

Exploration on the Critical Point of Hester's Repentance

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Abstract—The paper intends to explore the indication point of Hester's repentance. Most scholars and critics hold that Hester was repented when she was accepted by her townspeople as the result of her long time devotion to others and care about them. However, if that were true, it means that Hester recognized her mistake just when she was released from the jail since from then on she has given more than what she has taken: She chose the life that she would be forgiven for her wrongdoings. However, if that were the truth again, how can we justify her behavior in the woods: she told Dimmesdale that what they did "had a consecration of its own" and even tried to persuade him to escape with her? In this sense, townspeople's acceptance does not mean her repentance. The paper first presents the criterion of repentance: the recognition of wrong-doing in one's own heart, instead of the forgiveness from others. Then, it reveals that her townspeople's acceptance of her is conditional, not forgiveness. Last, the paper demonstrates that Hester was not repented until at the end of story. Four representative incidents are employed to explore her psychological motives: 1 the trial on the scaffold; 2 acceptance from community; 3 the confession in the woods; and 4 resuming the scarlet letter.

Index Terms—Criterion of repentance, psychological motive of repentance, redeem, redemption, repentance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Letter, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is a story about sin and repentance. The story goes Hester's sufferings due to her adultery with her pastor, Dimmesdale, a secret sinner, while her husband, Chillingworth, was absent due to her arrival in Puritan Boston in advance of his. She was sentenced to stand on the scaffold for the public exhibition in the market with a scarlet letter "A" on her bosom and her baby in her arms – three month old at that time, serve a prison term, and bear on her bosom the sign of her shame for her life. From then on, she became "a living sermon against sin" ([1], pp. 67) and was isolated from her community after released from the prison – living segregatedly at the city border and without a friend to talk to. Besides, it is common for her to be followed and teased by children, and stopped and taught at any place and at any time by clergymen ([1], pp. 90). Despite the segregation, she lived independently, making a living on her needlework for her daughter and herself. At the same time, she devoted all her life to her community and even sacrificed herself whenever help was needed. As time went on, the letter A, an abbreviation for "adulteress" originally, on account of her devotion to her community and even self-sacrifice, seemed transferring from its original meaning to a new one in her

townsfolk's eye: Able; moreover, she was even described as an Angel by them. Up to here, the community seemed accepting her, and it seemed that she got her repentance or redemption at the same time.

Much has been discussed by critics about her devotion and repentance, and the long and enduring process of it – seven years. It seemed that she got her repentance because of the acceptance from her community, and her devotion to the community was because of her acknowledgement of her wrongdoing, and she would like to repent herself by her sacrifice. Contrary to this, my point is that there is no relationship between these items. Repentance is a matter of oneself; it is the reflections of his past experience and the determination of the future concerning it. Redemption is the forgiveness by God, or at least by his community. While exploring the turning point of her repentance, or some critical incidence indicating her repentance, I am trying to convince that her repentance has nothing to do with the acceptance from her community, the redemption if we could say, and there is no relationship between her devotion and repentance.

II. REPENTANCE

The following is the etymology of "repentance" from Wikipedia:

In Biblical Hebrew the idea of repentance is represented by two verbs: שׁוּב *shuv* (to return) and נָחַם *nacham* (to feel sorrow). In the New Testament, the word translated as 'repentance' is the Greek word μετάνοια (*metanoia*), "after/behind one's mind", which is a compound word of the preposition 'meta' (after, with), and the verb 'noeo' (to perceive, to think, the result of perceiving or observing). In this compound word the preposition combines the two meanings of time and change, which may be denoted by 'after' and 'different'; so that the whole compound means: 'to think differently after'. *Metanoia* is therefore primarily an after-thought, different from the former thought; a change of mind and change of conduct, "change of mind and heart", or, "change of consciousness".

When John C. Gerber ([2], pp. 11) presents his opinion on the sin committed by Hester and Dimmesdale in the "Introduction" to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Scarlet Letter*, he explains,

Hester and Dimmesdale are not forced to commit adultery, but once they do so their sin is bound to intensify and to spawn other sins. Does one have enough freedom of choice so that by an act of will he can bring the consequences of a particular sin to an end? The stories of Dimmesdale and Hester suggest that such freedom of choice is granted man. First, one must have a sense of responsibility for one's transgression strong enough to energize the will; then he

must repent and voluntarily perform such penance as seems appropriate. Even this procedure in the Hawthornian world, though, may not wipe the slate altogether clean.

Gerber's explanation on the sin and penance agrees with the definition of repentance in Wikipedia. To repent is to be responsible for the past experience.

Repentance is a matter of change of one's mind or heart. It means that he regrets when reviewing his past for what he has done or not done when he repents; he changes his mind and has different attitude or judgment to his previous action or decision, and would not take the similar action if given another chance. He takes what he has done as wrongness. The significance of it lies not only in the regretful man's sincere remorse for the past or the resolution not to repeat the offense in his future, however, but his responsibility for his past action and the determination to be responsible for his later life. This latter is what I take the foremost of the repentance.

