

The Conflicts in Arthur Dimmesdale

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Abstract—Conflict theory is one of the most plausible theories to be adapted to the analysis of the protagonist's inner heart activities and outer behaviors. From the perspective of conflict theory, Arthur Dimmesdale, the heavily psychic tortured priest in the scarlet letter, is actually the most important figure in the fiction. This importance is rendered by three conflicts, the conflict in Dimmesdale's inner heart, the conflict between Dimmesdale and Hester and Chillingworth, the conflict between Dimmesdale and the puritan society.

Keywords—conflict; Arthur Dimmesdale; the puritan society

I. INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter tells a tragic love story that occurred during the colonial period in North America. Hester Prynne, the heroine, married Doctor Chillingworth, but there were no love between them. Hester fell in love with Reverend Dimmesdale and gave birth to their daughter Pearl. This was a great shame in the Puritan society. Prynne was punished in public, wearing a red A character marked adultery on the chest part of her gown. Unyieldingly, Hester refuse to tell who her daughter's father was. She was sentenced into prison. Dimmesdale and Hester's struggles are just at the bottom of all the people of different times and can arouse much resonance and sympathy among them.

Nathaniel Hawthorne uses symbolism in the fiction with subjective imagination, people's psychological activities and intuition in the first place in the description. Therefore, it is not only the representative of American romantic novels, but also regarded as the initial of psychological analysis in American novels. *The Scarlet Letter* is an ever-lasting hot topic of American literature. Hester Prynne successfully catches the eyeballs from readers and critics by her extreme loneliness, diligent work and ethereal soul. However, the hero, Reverend Dimmesdale should never be neglected. It is just the conflicts occurred in him which work as the propeller putting the rhythm of the fiction developing forward.

II. CONFLICT AND FICTION

A. The Function of the Conflict in Fiction

The conflict is one of the main elements in a fiction. It intensifies the plot, gives prominence to the theme, guides to the characters' behavior, whether internal or external, and it foretells the fate of the heroes. It plays an important role in pushing the fiction to reach its climax and in the conflict, and the clue is entailed through the whole story from the very beginning to its end. Conflict reveals the author's speculation,

philosophy, and attitude towards the world and humans. And also, conflict provides a background for the plot, and a soul for the fiction. Unlike love, conflict can't transcend time and place. It is fixed in a certain given situation, and it varies from one situation to another. For instance, the conflict, most frequently seen in modernism — the split in personality, is largely different from that in the past.

If there is no conflict, there would be no theme, no meaning in a fiction, and the color of the fiction would fade away soon and the fiction would be ephemeral and can't find its way into literature. If there is no conflict, readers will not know what they gain and what they lose in value, and there would be no criteria of evaluation or justice. In a word, only there is conflict, there would be the echoed feeling aroused in the readers, lacking which, any fiction would be empty — passion, sympathy, grief, criticism, and affirmation.

B. Three Types of Conflicts

According to M.H.Abrams, conflicts can be divided in to the following types:

- “the relation between them (protagonist and antagonist) is one of conflict.” (M.H.Abrams, 225)
- “in addition to the conflict between individuals, there may be the conflict of the protagonist against fate, or the circumstances that stand between him and a goal he set himself.” (M.H.Abrams, 225)
- “and in some works (as in Henry James' Portrait of a Lady) the chief conflict is the opposing desires or values in the protagonist's own temperament.” (M.H.Abrams, 225)

They are, shortly, the conflict between individuals, the conflict between individual and society, the conflict in the human heart itself.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, weaves a great net full of the knots of conflict. He did not mean to provide or explain the methods to untie the knots. He just shows his readers a social problem by revealing the relations between the knots, among which, Dimmesdale is arranged at the focus of the conflict net. In the fiction we can find all the three types of the conflict in him, formed as the conflict in his own heart, the conflict between lover and priest, the conflict from between friend and enemy, human and god's messenger, truth and hypocrisy, impulse and self-reliant, moral violation and moral defence, to live and death. So from this aspect, Arthur Dimmesdale is actually the most

important figure in the story. Tracing his psychological progress, we can get a full-scale comprehension of the author's original intention, and a deeper understanding of the fiction.

III. THE CONFLICTS IN DIMMESDALE

A. *The Id, the Ego, the Superego*

The fiction is imbued with the conflict in Dimmesdale's heart, "which alone", according to William Faulkner, "can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." (Zhai, 354) Nathaniel Hawthorne resorts to plenty of rooms and ink to depict the psychological process of Dimmesdale.

