

On the Ambivalence of Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter

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ABSTRACT

There are two recipients of the scarlet letter "A" in *The Scarlet Letter*, one is Hester Prynne, who was publicly tried, and the other is pastor Arthur Dimmesdale, who branded the scarlet letter on his chest. Compared with Hester, Dimmesdale showed greater contradiction in behavior and psychology: the conflict of ethical identity, the tangle of public confession and the confusion of inner belief. The reasons for the contradiction were closely related to the oppression of human nature by the society dominated by Puritanism and Dimmesdale's self-reflection and awakening. Hawthorne used a lot of psychoanalysis, contrast and scene description to show the complexity of Dimmesdale.

INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter is set in Boston during the colonial period of North America and tells the story about the scarlet "A". The "scarlet letter" is a symbol of adultery in the eyes of the Puritans. In the text, Pastor Dimmesdale fell in love with the married woman Hester, and then they combined and gave birth to Pearl. While Hester is publicly displayed and wears the scarlet letter on her chest, Dimmesdale is able to conceal his guilt but suffers from great internal torture and pain. This paper focuses on the ambivalence of Dimmesdale's behavior and psychological performance, explores the reasons for the ambivalence, and analyzes Hawthorne's artistic techniques for presenting Dimmesdale's ambivalence.

THE AMBIVALENCE IN DIMMESDALE

In Hawthorne's writing, the pastor Dimmesdale, as Hester's secret lover and the father behind little Pearl, after seven years of inner torment, from the initial fear of revealing his sins to the ultimate initiative to confess publicly, is both a devout believer and feels "bound". This reflects the strong contradiction in the character of Dimmesdale, who is both a devout believer and a man who feels "bound" and longs for a science that upholds freedom of thought.

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The Conflict of Ethical Identity

The most intuitive contradiction of pastor Dimmesdale is the conflict of his ethical identity. According to Wang (99), Dimmesdale is a "saint before and a devil after". In the eyes of the people, he meticulously fulfilled his duties as a pastor, had many admirers, and was regarded by the faithful as "the apostle appointed by God". However, there was another side to him: his relationship with a married woman, Hester, and the birth of Pearl. Such multiple identities are the most direct contradiction and obvious conflict in Dimmesdale: when Hester wearing the scarlet letter passed through the street, she became the "theme of the sermon" of the pastor. Dimmesdale, who belongs to the same pastor group and should be scorned and accused of adultery, is Hester's secret lover and the father of little Pearl.

The Tangle of Public Confession

From the perspective of plot, the "tangle of public confession" constitutes the main part of Dimmesdale's behavioral contradiction. His psychological state ranges from a state of panic and fear at first as a priest asking Hester to confess to Pearl's father, to a state of inner torment and a desperate desire to make a public confession to relieve his inner pain. Later, because of practical concerns, he withdrew and finally voluntarily confessed under the call of love and morality. It can be seen that the "tangle of public confession" is prominent. This contradiction basically constitutes the main plot of the article and plays an important role in guiding the development of the plot.

In the seven years after Hester was tried by the public, Dimmesdale was frightened and remorseful. The passage of seven years, accompanied by his physical and mental emaciation (Diamond 662), has changed his attitude towards public repentance. In the chapter "The Minister's Confession", in the case of extreme collapse, Dimmesdale is eager to "boldly tell people who he is at the pulpit with the loudest voice" and confess that he is "a thoroughly dirty liar".

These words with madness are the inner reflection of the priest's collapse and loss of control. The chapter "The Minister's Vigil" shows that the collapse of the pastor is approaching the climax. At night, he came to the gallows where Hester was shown to the public. When he saw pastor Wilson, he could not help but try to pour out his guilt. However, this inner impulse was interrupted by the encounter with Hester and Pearl. When they stood on the scaffold hand in hand, the pastor changed his mind again:

"There came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life... as if the mother and the child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system." (Hawthorne 117)