Back to the previous point, how did Hester get her repentance? Or is there any critical point showing her repentance of her past if she did repent and if acceptance from her community has nothing to do with her repentance?

III. HESTER'S REPENTANCE

Hester did not repent until near the end of the story, and all accounts before that depict her long journey of repentance.

A. *The Embroidered Letter*

One of the punishments imposed on Hester's adultery is to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her bosom all her life. And the first appearance of the letter emerges while she mounted on the scaffold in front of her townspeople with a baby in her arms:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony. ([1], pp. 57)

"A", the symbol of adultery, or "a living sermon against sin" ([1], pp. 67) was sentenced to be worn on Hester's bosom for life, with the intention to impose shame on her by the civil-religious authority as well as the townspeople. However, such a shame was not treated as it was intended to be by her; on the contrary, it was cherished as a "gift" by her: she elaborately embroidered it, even decorated with golden lines. She took it as something deserving cherished. The embroidery of it manifested her mind. Besides, the letter was embroidered so fantastically and with so much care and effort that it was even illuminating upon her bosom while she was standing on the scaffold, having "the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself" ([1], pp. 58). Even the severe women who thought they had the right to sentence her due to their "mature age and church-members in good repute" ([1], pp. 55) had to admit "She hath good

skill at her needle, that's certain" ([1], pp. 58). She was good at needlework, no doubt, but, on the other hand, the fantastically embroidered letter leaked out her hidden affection and passion of her misdeed while she was embroidering it. A craft man always puts his emotion into his work. One could not accomplish a task creatively and wonderfully unless he puts his affection in it. The letter A could not have the effect of a spell separating her from the rest of her community if she embroidered it without her emotion in it, although "Not a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt it in her heart" (ibid) as one of audience depicted.

With the fantastically embroidered letter, she stands proudly and elegantly on the scaffold, with no slice of indication of any remorse or regret on her face. Though regarded as a sinner by her community and being under her punishment according to the social convention, she shows no shame on her face. It indicates that she does not think there is anything wrong in her deed. Thus, she could not repent what she had done. Moreover, her impression upon the audience with pride and elegance indicates that she has her own judgment about her act. No doubt she is stubborn and with strong will. Though sentenced to stand in the scaffold in front of her townspeople and wear the scarlet letter for life long, she has a strong determination that there is nothing wrong in her.

The meaning of "A" grows other phases with time and situation, but the core meaning of it in her mind has never changed. The significance of it not only lies in her judgment about the act she has conducted, but extends to the deep understandings about the world, and the protection herself and Pearl from the society. By the time Pearl has reached the age of seven, and Hester has released from the prison for seven years as well, "Hester has changed, and seems much more like the deliberately duplicitous romancer of Hawthorne's prefaces." ([3], pp. 51) Bell gives his opinion about Hester's changing mind with time: "The great summary chapter of psychological and social analysis, 'Another View of Hester,' describes a woman who wears one face to herself and another to society, but who remains very much aware (unlike Dimmesdale) of the different ways in which each of these faces is true. 'She never battled with the public,' 'but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage' She has even convinced the public that her embroidered letter – through which she has long expressed the soothed 'the passion of her life' – 'is 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'" (ibid). She clearly understands what she is doing. The actions diverge here from her mind despite their benefits to others. She not only has her own judgment about the world in her mind, but clearly understands how to survive in the severe world. "The world's law was no law for her mind....Hester Prynne ... assumed a freedom of speculation ... which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter" ([1], pp. 175-176). Guided by her law of the world, she would be kind, instead of severe, as she is treated, to others. Outwardly, she conforms to the public – wearing A for punishment; inwardly, she sticks to her interpretation to it. To the latter, it manifests her wisdom to survival. Holding her cords of

life to her mind, and with pride in her heart, she lives her life secretly elegantly and proudly. Definitely, there is no repentance in her mind.

B. Acceptance from Community: Needlework, Good Deeds and Sacrifice

Lonely was she after she was released from the prison: having to choose to live segregatedly on the border of the city, and “without a friend on earth who dared to show himself” ([1], pp. 86). However, with her weak and enduring efforts, she seemed that she was accepted by the townspeople.

