

## Hawthorne qua Psychologist in *The Scarlet Letter*

Sung Myun Hong

### I

While *The Scarlet Letter* was described by Hawthorne himself as a romance "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet," Harry Levin points out, very acutely, that;

".....the quasi-historical setting [allows him to] question certain moralistic assumptions with a freedom and a candor which he could not have applied to [a nineteenth-century subject. It is not the least of the book's achievements that in the every epoch of genteel femininity, when America outdid Victorian England in the strictness of its taboos, Hawthorne's treatment of a triangle was hardly less of a challenge than D.H. Lawrence's"]<sup>1)</sup>

It is necessary to add that Hawthorne is for less interested in the adultery itself than in the effects of sin upon the characters themselves. The public guilty of Hester produces a dangerous alienation between Hester and humanity. Without Pearl as her link to human being, Hester would have moved closer to Mister Hibbins and her Satanic revels. Hawthorne describes Pearl as a born outcast of the infantile world. He adds, mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society. It is Hawthorne qua psychologist who acutely senses those elements in the nature of Hester Prynne and the different elements in the nature of the Puritans that turns Hester toward humanity.

As for the Puritans Hawthorne describes their sable simplicity which ejects in public ceremonies in sombre, but yet a studied magnificence. Hester's needle work and her art were soon on the ruff of the Governor; military men were it on their scarfs; and the minister on his hand; it decorate the baby's little cap; it was shut up to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead. Thus, Hester's rationalizing combined with the Puritan modes of dress to make Hester's penance possible. But Hawthorne adds an ironic note; out of Hester's punishment comes a greater danger. Liberated in one sense from the community, Hester assumed a freedom of speculation; in her lonesome cottage, by the seashore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England. While we guess speculation as dangerous from a Puritan point of view, Haw-

---

1) H. Levin (1960), *The Scarlet Letter by Hawthorne*, (Harvard University. Press) INT. IX.

thorne, in the role of omniscient author, comments;

"It is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulation of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action."

## II

Treatment of Dimmesdale is worth speculating, in the light of this insight, on the Puritan view of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth as well as Hester. The Puritans punish Hester, hoping ironically to save her but forcing upon her the isolation leading to more serious alienation and also the possible sin of pride and cold speculation. She moves closer to the position of Chillingworth, and further from a womanly position of warmth. The Puritans sense the allegiance of Chillingworth and Satan but do not recognize the utter depths of his depravity, not his liaison with evil but his intellectual pride that will not leave punishment to God; he moves toward the unpardonable sin of severing himself from humanity. In this respect he acts very much like "Ethan Brand." To the conventional Puritan he might have been approved as rooting out hidden sin. In Dimmesdale we have the irony of the guilty minister serving as the symbol of saintliness. On the day following the minister's vigil on scaffold,

".....he preached a discourse which was held to the richest and the most heavenly influences, that had ever proceeded from his lips. Souls, it is said, more souls than one, were brought to the truth by the efficacy of that sermon....."

In the change that occurs in Pearl, Hawthorne reveals one of his most basic themes, a theme contained in the novel and his short stories, the theme of human isolation being destructive. In the chapter devoted to Pearl, he observes:

".....the hostile feeling with which the child regarded all those offspring of her own heart and mind. She never created a friend, but seemed always to be sewing broadest the dragon's teeth, whence sprung a harvest of armed enemies, against whom she rushed to battle."

Then, in the climactic scene of the minister's vigil on the scaffold Hawthorne brings Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl together:

"The minister felt for the child's other hand, and took it. The moment that he did so, there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, curing 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 self torpid system. The three formed an electric chain.

But the moment does not continue. Dimmesdale's fears cannot survive the coming of daylight and he returns to concealment and isolation. In the Chapter twenty-three, "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter," Hawthorne dispels the sin of concealment and isolation.

---

2) Levin, XIV.

When the minister, in the open light of the day, calls Hester and Pearl to stand beside him on the scaffold, and almost magical result follow: "Pearl Kissed his lips. A spell was broken.

The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as the tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, not for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it."

The power of love in contrast to isolation also appears in the *Scarlet Letter* another form. Hawthorne views the Puritans in two ways, as human beings directly and in their institutional harshness. Speaking in the omniscient author voice, he notes, "It is to the credit of human nature, that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily that it hates." With this assumption stated Hawthorne continues:

"The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people; individuals in private life, meanwhile, had quite forgiven Hester for her frailty; nay, more, they had begun to look upon her *Scarlet Letter* as the token, not of that one sin, for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but of her many good deeds since.

Even Dimmesdale's forgiveness of Hester's sin of concealment (not telling him about her relationship to Chillingworth) takes on a relativistic tone:

"We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the pollu priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of human heart.

F.O. Matthiessen observes that Hester and Dimmesdale:

".....are distinguished from the wronged husband in accordance with the theological doctrine that excessive love of things which should take only a second place in the affections, though leading to the sin of lust, is less grave than love distorted, love turned from God and from his creature, into self-consuming envy and vengeful pride."<sup>3)</sup>

### III

Hawthorne's treatment of Roger Chillingworth is much more severe than his treatment of Hester or the minister. Yet even here, ambiguities and paradoxes continual. With appropriate symbolism the old man is described as withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun. Chillingworth was the wronged husband; he had been, throughout life, calm in temperament, kindly, though not of warm affections, but ever, and in all his relations with the world, a pure and upright man. Hawthorne self suggests that Chillingworth's drive for revenge has an element of necessity, not a Puritan theological necessity but an artistic set succeeding act with a kind of dramatic inevitability.

