

On Hester's Defiance

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Abstract. This paper suggests that Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* is always defiant throughout the plot and then discusses the effect of defiance on the moral growth of the woman when sinned against. Finally, it explores Hester's defiance considering the historical background of America.

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Letter, regarded as Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece, tells a moving about the sin of adultery, its effect upon people living in a Puritan community and how deliverance is obtained for some of them. Of the three major characters (Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth), Hester is the only one who has a positive response to the scarlet letter A, a token of sin, and is able to reconstruct her life and finally win a moral victory. Many critics have agreed that it is Hester's humanities such as ability, honesty and kindness that help to make her reestablish a new fellowship with her villagers and finally win their love and admiration. Chang Yaixin has summed this point explicitly, "She does her best to keep her hold on the magic chain of humanity ... Her life eventually acquires a real significance when she reestablish a meaningful relationship with her fellowmen" [1]. Actually, Hester has many humanities and she is able, honest and kind. However, in my opinion, defiance is Hester's most important humanity. Hester is defiant above all, not only in pursuing love and happiness but also in living under the persecutions of Puritanism. The paper studies Hester's defiance, her fearlessly facing the persecution and never yielding to the Puritan world, considering the whole plot, the effect of defiance on her moral victory and the historical background of the spirit.

2. Hester's defiance throughout the plot

Hester is defiant throughout the plot and many events conspicuously manifest the defiance possessed by the central character.

Hester's first appearance in the story gives a strong impression of her defiance. At the beginning of the story, Hester steps from a jail into an open air to show her public disgrace. On the threshold of the prison door, she repels the town-beadle who intends to draw her forward "by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character" and steps into the open air "as if by her own will" [2]. On such occasion, only with a rebellion soul, can Hester serenely move into the step of the scaffold and stand quietly under the staring eyes that watch her disgrace.

When the ministers of the town call on her to name the man of equal guilt, Hester unyieldingly refuses. Her refusal deeply moves Arthur Dimmesdale and gives the sinful man relief. "He now drew back, with a long respiration, 'Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman heart! She will not speak!' " [2]. Dimmesdale's reaction to Hester's refusal indicates he does not dare to confess his guilt but admires Hester's defiance. In contrast, Hester's defiance is remarkable in not yielding to any pressure. Even under the persecution of Puritanism, the defiant heroine never gives up her own belief. When Chillingworth insists on taking revenge on Dimmesdale, Hester suggests Dimmesdale should leave the colony with her to start a new life. Hester's seeking for love and happiness expresses her defiance against the Puritan morals that can crush a human's capacity for love.

After Dimmesdale and Chillingworth die within the same year, Hester, with the scarlet letter on her breast lives alone for many years. At this stage, she knows how to calmly face any suffering on earth and often alleviates people's pain by her deeds of kindness and mercy- "Hester comforted and counseled them as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, 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 relationship between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" [2]. Here, Hester's "firm belief" indicates that the woman "stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow" [2] still contravenes the Puritan beliefs and stands in defiance of the Puritan persecutions in the end.

Hester's life is companied by her remarkable defiance. However, the story is not just a praise of this defiance, but a hymn to the moral growth of the woman when sinned against. A further discussion of the effect of Hester's defiance will be given in the next section.

3. The effect of Hester's defiance on her moral growth

Before the effects of Hester's defiance on her moral growth are discussed, the first step is to explain what Hester's moral growth is. In general opinion, "moral growth" means the development of becoming better in character and behavior and purer especially in the matters of sex. Hester's moral growth is an important clue throughout the plot and seems to be what the author mainly concerns with. At first, Hester is considered to be an immoral woman and outlawed by the self-righteous community. The "A" on her breast is a token of shame. But then the villagers who benefit from her sympathy and help regard her as able, kind and helpful. In their eyes the scarlet letter becomes a sign of "ability". Later in the story, the letter A appears in the sky, signifying 'Angel' [1]. In the end, Hester is regarded as really pure and good enough to go to heaven. The change of the meaning of the scarlet letter from "Adultery" to "Able" and then to "Angel" symbolizes Hester's moral growth, the improvement of her human nature.