How to explain the hypocrisy in Dimmesdale? Is he lowly, purposely, impudently avoiding the public criticism? Why does he escape? What is he intend to escape from? Can his dim be over simply contributed to his selfishness? what about his repentance? Is he really a coward? Is he really prevailed by the basest feeling — cowardness? We probably can explain these questions with Freud's theory of the id, the ego, and the superego. As his explanation, the id is "an impulsion to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure principle." (Guerin, 129) The ego "is the rational governing agent of the psyche", "the ego is governed by the reality principle." (Guerin, 130) And the superego "acting either directly or through the ego, the superego serves to repress or inhibit the drives of the id." (Guerin, 131) Driven by the id, the hot passion of his heart, the pious minister, Dimmesdale, has done a wild thing, he has committed, — the original sin, which, against the Puritan asceticism, is obviously of love, of joy, and of passion. He longs for it. Only under the hot passion brought by the id, can his desire for human love be put into performance. Whereas, for the superego, it stands for the devout religious belief in the minister. His Puritan position, his obligation as a clergyman prevent him from his desiring for the most basic feeling of human nature. Both the id and the superego contrive to have the mercy of the ego, and the confrontation is severe, which is externalized as the agony and anguish in Dimmesdale's heart. His personality, at last, is split up into two parts, of which, an apparent consequence is that under the solemn ministerial gown, he can never get a peace in his heart again. His heart has been placed under the ceaseless torture from the two sides.

The author arranged three scenes at the scaffold with the purpose to reveal the struggling process in Dimmesdale's heart, which should be paid more attention to.

The first, when Hester Prynne is sentenced at the scaffold, Dimmesdale appears as a priest. On one hand, he performs his religious duty, on the other, as a "sinner", he is seized by a complicated feeling, which, like a underflow in the river, floods in his heart roaring. When Hester refuses to tell the name of her lover, he relieves, and at the same time, he is drawn into a deep hole of repentance and guilty, deeper than the betrayal of his sacred Puritan career, —the betrayal of his heart, his lover, and his passion to his weakness.

The second, by the cover of the dark night, Dimmesdale climbs up onto the scaffold where he and his worldly family stand together, where he gets strength of new life.

The moment that he did so, there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying through all his veins, as if the mother and the child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system. (Hawthorne. 140)

He is so shocked by the torrent, and his feeling as a father and a lover awakened liked the newly-sprout willow leaves in April. This is a forward step he paves nearer to the truth. However, he turns down Pearl's request to expose himself in public. That means, he has not yet overcome the fear of the public opinion, of the social force and the Puritan Laws. He still wanders between human nature and human institution.

The third, also on the scaffold, Dimmesdale tears away the ministerial bond from before his breast, confessed his "sin" hidden for seven years. At the same time, what he tears away is by no means only the ministerial bond, but his role as a clergyman. He breaks with the Puritan Laws long-established on the sable land, and comes back to be a lover, a father, a human.

The author makes a pre-Freud depiction of the hero. These three scenes can be said to be the three phases in Dimmesdale's psychological process. From a pious, dedicated clergyman to a betrayer, a rebel against the Puritan Doctrine, the transition is far from easy and smooth. The conflicts between a lover and a priest, between a patient and a pastor, between a human and a missionary, between a rebel and a defender, all the above grind his soul into the hollow penance and penitence, into the burning torture bearing upon the flesh of his breast, and split his personality into two pieces, which can never be united until his death. The conflict plays an important role in explaining Dimmesdale's psychological process and it reveals the author's attitude toward the Puritan Religion, which can do nothing good to human soul and should be discarded, or at least, should be doubted. As shown in the forest interview, when Hester inquired Dimmesdale whether he has gotten peace in his good works, he replied, "No, Hester, no. There is no substance in it! It is cold and dead, and can do nothing for me!" (Hawthorne, 176)

The interview between the pastor and Hester in the forest is a critical one. It is the key turning point in Dimmesdale's life. The moment he decides to be with Hester again, the id in him has found a loose way to steal into the sphere of his thought and feeling. Once the id, even a little part of it, gets a revolution from the suppression of the superego, it will become an aggressive and destructive force. This can be used to interpret why Dimmesdale should develop such fantastic and ludicrous ideas to his parishioners on his way home.

