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HAWTHORNE'S FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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ABSTRACT

Nathaniel Hawthorne is famous as one of the greatest American romantic novelist of the 19th century and his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* is considered one of his most successful works and gains Hawthorne great fame. A typical contemporary review declares, "None but a man of true genius and a highly cultivated mind could have written it." (Person, 5) *The Scarlet Letter* tells the story of the tragedy of love in colonial North America between Hester and Dimmesdale.

Firstly, this paper will briefly introduce the feminist critical theories and the prominent feminist writer Margaret Fuller who exerts partial influence on Hawthorne's feminist consciousness. Then Nathaniel Hawthorne's feminist consciousness will be elaborated by analyzing Hester from the perspective of her dress and the needlework. Hester is portrayed in the novel as a rebellious figure, who manifests Hawthorne's dissatisfaction with traditional Puritanism and its oppressive doctrines to a certain extent. However, Hawthorne is not exactly a feminist as he is haunted by deep-rooted puritanism, which drives him to support and maintain the existing ruling order subconsciously, and his rebellion is mild and far from revolutionary. In a word, he will never overthrow the patriarchal society he belongs to. Therefore, under his pen, Hester is radical and defiant but within the control of patriarchal society, depicted as a traditional woman who lives on her needlework with a tinge of meekness and other feminine qualities. From the two above aspects, Hawthorne's feminist consciousness is clearly unveiled to readers.

Keywords: Dress; Needlework; Hawthorne; Feminist Consciousness; Hester;

By general definition, feminism is a philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued. Women have the right to enjoy social, political, and economical equality just as men do. Feminists can be anyone in civilized society, men, women, girls, or boys. Feminism can also be described as a movement and is the idea that women should have political, social, sexual, intellectual, and economic rights equal to those of men. It involves various movements, theories, and philosophies, all concerned with issues of gender difference. Feminists advocate equality for women and wage campaigns for women's basic rights and interests.

The feminist critic Margaret Fuller is America's first true feminist who is famous for her work *Women in the Nineteenth Century* published in 1860. Fuller is noted as an editor, journalist, translator, charismatic polemicist, and most importantly, an active feminist. She proposes that women should enhance their self-

consciousness, break irrational social restrictions, and explore and actualize their potential. The quintessence of her thoughts is that women are supposed to be self-sufficient, instead of being manipulated willingly by men. She also encourages American women to think independently and actively participate in social activities. Her feminist ideology, literature views, and her thoughts on social reform gain her lasting regard and renown.

Fuller mentions that “what we woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our home” (Fuller, 38). It is the magnitude of this immortal soul, or rather, the incapacity of a man to concede its significance, that Fuller regards as the occasion of much of women’s suffering.

It is Margaret Fuller who has hugely influenced Hawthorne’s attitude towards women. And Hawthorne develops a very complex relationship with Fuller, a leading representative of the radical feminists of that period. Besides, Hawthorne is particularly attracted to the brilliantly fabulous Fuller while he is deeply bothered by her at the same time. Repelled sometimes by Fuller’s aggressiveness and radical mind, Hawthorne still fails to resist the ecstasy when they strike the intelligent sparks.

Fuller’s work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, detailing the oppressed position of women in American society, is of incalculable significance to Hawthorne, who has unquestionably modeled from it the thirteenth chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as Hester’s most radical thinking about “the whole race of womanhood.” At the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, Hester assures the women who come to her cottage of “her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should 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, 263). The use of the word “ripe” echoes Fuller’s comments on the prospects for feminist reform in her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, in which the word “ripe” stands out in each passage.

Though Hawthorne can’t countenance some of Fuller’s feminist ideals, he is substantially swayed by her stands. Hester’s self-reliance, her independent thinking, and her disregard for social convention all reflect the brilliance of Fuller’s thoughts. It is reasonable to conclude that Hawthorne is enlightened by Fuller’s notions and prompted to reflect on the issues concerning women.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Feminist Consciousness Embodied in Hester

Hester’s image is the highlight of *the Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne’s most controversial and attractive female character to date. She is determined and dares to pursue love and equality passionately. In the process of defending her love and protecting her children, the contradiction between her and the whole Puritan society becomes increasingly prominent.