During the process of Hester's moral growth, her defiance plays a most important role. It is the defiance that enables her to stick to her own beliefs, improve her human nature and win the final moral victory. If Hester had lacked defiance, she would have been defeated morally at the beginning, and would not have had the opportunity to acquire her moral growth. From the novel, we know that in the early days of New England the Puritans lived a life of strict and rigorous moral discipline, and an adulteress had to wear a token of shame all her life. Adultery is such a serious shame that not everyone can endure it. Dimmesdale, fearful to admit his sin, undergoes the tragic experience of physical and spiritual disintegration until his death. In contrast, Hester is fearless of showing her "evil" to the outside and ready to accept the scarlet letter. Hester's defiance encourages her to maintain her honesty, the best policy for a person by moral standards. In view of her honesty, we can say that Hester's defiance helps her be morally victorious in the first step of lessening the tension between her and society.

After being abandoned by the Puritan community, Hester reconstructs her life with defiance and gradually gets moral growth. Life is full of hardship and seemingly of no hope for the outcast woman with her little child. Hester accepts her own world without fear and bravely asserts her dignity on her own set of principles. Not being distorted by the Puritan persecution, Hester is always able, kind, helpful and even becomes wiser and more generous. In the end the villagers respect Hester and are proud of her and in this stage the defiant Hester has improved her human nature and finally won the moral victory. Hester wears the scarlet letter on her breast all her life, however, her defiance helps her have a positive attitude to the token of shame, thus improve her humanity and acquire her moral growth.

4. The historical background of Hester's defiance

Hester's defiance is of great value, and the defiance not possessed by everyone in the world has its own historical background. The third section explores Hester's defiance considering the historical background of America.

Defiance is part of the heritage of the spirit of early Americans and can be traced back to the very beginning of American history. Early in the 17th century, the English settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts began the main stream of what was regarded as the American national history. As John Smith portrayed, English North America was a land of endless bounty; and his vision helped lure the early settlements to create a New Promised Land where all seemed possible through hard work and faith[3]. At the same time, the very severity of the frontier conditions taught them to be ever ready for any misfortunes and failures, and defiance was assimilated into their spirit in the grim struggle for survival and development.

Having come to New England for the sake of religious freedom, the Puritans founded a theocracy which may have been inspiring but often led to injustice and intolerance. They were zealous in defense of their own beliefs, but often did not respect the beliefs of others. In spite of the faults of the Puritans, they still lived a way of life that stressed toughness, purpose and hard work. They dreamed of living under a perfect order and worked with indomitable courage towards building a new Garden of Eden in America. Cherishing their own belief, the Puritans looked even the worst of life in the face without fear.

Hester's seeking for love breaks the Puritan principle and her sin is an opposition to the strictness, the harsh side of the Puritans. However, Hester also insists on her own belief and fearlessly reconstruct her life; that is to say, Hester still owns one powerful aspect of the Puritan spirit—defiance, that is never yielding to any pressure and bravely recreating a new promised world defiance. In fact, as Hawthorne seems to suggest, everyone is potentially a sinner, and great moral courage is most important for the improvement of human nature[4]. In this sense, it can be said that Hester's defiance is ahead of that of her generation.

5. Conclusion

This paper offered a study of Hester's defiance considering the whole plot of the story, the effect of Hester's defiance on her moral growth and the background of America behind the spirit of defiance. From the study, it can be seen that it is the spirit of defiance cultivated in the American history and always possessed by Hester that encourages her to rebel against the Puritan persecution and win the final moral growth. In a broad sense, it can be said defiance is of great value to an individual and a nation in that it always encourage them to achieve their survival and growth especially in the adversity. We, Chinese people, also often regarded as brave and hard-working, still can learn more from Hester's defiance to improve our work and advance our cause of socialist construction.

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