All his strength and energy—all his vital and intellectual force—seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively withered up, shriveled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun"(238). Besides, Pearl, the child of his wife and Dimmesdale's, either instinctively ran away or she was asked to go away for a while, which symbolized the mental gap between them. His soul was irretrievably estranged and at last he died in loneliness (Peng Aimin 19-24).

2.4. Analysis of Pearl's Loneliness

As a child of adultery, Pearl and her mother lived far from other people and her mother was her only companion. Her father didn't acknowledge his paternal love for her because he didn't want to expose himself as the sin-child's father. Therefore, Pearl always asked for recognition for she was afraid of being abandoned. Actually she longed for other's love and recognition, which can be proved in the forest meeting. There Hester encouraged Pearl to embrace Dimmedale and entreat the priest's blessing. Then Pearl raised a question: "Doth he love us? [...] Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?" (194) She was given a negative response. Since Pearl's unconscious request for recognition could not be granted, she tended to be unfriendly to the minister and make some unfavorable comments on him. But when she was recognized by his father, she kissed her father's lips and her tears fell upon her father's cheeks. "They (Pearl's tears) were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (235). Therefore, Pearl was lonely for her born (31-34).

3. Conclusion

Being an American romantic writer in the 19th century, Nathaniel Hawthorne began to explore the loneliness in human relationship. Loneliness and alienation are a typical theme in modern literature works. Analyzing them can help the readers learn more about *The Scarlet Letter*.

References

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