3) F.O. Matthiessen (1941) *American Renaissance*, (New York: The Macmillan Co.), p.42.

When Hester Chillingworth if he has enticed her into a bond that will prove the ruin of her soul, he answers, "Not thy soul. No, not thing." Ambiguity exists in the remark. From the old man's view, he anticipates finding the guilty party; the reader recognizes the oncoming self-destruction. At the same time the remark heightens the tension in the novel and intensify the storyteller's effectiveness. Almost the same device to increase tension is used when Chillingworth in the recognition chapter remarks, in a height ending of the dread, "he will be known! he will be known! he will be known!"

Hawthorne find out the changes in Chillingworth to follow a recurrent theme, the idea that inner states of being are reflected in outer revelation. Thus, Hester's recollection of her husband as she stands upon the scaffold includes his physical deformity and his pale, thin, scholar-like visage. The foreshadowing accomplished, Hawthorne immediately underlines the idea:

"He was small in stature, with a furrowed visage, with, as yet could hardly be termed aged. There was a remarkable intelligence in his features as of a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens."

If Chillingworth plays Mephistopheles, he is not trying to be guile Faust into a seduction but to bring out his remorseful after thoughts. As a doctor, Chillingworth perceives that the source of his patient's malady is not physical. There is a strange sympathy betwixt soul and body in Dimmesdale. Ultimately his body reveals the secret his soul has kept. Today we would call Dimmesdale illness psychosomatic, and upon his colloquies with the leech as sessions with a psychoanalyst. Hawthorne's vocabulary may sound old-fashioned; yet we have scarcely penetrated beyond some of his psychological perceptions, such as his argument for the essential sameness of love and hate-which we might characterize, less elegantly, as the ambivalence of Chillingworth's motives. With Dimmesdale, the problem is Hawthorne's obsessive theme of secret sin-guilt-consciousness, suppressed and seeking catharsis.<sup>4)</sup>

Hawthorne exaggerate his story with a dramatic conclusion in chapter ten. Chillingworth push the minister's garment: With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by the eye end features, and therefore bursting forth through the whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously manifest by extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms the towards the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor! Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comforts himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom. But what distinguished the physician's ecstasy from satan's was the trait of wonder in it!

Hawthorne concludes his description of Chillingworth in the last chapter of the novel: Nothing was more remarkable than the change which took place, almost immediately

4) H. Levin, XV.

after Mr. Dimmesdale's death, in the appearance and demeanour of the old man known as Roger Chillingworth. All his strength and energy—all his vital and intellectual force—seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun. Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions seen in a celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and lurid glow. In the spiritual world; the old physician and the minister, mutual victims as they may have been, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love.<sup>5)</sup>

## V

Hawthorne corelates the moral and spiritual degradation with the physical deterioration. He uses essentially the same device in a more spectacular way earlier in the novel when he introduces the "great red letter in the sky" the letter "A" which some believed stood for Angel. Here, the novelist combines ambiguity, symbolism, and storytelling. However, this is the scene that prompts Henry James, in his bibliography of Hawthorne, to protest:

".....imaginative, impressive, poetic; but when almost immediately afterwards, the author goes on to say that "the minister looking upward to the zenith behold there the appearance of an immense letter—the letter A—marked out in lines of dull red light, we feel that he goes too far, and is in danger of crossing the line that separates the sublime from its intimate neighbor. We are tempted to say that this is not moral tragedy, but physical comedy."<sup>6)</sup>

On the level of conscious symbolism, the scene is highly significant. The minister's wild shriek attracted attention from Governor Billingham and from Mistress Hibbins. If the Governor represents secular authority, here are symbolic opportunities for Dimmesdale to break from his concealment. Moments later Reverend Wilson, the symbol of spiritual authority, also passes to Dimmesdale. The minister aligns himself with none of them. He remains isolated. It is only with Hester and Pearl that he can feel any unity. But that unity is frustrated by cowardice.

Hawthorne's psychological conflict is also, important for this paper. Unlike many writers of fiction who picture only surface details (externalism). Hawthorne analyzes the inward tensions of his characters. Dimmesdale, the hypocrite, is filled with remorse, as he keeps reviewing in his mind and his guilt. His sensitive conscience forces him to keep midnight watches. Chillingworth becomes "fiend" as he pursues his psychological revenge on Dimmesdale. Hester, outwardly subdued by the Puritans, continues to speculate on the place of women in the world.<sup>7)</sup>

The key modulate from theology to psychology, as it usually does with Hawthorne.

---

5) H. Levin (1960), *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.), p.257

6) H. James (1879), *Hawthorne, Englishmen of Letters Series* (London), p.154

7) C. Leavitt (1965), *The Scarlet Letter*. (New York: Monarch press), p.9

Romance, treatment of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth psychology conflict are the Hawthorn's literary techniques and theory of novel. And also transcendentalism, supernaturalism, puritanism, symbolism, and moral matters are related Hawthorne qua psychology in the Scarlet Letter.

The Novel ends on a somber and gloomy note. Hester and Dimmesdale share one escutcheon, sable, relieved only by one glowing point of light. Hawthorne has, of course, foreshadowed the end in his opening chapter: The wild rosebush's flower symbolizes a "sweet moral blossom" designed to "relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow." And a rich and complex tale it is!

경희대학교  
사범대학  
외국어교육과