As the protagonist of *the Scarlet Letter*, Hester embraces several merits, among other things, being able, courageous as well as self-dependent. At the same time, she is characterized as a rebellious woman who commits adultery and refused to divulge Arthur’s name, openly defying the authority of religion and society. Hester is a character created by Hawthorne who expresses his beliefs and vents his feelings by depicting the disobedient Hester. Therefore, in the following parts, this paper will expound on Hawthorne’s feminist consciousness from the perspective of Hester’s image.

Hester’s Rebellious Spirit from the Perspective of the Dress

The Scarlet Letter, written by American romantic novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, tells the story of Hester, a beautiful young woman who is bound by an unpleasant marriage and falls in love with a young minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, then gives birth to her daughter, Pearl, which is forbidden by Calvinism, the Puritan religion of the time. As a punishment, she is ordered to wear a scarlet A for life. However, Hester never acts obediently and she has her own way to express her silent rebellion. In this part, Hester’s rebellious spirit will be analyzed from the perspective of the dress.

The background of *the Scarlet Letter* is set in the colony of Massachusetts in the 17th century when people’s thoughts and lives are greatly influenced by Puritan thoughts. Under the control of Puritan asceticism,

people have to dress in the sable simplicity that generally characterized the puritanical modes of dress and will be punished if they violate that rule. Hester is not an exception. "Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most somber hue."(Hawthorne, 55)

However, "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. ...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"(Hawthorne, 40) Hester's unconventional and rebellious thoughts can be reflected on her chest: the only one ornament on her dress. Generally speaking, once a man has committed a crime and wears the proof of his guilt on his chest, the guilty man must be ashamed to hide the symbol of his guilt from others. Quite on the contrary, Hester is not ashamed of the scarlet letter on her chest at all. She even decorates it with exquisite and eye-catching decoration, which reflects Hester's courage to defy authority without scruples. "Her attire...seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity"(Hawthorne, 41)

Hester expresses her rebellious spirits not only by the fantastically embroidered and illuminated Scarlet Letter upon her bosom but also by the clothes she makes for her daughter Pearl, who symbolizes the crime Hester has committed. Hester never feels regret about giving birth to Pearl and even has "bought the richest tissues that could be procured, and allowed her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dresses which the child wore, before the public eye." (Hawthorne, 58) Hester is so proud of Pearl, who is just like an angel in her mind. By contriving the child's garb, Hester "arrays Pearl in a crimson velvet tunic, of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold-thread."(Hawthorne, 64) Little Pearl's bright and ornate dress shows Hester's defiance of the authority of the church and her silent rebellion against the secular world. (Li, 24)

When Hester goes to the Governor's Hall, she is considered a great lady by the innocent doorman who has no idea of Hester's past. It is conspicuous that Hawthorne recognizes and praises Hester from the bottom of his heart and portrays Hester with a positive image. As a character created by Hawthorne, Hester's thoughts also convey the author's views on Puritans. Her silent defiance of the authority also shows Hawthorne's dissatisfaction with the suppression of human nature by puritanism and his praise of the rational nature of man. Besides, the courage to break the shackles of religion is also encouraged by Hawthorne through the image of Hester.

In a word, the image of gorgeous clothes becomes a medium for Hester to express her free mind and challenge the patriarchal society as well as puritanism. (Zhang, 5) Hester is a rebellious figure in *the Scarlet Letter*, among other things, her dress is one of the demonstrations of her open defiance of the suffocating oppression. By depicting Hester's image as a rebel, Hawthorne, to some extent, shows his sympathy to the poor character and encourages females to fight against the patriarchal society and religious bondage and fight for themselves considering their marginal position.