Her needlework, on which she made a living for her daughter and herself, with her delicate and imaginative skill, “was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarfs, and the minister on his hand; it decked the baby’s little cap; it was shut up to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead” ([1], pp. 88). Everyone loved her needlework and it could be found almost everywhere, from a baby’s cap to the robe of the dead, and worn by almost all the people from different background, from the ordinary people to the upper class. However, in spite of the popularity of her wonderful needlework nearly everywhere, there was one that she had never been called in aid to embroider, where the holy purity was highly represented: “the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride”. (ibid) Hawthorne explained, “The exception indicated the ever-relentless vigour with which society frowned upon her sin” (ibid). People love and enjoy her wonderful needlework in their ordinary daily life, but no way in the blushes of bride. Hester’s needlework is perhaps incomparable to others’, but it could not compensate for her sin. A sinner can never be regarded as “pure” as them. Sin could not be excused, forgotten, let alone erased. In this, Hester could not be redeemed in her townspeople’s eye. That her people accepted her needlework in most cases did not mean that they had accepted her, or she was redeemed. The fact that they drew a line between her and her needlework means that they drew a line between her and purity.

It is not exaggerated to say that Hester’s devotion to her community has gone so far that she even sacrificed herself. “Except for that small expenditure in the decoration of her infant,” she “bestowed all superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself” ([1], pp. 89); “None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty” ([1], pp. 172); “None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town” (ibid). Hester devoted nearly everything to her community, and she had devoted so much and so hard that many people began to “refuse to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able” (ibid). So far, Hester seemed accepted by her people one more step, and even A, the token of shame, standing for Adultery, for which had brought shame on her, for which she had suffered so much, and for which she had been mistreated for so long, was reinterpreted as Able. And she was even described as “Angle”. How holy was Hester in their mind! And if that were true, what a long journey for her to travel from adulteress to angle! No more “adultery”, but “able”. A long journey indeed, but it is worthy.

However, does Hester’s new life arrive? Is Hester really

accepted by her townspeople? Or is she taken as same as themselves by the townspeople? To answer these questions, a good example to illustrate this is the scene of her attendance the ceremony of the new Governor receiving his office in New England holiday, where is near the end of the story. The market-place was already thronged with the inhabitants of the town when she came into it. However, crowded as it was, of where she stood, “a small vacant area – a sort of magic circle – had formed itself about her”. ([1], pp. 254) The circle was surprisingly formed by those who “praised” her! Such case was not the first time, as “was usually the case wherever Hester stood” (ibid). Such a contrast to their praise on her when she was needed! They would rather elbow one another at a little distance than stood close to her. It is unbelievable, but understandable. The magic circle, separating her from her townspeople, indicated the distinction in their mind between her and her fellow people. Again, they might accept her well-embroidered needlework for daily life, but not for the token of purity in the blushes of a bride; they might accept her help when they needed it, but not her, the one with impure past. She was still regarded as a sinner. “Able” is the praise for her devotion, but not for her. On the other hand, even if we do not dare to say they abused her devotion or sacrifice, we cannot deny the fact that they did not accept her thoroughly if they were said to accept her; at least, it was conditionally.

So far, I do not say that Hester took advantage of her skillful needlework to get in touch with her fellow townspeople and try to redeem herself by her good deeds and sacrifice. Actually, her needlework was a way of her living, on which she supported her daughter and herself. She had to work hard on it. As to her devotion, maybe it was just out of her nature. Moreover, not intentionally, she saw what others could not through her devotion. The letter “gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” ([1], pp. 92).

Interestingly, though she was praised as “Able”, we know nothing about her own judgment about it. In this, we can only infer that she has her own judgment about the world, especially about her relationships with her community. Nevertheless, she did not repent her past. She still had her own judgment about the so-called sin, which I will explore in the next section.

Again, acceptance or pardon from others has nothing to do with the repentance in one’s own heart. Repentance is a man’s own reflection or determination; pardon is other people’s attitude toward it. Even if there exists some connection between them, repentance in one’s heart goes before pardon from others. From her good deeds or sacrifice, we could not draw the conclusion that she repented; she might be waiting for something.

C. Consecration

The story opens with the punishment on Hester for her adultery. Up to Chapter 17 (*The Pastor and his Parishioner*), we can identify the attitudes towards it of all walks of life in the Puritan Boston except Hester’s: the civil-religion authority, the townspeople, Dimmesdale, Hester’s puritanic lover and Chillingworth, Hester’s scientific husband. They were all against it in different forms: the first two put severe