It may be that he is greedy for the "instant vitality", and he is afraid of public repentance. When Pearl proposed to let the pastor hold hands with herself and her mother openly, he once again evaded. After this turning point, Dimmesdale once again fell into the cycle of "repentance - no repentance". What made him end this cycle was his conversation with Hester. Diamond (662-663) believed that it was at this time that

Dimmesdale was saved from the edge of darkness by Hester. Hester persuaded him to leave Boston, and then they started a new life again, which gave Dimmesdale hope. However, Dimmesdale, who had intended to leave this "land of right and wrong" and escape from his inner suffering, chose to face his guilt and confess publicly: he openly embraced Pearl, supported by Hester, tore off the pastor's lace, revealed the scarlet letter on his chest, and finally exposed his guilt in front of the confused, sympathetic and lamented crowd before he died.

Confusion of Inner Belief

The confusion of inner belief highlights Dimmesdale's awakening. He believed in religion but felt "bound". He uncontrollably longed for science but simultaneously resisted it. Dimmesdale is highly respected in religious ordination. In Parishioners' eyes, he is the apostle of God. In his eyes, he is a religious man. However, in the chapter "The Doctor", when the pastor representing religion and the doctor Roger Chillingworth representing science were together, Dimmesdale felt that "It would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework...did he feel the occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect than those with which he habitually held converse." (Hawthorne 95)

Dimmesdale is a religious believer, and religion is the guarantee of his inner peace. However, he also vaguely felt the shackles of Puritanism on him, which made Dimmesdale feel confused. Seven years of pain made Dimmesdale increasingly aware of the hypocrisy of religion, but he still loved the eternal God (Yang 99). In addition, in the process of getting along with doctors, the new media based on knowledge—scientific thoughts infiltrated into the pastor's brain imperceptibly. He had an inexplicable vision of this new media, which was different from the dogma that bound himself. In Dimmesdale's view, it was free and fresh. However, at the same time, Dimmesdale harbored hostility in his heart:

"...he looked doubtfully, fearfully—even, at times, with horror and the bitterness of hatred—at the deformed figure of the old physician." (Hawthorne 108)

Dimmesdale's inner resistance is partly due to his secret of guilt and his vigilance against the doctor Chillingworth who wants to spy on his heart, and partly due to his confusion of inner belief. As a Puritan priest, he should believe in religion, but he found the charm of science in Chillingworth, and even yearned for it. The science that encourages freedom of thinking is undoubtedly contrary to Puritan doctrine, and the pastor is afraid of the power of science and his own "shake".

REASONS FOR DIMMESDALE'S AMBIVALENCE

Dimmesdale's extramarital affair with Hester undoubtedly does not meet the requirements of morality and law. In the face of sin, Dimmesdale has the same fear and entanglement as most ordinary people who violate morality and law, but the pastor's

identity has further contributed to his contradictions from both social and individual aspects: the Puritan society that represses human nature, the choice of fame and wealth, and the examination of religious constraints.

Tolerance Under Social Oppression

The repression from the Puritan society is a potential cause for Dimmesdale and Hester to violate morality and law, and ultimately lead to the conflict of their ethical identity: "First, he is a genuine Puritan, a pastor admired by the religious people, then he is Hester's lover, Pearl's biological father, and finally he is Chillingworth's rival and revenge object" (Yang 98). This conflict is the result of society's long-term harm to human nature. Kang (149) pointed out that in New England, where Puritanism was prevalent at that time, Puritanism believed that human beings were born evil, and only through extreme self-discipline can good be achieved. Pastor Dimmesdale has almost morbid self-demands. He often fasted, worked extremely hard even at the cost of his own health. Puritanism also emphasizes asceticism and excludes feelings, which makes people lose the freedom and right to pursue love. Under the influence of this decadent thought, Dimmesdale was always alone before meeting Hester. The excessive suppression of human nature hides the danger of radical resistance, as exemplified by Dimmesdale's falling in love with the married woman Hester. To some extent, the painful and contradictory Dimmesdale became the victim of the Puritan society (Zhang 253).