Hester's Self-dependence from the Perspective of the Needlework

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, as an outcast who lives in a marginalized area around the village, has to reside alone and depend on herself. Hawthorne describes Hester as a widow who lives on her needlework to achieve economical independence, find the value of existence, and get rid of the bondage of male ideology to a certain extent. However, her needlework also plays down her disruptive image, fettering herself to overthrow the Puritanism and patriarchal society, which reflects Hawthorne's conservative notion of the feminist consciousness.

Why does Hester have to support her child and herself by needlework instead of other livelihoods? The reasons closely relate to her historical and social background. The story of *The Scarlet Letter* takes place in the middle of the 17th century. According to the law at the time, the woman's existence or her legal identity is merged into the husband's existence and becomes one with him. (Marylynn, 200) In the event of her husband's death, the wife can secure her livelihood by inheriting her husband's property, but if she cheats on her husband,

who then has the right to evict her and deprive her of the share of the property. Hester has been “protected” by the legal system, enjoying the material security provided by her husband, Roger Chillingworth. But after she and her husband separate, Hester commits adultery and gives birth to her daughter, which is deemed a felony and not permitted by the law. In this context, even though Hester’s husband dies, she is unable to claim the inheritance. In addition, Hester chooses needlework as a livelihood mostly due to her background. In light of the text, we can learn that her family in Old England is “a decayed house of gray stone, with a poverty-stricken aspect, but retaining a half-obliterated shield of arms over the portal, in token of antique gentility.” (Hawthorne, 33) It is conspicuous that she enjoys a good pedigree.

Since the Renaissance, special schools have been set up for women of noble or middle-class backgrounds to cultivate the female temperament. In addition to simple math and French courses, these schools also teach music, painting, needlework, and other skills. Compared with painting, music and other activities disconnected from daily economic life, needlework stands out with real economic value. This renders needlework a way for women to make a living without the protection of her husband and original family. As Hawthorne mentions in *The Scarlet Letter* “It was the art—then, as now, almost the only one within a woman’s grasp—of needlework.”(54) Therefore, Hester is prone to rely on the needlework to feed herself as well as her child. Through her needlework, Hester achieves her freedom and self-dependence. The economical independence promotes her to think independently and radically. Nonetheless, it does not mean Hester’s extremity and freedom will go far and smoothly.

On the contrary, the skill of needlework in the female field allows Hester to return to the track of patriarchal gender orientation to a certain extent. In ancient China, there is a division of labor between men and women, so as in western societies. Men are responsible for hunting and plowing, while as housekeepers, women stay at home doing the housework and sewing. Women’s lives fix in the home, including cleaning the house, educating the children, caring for the sick, and so on. These works in the women’s field are associated with purity, thrift, gentleness, love, and other feminine qualities. Needlework is also a very indispensable skill for women in Hawthorne’s time. Hester in *the Scarlet Letter* also reveals the traditional side of her character with tenderness and maternity in the flying of the silver needle.

Under the influence of her motherhood, Hester embraces not only her children but all suffering people. The proceeds she earned from embroidery are sent to the poor in the form of money or goods. She sews clothes by needlework both for Pearl, also for the poor people of the town without warm clothes. She becomes the Virgin Mary-like character, gathering around her many insulted and injured people who seek peace and comfort in her arms. She, being the representative of the whole town, embodies the godlike side of femininity, such as endurance, restraint, sacrifice, and fraternity, needed by the patriarchal society.

Meanwhile, in this novel, the needlework also becomes the link between Hester, a marginal person in society, and the Puritan society. Her delicate embroideries cost so much that only the elite of the mainstream social class could afford them. She defies the patriarchy of Puritan society by refusing to name her lover, yet she makes gloves and clothes for the judges. Hester does her embroidery with meticulous care.