punishments on her, the client; Dimmesdale regretted and punished himself secretly, and Chillingworth revenged desperately and even viciously on the sinner. In contrast, never has Hester uttered anything about her attitude to it until in Chapter 17: “What we did had a consecration of its own” ([1], pp. 210) when she urged Dimmesdale to flee with her. In fact, it was the only utterance expressed by her towards her misdeed: a holy act! Not “‘sin’ at all but something natural, lifeenhancing, and holy” ([4], pp. 114). She went so far that she even undid the scarlet letter afterwards and threw it to a distance ([1], pp. 218) and “took off the formal cap that confined her hair” ([1], pp. 219). With these actions, she felt she had never been as free as at that moment, and the air had never been as fresh as then. Hester’s attitude could not be clearer: she did not think there was anything wrong in their love. That, at the same time, explains the elaborated embroidered A, her pride while standing on the scaffold, and her indifferent attitude towards the townspeople’s praise to her. She holds the truth that there is nothing wrong in their behavior. As to her former behaviors, the public exhibition and the wearing of the scarlet letter only indicate her submission to the community superficially; “her heart has not been touched” ([5], pp. 107). “Hester, according to the narrator, gives up her ‘individuality’ in order to become ‘the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion’” ([3], pp. 50). She “gives covert expression through the art of needlework, with which she adorns her scarlet letter and her daughter” (ibid). For all her outward conformity, “her needlework ‘appeared to have also a deeper meaning’; ‘it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life’” (ibid). Concealing her dreams from herself in her needlework, she rejects it as sin. Her devotion to the community was “superficially conforming to the values imposed by the community, thus performing a false penance” ([6], pp. 50). “‘What we did had a consecration of its own’ justifies her adultery to herself, which is all that matters, and her plan of fleeing with Pearl and the minister is an action which is right for her” ([7], pp. 78). For a person who does not believe that there is something wrong in him, how could we judge that he repents?

D. Resuming A

Hester did not think there was anything wrong in their love until near the end of the story. The indication of it is that she resumed A. She resumed it “of her own free will”, never “afterwards did it quit her bosom” when she returned to New England ([1], pp. 285).

When Hester returned to Boston in the book’s “Conclusion”, she finds “a more real life,” “here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence”. Bell ([3], pp. 52-53) believes “This sounds ominously like the self-deceiving Hester, earlier, to whom only the tokens of shame were ‘realities,’ the Hester who masked her abiding passion, even from herself, in the language of ‘guilt,’ ‘earthly punishment,’ and ‘martyrdom’; but there are major differences. For one thing, this language now seems to apply truly to Hester’s

feelings; she is now apparently sincerely penitent, or at least bereft of any opportunity to gratify her love for Dimmesdale. What may be even more important is that she has now ‘resumed, – of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it, – resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale’” ([3], pp. 52-53). Bell further emphasizes, “The crucial term here is ‘free will’ : Paradoxically enough, it is by *forsaking* open rebellion, by reassuming her part in society, that Hester is at last able to realize her individuality and freedom. And this paradox lies at the heart, not only of Hester’s society, but of Hawthorne’s conception of the art of fiction”. ([3], pp. 53)

Why did she resume it which she was so hatred that she even threw it far away in the forest, which not only brought shame on her, but ruined her life? With it she had never breathed as freely as others. And her every misfortune onward was due to it. The only interpretation about it is that she repented. As the definition in Wikipedia, repentance is “the change of mind and the change of conduct. And it is always accompanied by the domination of being responsible for the past or the future.” As Paulson ([8], pp. 155) puts it, “Perhaps Hawthorne intends to make her a tragic heroine; or perhaps he implies a sense of Atonement for her community summed up in the effect she and the letter have on her contemporaries – and on Hawthorne’s contemporaries and when he discovers the letter in the Custom House in the 1840s” .

IV. CONCLUSIONS

So far, Hester repented, regretting what she had done when she was young, and by voluntarily resuming her letter A, she showed her willingly to be responsible for it in her later life. To repent is not to forget. Throughout the novel, it should be noted that Hester once did something that society considered a mistake: adulterousness, which even today, much open than the time of the colonial times when she lived is still not accepted in most societies.

Though the story goes the punishment of a sin, despite the criticism that the punishment is too harsh, and the repentance of adultery, we should go beyond the sin and repentance of its kind; it would be better to extend to any sin and any crime of any kind, including the rules and regulations in daily life. Repentance is the growth of one’s inner heart, and punishment is the deterrent to not only the client but the people surrounding it who might have not realized the seriousness of it. For everything that we have done, we should be responsible for it. In this, I would like to quote a saying: Seeking to forget makes exile all the longer; the secret of redemption lies in remembrance, a word by the ex-president of the former West German on the occasion of the forties anniversary of the end of World War II.

However, for a happy and harmonious world, no more dark stories of Hester and Dimmesdale in future, I would like give my suggestion about it. Contrary to the philosophy to something that we would like to take – Little is better than nothing – for what we do not want, the saying should goes nothing is better than little. In other words, for anything that we would not like to take, undo to others.

Back to the story again, if Hester did not want her husband having adultery affair with other woman even though he did not love her, and even though he had his own judgment about the world as she did, she would not have adultery affair with her priest. (Dilemma indeed in this case because divorce was not allowed at that time. Hence, tragedy for the three characters in the story.) On the other hand, if the community would not like to be treated as the way Hester was treated by themselves – full of humiliation and unfairness, they might regulate their treatment to Hester. Above all, it is suggested that we not be violate any regulation. If we do, repent it.

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