The Choice Before Worldly Fame and Fortune

Dimmesdale struggled with public confession from beginning to end. The reason was that he tried to make his own choice before worldly fame and fortune. As a trusted pastor, the parishioners obtained spiritual salvation through the influence and guidance of Dimmesdale, so Dimmesdale was seen as the "apostle of God" from the public point of view. He is the best among the clergy. Therefore, to publicly expose his guilt is to directly admit that he has violated the morality and responsibility of being a priest. The most direct blow to the pastor is the destruction of the public image, causing him to fall from the altar, and at the same time, it may lead to the collapse of the doctrine he preached in people's hearts, thus betraying his faith of devotion and hard protection. The choice and worry before worldly fame and wealth led to Dimmesdale's repeated entanglement in the matter of public confession and delayed action. The final public confession on the gallows is the final awakening of his soul as a preacher, the guilt for the religious people, and the letting go of fame and wealth. Su (115) believed that this was his soul struggle and a great change in the sense of faith. At the last moment of his life, Dimmesdale truly realized that public repentance was the maintenance of his faith in the doctrine, and that worldly fame and wealth were trivial before his inner salvation.

Examination in Religious Bondage

Dimmesdale's contradiction also stems from his re-examination of Puritanism under the constraints of religion. In the Puritan-led society, people adhere to the Puritan rules. And in the face of the suppression of human nature by the rules, the religious people who have lost their sense of independent thinking gradually become numb, so that they accept the rules completely. In the era of universal belief in Puritanism, people can't hear voices other than Puritanism, so they will not have self-contradictory psychology or behavior. After falling in love with Hester, Dimmesdale first questioned the religion he had always been faithful to. He felt that Puritan doctrine was not as perfect as he had always preached and believed. It contained the desire for love in human nature and brought endless pain to people. In the seven years after Hester's public trial, Dimmesdale, who had suffered from his inner torment, felt more the pain brought by Puritanism, which suppressed human nature, and more aware of the charm of science advocating freedom of thought. The examination in this bondage finally led to the confusion of the pastor and his own contradictions.

DEMONSTRATION OF DIMMESDALE'S CONTRADICTORY WRITING SKILLS

Unlike traditional literary creations, Hawthorne directly displays Dimmesdale's contradictory psychology through a large number of detailed psychological analysis in *The Scarlet Letter*. The character contrast between Hester and Dimmesdale, as well as the vivid scene description, depict the contradictory character of Dimmesdale from the side.

Delicate Psychological Analysis

Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is known as the first work of psychoanalytic novels. Dimmesdale's contradictory display cannot be separated from the detailed psychological description. The delicate psychological analysis vividly depicts Dimmesdale's tangle of public confession and makes Dimmesdale's characters show authenticity. As Katz (3) said, the characters in this novel are more like characters in realistic works than fabled characters.

Hawthorne used psychological description many times in *The Scarlet Letter*. The psychological activities of Pastor Dimmesdale are mainly concentrated in the two chapters of "The Inferior of a Heart" and "The Minister's Vigil". "The Inferior of a Heart" deeply analyzes Dimmesdale's inner activities. The public's respect and trust for him brought him great pain in his heart. He tried to tell people about his sins for many times, but finally only revealed to the public in vague words that he was a mean man. He hated his hypocritical behavior, but Dimmesdale, who was worried about his downfall, chose to tangle in his heart day after day to avoid public confession. "The Minister's

Vigil" is the most fluctuating chapter in Dimmesdale's heart. From the beginning of his collapse impulse, he was about to confess his guilt to pastor Wilson, to meet Hester and Pearl with new vitality in his heart, and then to his avoidance when confronted with Pearl's suggestion that the pastor hold hands with herself and his mother publicly, his worries and fears were at a glance. Through detailed psychological analysis of Dimmesdale, his cowardly and tangled personality and contradictory psychology are directly exposed to the readers.

Clear Character Contrast

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester and Dimmesdale are both the bearers of the scarlet letter "A", but Hawthorne highlights the differences of Dimmesdale by comparing the characters with Hester, and then shows the contradictions of Dimmesdale.