B. *Chillingworth, Hester*

Chillingworth, the cold-hearted revenger, keeps gnawing into Dimmesdale's soul, and violating the dignity of his personality maliciously. He is the symbol of the evil force

protecting the social institute. From this point, he stands for the superego in Dimmesdale. The ugliness of his form, is in accordance, in the author's view, with the ugliness of the social institute. Undoubtedly, there is a sharp conflict between Dimmesdale, the lover of Hester and Chillingworth, the husband of Hester. Chillingworth, a wise doctor, refuse to accept the shame Hester and her lover impose on him, his dignity as a husband offended severely. He, like a snake, seek every possible chance to discover the man who brings such a shame to him. He accompanies the priest. Superficially, he takes care of the health of the Reverenced, while actually, he gazes at him stealthily. He enjoys the pleasure of the vengeance he commits in the dark. He is the vine of dark forces tangled around the pale birch, sprouting his prickles into the birch skin to squeeze its vital juice to the last drop. Their conflict is irreconcilable. Neither is there agreement nor compromise. Dimmesdale, the symbol of natural life, is finally smothered by the imperceptible accumulation of suffocation. He is harmed by his health, which is actually a result of long suffered inner torture. The conflict between them ends in his thorough failure.

And what effect does Hester cause upon Dimmesdale? Is there any conflict between Dimmesdale and Hester? Why does Dimmesdale call her "my better angel" in what view should we access to the brave, able and isolated woman? She is, of course, the better angel for Dimmesdale, much better than those with wings, watching over the humans, yet doing nothing. It is Hester, who brings back Dimmesdale's joy again. It is Hester, who gives Dimmesdale the hope for a new life. It is Hester, who grants Dimmesdale courage to confess his "sin" in public. She is the temptation, the temptation of beauty, of love, and of nature, which is irresistible for Dimmesdale. In this case, Hester, is the outside of the id in Dimmesdale, the precipitating factor to trigger Dimmesdale's hot passion that has been suppressed so long by the Puritan Doctrine. This id will further make up a conflict between the protagonists. Dimmesdale's puritan awareness does not allow him to indulge himself into the love with Hester. Hester is a mirror reflecting his image, yet he fears to find an authentic self. Although he is eager to get access to her, he is resistant to her. In the conflict with Hester, he is also a loser.

Hester and Chillingworth are the two major cognitive objects that Dimmesdale connects with the world. They are at the mean time the two aspects of Dimmesdale's personality.

C. *Dimmesdale and the Puritan Society*

In the fiction, Dimmesdale repeatedly claims "I fear, I fear". What does he fear? What makes him so restless? We may probe into his heart in respect of individual and society. One of the primitive feeling we heritage from our ancient ancestors, is that we fear to be isolated, we have the tendency to congregate in groups, which has been emphasized in Dimmesdale. So he fears, he fears to be alone, to be discarded by the society, to be left in dark hollowness. He does not have enough courage to sustain the horrible consequence. But when the conflict between the two sides becomes hot, and there is no possibility for individual to

compromise with the society, only two approaches available to settle the conflict, either the individual subjugates to the society, leading a hypocritical life under the overt calm, or he breaks with the social law. In the fiction, the protagonist chooses not to avoid anymore, but to face his heart, to come back to Nature. He does not flee, for he knows a conflict between an individual and the society has no sphere to flee. What he can do, is only to face and to choose, either the Puritan establishment or he own heart. However, the travail is long, difficult, and full of agony and anguish. The young minister has a Puritan background too profound to overcome, by which, he is firmly wrenched. Such a background has become a heavy burden for him, never a console, never a sacred altar again. He has been so suppressed that he thinks his joy has been dead. As he cried to Hester in the forest "methought the germ of it (joy) was dead in me!" (Hawthorne. 184) But once he determines to adopt a new life, his joy comes back again. So what is the Puritanism? Through Dimmesdale, the author, puts forward his own view, it is nothing but torture and suffering, yet unreasonably tremendous. Resulting from the tremendous force, our hero has been wandering and struggling between the Nature law and the Puritan Law for as long as seven years! Though at last, the human nature defeats the Puritan Law, yet the cost is much too dear. His energy has been wasted, his health has been destroyed, his vitality faints away from him, and death comes closer till it grasps him.

IV. CONCLUSION

Dimmesdale is dead, a young life withered. He is a weak, tragic figure, a sacrifice of the conflict between individual and society. But it is just these weak, tragic figures, who promote to awake the average people, who promote the requirement of the firm ones to be respected, who force the society to confess the existence of the Nature Law, to accelerate its advance, and to adapt itself to be more agreeable to human nature.

On realizing this point, Nathaniel Hawthorne, at the end of the fiction, through Hester Prynne, foretells the truth of a hopeful future,

At some brighter period when the world have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. (Hawthorne. 239)

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