“Public ceremonies, such as ordinations, the installation of magistrates, and all that could give majesty to the forms in which a new government manifested itself to the people, were, as a matter of policy, marked by a stately and well-conducted ceremonial, and a sombre, but yet a studied magnificence. Deep ruffs, painfully wrought bands, and gorgeously embroidered gloves, were all deemed necessary to the official state of men assuming the reins of power;”(54)

Hester’s needlework appears “on the ruff of the Governor; scarfs of military men, and the band of the minister.”(55) Hester’s rebellion, therefore, is incomplete. She is “not in the Puritan community, but she is near it, supporting it.” (Kaplan, 137) Hawthorne is a complex writer. In terms of Hester’s rebellion, he arranges for her to be feminine and traditional to dilute her image as a rebel. However, such an arrangement makes Hester continue her internal rebellion within the scope permitted by the patriarchal system, to which she is brought back.

Conclusion

On the one hand, Hester is jailed for committing adultery which is not allowed by Puritanism at that time. In prison, she embroiders an exquisite "A" on her chest according to her own imagination. This willfulness seems to express her spiritual freedom, and her feelings of despair and recklessness. Under the circumstances at that time, the color and style of Hester's costumes violate the provisions of the church. However, Hawthorne does not criticize her untimely behavior as a defender of Puritanism. On the contrary, Hawthorne positively affirms Hester's image at this time with appreciation, describing her as a beautiful angel who radiates holy light. Hester's gorgeous costumes not only show her rebellion, and her challenge to secular morality and religion, but also show Hawthorne's preference and praise for Hester, implicitly reflecting Hawthorne's dissatisfaction with and suspicion of Puritan morality, and his affirmation and praise of human nature.

On the other hand, Hester is so radical and avant-garde over the issue of overthrowing the existing social and hierarchical order dominated by men, which is never accepted by Hawthorne. She accepts the penalty of the patriarchal society at the beginning and makes atonement voluntarily, but she does not have to beg for food from men or listen to the preaching of the patriarchy, while through thinking, she sees through the hypocritical nature of the gender discourse of the patriarchal society and draws a conclusion that is regarded by the patriarchy as rebellious: "As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before the woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position." (Hawthorne, 100) It is obviously that Hester's consciousness is so far ahead of her time that it is no wonder that critic Richard Chase, in his classic *American Fiction and Its Traditions*, calls *the Scarlet Letter* "a feminist pamphlet." (Chase, 73) The ideal assumption of Hester is beyond the control of Hawthorne, who will never let it happen. The ending of this novel also manifests Hawthorne's conservative attitude towards Hester, who fails to run away with Dimmesdale to set about a brand-new life in a new place where no one knows them, and returns to her ramshackle hut living in solitude.

In the patriarchal society, men refuse to give women equal rights in the economy, considering they want to own all the wealth and refuse to allow women to share. Because men have realized that once gaining financial independence, women will no longer be content to be safely under their wings, but try to seek independent thought and equal status. In *the Scarlet Letter*, we can see that Hester obtains her independence of thought through economic self-subsistence gained by needlework. She wins people's respect with her practical actions and rewrites her identity, turning the letter A on her bosom, which stands for "Adultery" into "Able". In Hawthorne's opinion, women deserve more equal treatment, but meanwhile, women should also be the model performers of morality. Women's right to speak and their realization of self-value should only be confined to the domestic sphere. Women should not challenge the authority of men, and women's self-fulfillment should not harm the interests of men. From this perspective, we can see he identifies with some traditional ideas about women. Conspicuously, he expresses his concern for the welfare of women on a patriarchal stand.

To sum up, Hawthorne's feminist thoughts have limitations. He reckons that women do have the right to call for equal status, and their realization of self-value should only be confined within the domestic sphere. Nonetheless, he still holds some feminist ideas, as he can realize women's unprivileged situation and the unjust treatment of women, embracing some feminist ideas and showing deep concern about women's problems. From this perspective, his concern about women's issues is prospective and progressive, which gives his works everlasting vitality and charm. In addition, this novel has foreshadowed the development of the feminist movement and women's liberation. What's more, the feminist consciousness of Hawthorne has furthered the development of feminist movements. And the feminist consciousness implied in the story bestows extraordinary and enduring appeal to the novel.

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