Hawthorne described Hester as a tough woman in his article. After Hester's extramarital affair with Dimmesdale was revealed, she bravely walked to the gallows to face her mistakes. In the face of the crimes committed, Hester and Dimmesdale have very different attitudes and situations. Hester was subjected to a painful public trial on the cold gallows, while Dimmesdale was afraid to admit it because of his reputation and delayed the public confession for seven years. Feng (85) believed that Hawthorne used the technique of contrast to show Dimmesdale's "double-sided image". Hester's crime was exposed to the public, so she suffered seven years of contempt and criticism. Dimmesdale was a hypocrite. In the eyes of the public, he was erudite and noble and devoted to religion. In private, he was a coward who violated morality and religious rules and dared not confess his guilt. It was his cowardice and cowardice that led to his delay and escape from the public confession. Londhe (3) stressed that the public exposure of guilt would release the guilty, while the private concealment of mistakes often led to death and destruction. So unlike Hester, who bravely faced his mistakes and wore the scarlet letter "A", Pastor Dimmesdale gradually spent his life in the inner contradiction caused by hiding and escaping.

Besides, after wearing the scarlet letter, Hester did not resent herself for being negative and degenerate, nor fight with the public with resentment. Instead, she did good deeds and raised Pearl seriously. So, people gradually interpret the scarlet letter on Hester's chest as "capable" within her gentle quality and silent kindness. Liu (24) believed that this was Hester's silent resistance with the doctrines of tenacity and goodness and suppression of human nature. Dimmesdale, however, fell into the tangled contradiction of "repentance—no repentance", tortured his body and spirit, wasted time and life.

Vivid Scene Description

Hawthorne placed Dimmesdale in different scenes, demonstrating the pastor's multifaceted character and complex psychology in different scenes, and better exposing the contradictions of Dimmesdale's characters. Zhang (64) pointed out that unlike the traditional creation based on time narration, *The Scarlet Letter* mainly adopts the form of

space narration. Bayer (257) pointed out that the key scenes in *The Scarlet Letter* are mainly described from the perspective of the audience, while the plots related to Dimmesdale mainly focus on the gallows. Dimmesdale's first appearance at the gallows in *The Scarlet Letter* was when Hester was publicly displayed. The scaffold was full of "bystanders" whispering. The atmosphere under the stage was "gloomy" and "serious". At the moment, the pastor's pale face urged Hester to name his lover. When Dimmesdale visited the gallows for the second night, there was no one under the gallows and everyone was asleep. The pastor who was suffering from the pain uttered a cry of "sadness and fear". His mood went from the initial collapse to the desire to repent, to the satisfaction after meeting Hester's mother and daughter, to the fear of withdrawal and reluctance to repent. At the end of the full text, the priest came to the gallows for the last time, exposed the scarlet letter in full view of the public, and faced up to the crime. At this time, the crowd under the gallows was in a "turmoil" and "panic". Dimmesdale's mood in these three scenes was different. The complexity of his mood echoed the atmosphere of the scene, which reflected the tangle and contradiction of the pastor's inner thoughts in the seven years after Hester's trial after the wrong combination with Hester, and finally showed the contradiction and complexity of Dimmesdale's characters.

SUMMARY

It is undeniable that the extramarital affair between Dimmesdale and Hester violated the requirements of morality and law. Their combination was "stealing forbidden fruit". This sin made Dimmesdale fall into self-contradiction: the conflict of ethical identity, the tangle of public confession and the confusion of inner belief. This part stemmed from the repression of the good feelings in human nature in the Puritan society and is also the self-choice of Dimmesdale. In the process of suffering and remorse, he began to break the blind belief in Puritan doctrine and triggered the reflection and re-examination of religion, science and human nature in the context of Puritan abstinence. In the era when Puritan imprisoned people's thoughts, there was no doubt that it had certain rebellious and progressive nature. From escaping from public confession to finally choosing confession, to some extent, Dimmesdale's awakening of human nature and self-salvation in sin were reflected, as well as the author Hawthorne's compassion for the religious people in a society that harmed human nature.

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