

Reflection of Christian Spirit on Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*

Gaimei Zhao

Xi'an Peihua University, Xi'an 710125, China

1142626982@qq.com

Yaodong Wang

Xi'an University of Science and Technology, Xi'an 710054, China

1694480194@qq.com**Key words:** Hester; Christian spirit

Abstract: The author tries to probe into the Christian spirit on Hester, describing her as an active woman, who dares to be against the Puritan world. In the novel, her experience gives us a good explanation of the essence of the Christian spirit. In her life she experiences sin, hardship and redemption. What is more, her action depicts Christian spirit including the tolerance, sacrifice and faithfulness. Facing citizens, she tries to reform their action with her belief although they bring her trouble. Priest Dimmesdale, who abandons her, Hester makes silent devotion to him with little complaint.

1 Introduction

The writer has instant reputation when the novel comes out in 1850. With its publication, much attention and comments occur from various aspects. Loring gives praise “an extraordinary work of art” [1]. Religion plays an important role in western culture, so does Christian spirit on Hester.

The essence of the Christian spirit is in such great qualities as tolerance, devotion, faithfulness and etc. Sin, hardship and redemption are also important factors. In order to acquire final redemption, one should try one's best to overcome hardship in his life. She has to meet with different hardships for her sin. At last, she redeems herself due to great qualities such as her tolerance, devotion and faithfulness.

Since people find her crime, which is forbidden by Puritan citizens, she suffers a lot, some hoping to make her leave her homeland. Being hurt deeply, still she gives her help to others and makes great contribution to people who are in need. Hester's attitude towards sufferings in silence is the same as Jesus. She tolerates and forgives

those who brings her harm and humiliation.

As the lover, Dimmesdale also commits crime, but he betrays Hester and escapes the punishment. He receives fame and respect. By contrast, Hester experienced more hardships but she is under the sunshine. Meanwhile Priest Dimmesdale is selfish and coward. With the respect from people and his fabulous oral talent, he makes himself a solid figure in higher status among people around the Puritan community while she is isolated by the neighbors. Nevertheless she wants to protect him from suspicious people with her devotion and sacrifice. She makes herself away from hatred with her good characters like Jesus.

2 Appearance of Christian Spirit

The Christian religion plays an important part in western culture. Christians are people who consider Jesus their spiritual leader and carry out his teaching and instructions in their behaviors. In such religion, people accept the belief that we should not complain about all misery and hardship In *The Scarlet Letter* Christian spirit is vividly reflected by her actions and her broad mind [2].

Jesus sets a good example for his disciples and common people admit Jesus their instructor in life. His sayings explain that each of us should give our soul to help others wholeheartedly. Serving people with heart and soul means that a person should have the open mind to be a Jesus-like servant no matter what hardship he is to meet. In a word, the spirit of tolerance and devotion makes broad and profound heart and mind.

Christian spirit gives a lesson to common people that it is not a feasible way to soothe hurt by means of returning an eye for an eye, and evil for evil. That will be not good for people to purify their mind like Jesus. If you want to achieve the real human nature and break through your limitation, the better way is to forgive the harm on you and melt the hatred through true love, such as tolerance, devotion and faithfulness.

Christians hold a firm belief that people are not living for the sake of worldly benefits and material gain, but for the sake of personality development among people at last such as self-salvation and soul-purification and etc. In order to achieve one's life destination, he engraves on his mind the Christian spirit and puts them into practice by himself with active attitude.

The ideal world for Christians to achieve is a world with love and justice. At the same time, the Christian spirit is a belief in such good qualities as tolerance, devotion, and loyalty, which lays foundation for people to sublimate his life and surpass his defects.

3 Christian spirit of Hester

In western culture the Christian spirit pays more attention to spiritual eagerness for redemption. In her life Hester experiences sin, hardship and redemption. Hester fulfill all these Christian spirits with her behavior. Unmarried, Hester is very young and gives birth to little Pearl. In the novel the author depicts that Hester is punished by standing on the scaffold to expose her ignominious symbol to the public. Because she commits adultery, she should be expelled from the Puritan community. Puritan community is considered as the paradise of Puritans in the new world. Consequently, the Puritans think that it is reasonable for people to declare that little Pearl is a child with original sin whose birth brings about so much hardship to Hester [3].

To the puritans original sin plays important part in Christian spirit. People are very familiar with the story that in *Holy Bible*, in the Garden of Eden, God orders Adam and Eve that they are forbidden to eat the fruit on the Tree of knowledge. However, Eve is not so much determined and she is tempted by serpent to eat the fruit. Because of the good taste, she breaks the rules and persuades Adam into having it together. Therefore, Adam and Eva commit the original sin and from then on the original sin is inherited to their descendants. Eventually the couple is driven out of the Garden of Eden.

People always choose what they want to believe and what they see with their eyes. In Puritans' eyes, Priest is a paragon of piety and righteousness just like Dimmesdale. However, it is the fact that in order to protect his social status, she suffers all misery and tribulation. What is worse, according to their spirit, the Puritan authorities think she is not qualified to bring up little Pearl. This is another kind of hardship which makes Hester broken-hearted, depriving Hester of her motherhood. But the respected and famed Priest Dimmesdale is closely related with her sufferings.

In the novel Hawthorne shapes Hester as a positive female figure in the Puritan authorities. Hester arouse readers to think the reason for she is elegant and energetic when she stands on scaffold to accept her punishment. The readers find that the woman is very different from the townspeople with gray clothing. Hawthorne describes the scene with depressed atmosphere while Hester's decoration and her showing-off attitude attracted the readers for the comparison. The decoration is so bright in such an atmosphere just like the fire from the hell. Hester's ornament of the letter A is making the readers full of imagination. In Puritans' eyes, A becomes the representative of the devil and only the fire from hell is able to make the letter A so bright.

In Puritan community all the people show their scold and scorn including Puritan children and they throw hidden stones to Hester. From children's actions the author shows that in the community children themselves have

accepted their parents' opinions of judgment. From children' behavior of showing cruelty and intolerance to Hester, undoubtedly it is the fact that they live in ruthless and cold community. Hester chooses to put Christian spirit into practice by following the Holy Bible. She carries out her Christian spirit of tolerance and philanthropy. Although she suffers so much hardships and misery which are mostly brought about by Puritan citizens, Hester does not want to hate anyone but tolerate them with her broad mind and behavior.

Philanthropy is also very important in Christian spirit. In Old Testament, God wants to put an end to human being. At the same time, God is full of sympathy with man. In New Testament, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35). The love that Jesus says is philanthropy. Although she tolerates these Puritan citizens who have influenced her deeply, still she is ready to help them. Hester puts such Christian spirit as philanthropy into practice [4].

4 Relationship between Priest Dimmesdale and Hester

Dimmesdale wants to devote himself to God without considering his sin and suffering he brings to Hester. Dimmesdale determines to abandon her to seek his social status. Although he leaves Hester in suffering and plight, he struggles in the gloomy corner with himself. Although she is treated so unfairly by Priest Dimmesdale, she makes no complaint and makes sacrifice for him. What is more, Hester is faithful to their love and she decides to put down hatred with her broad mind.

In the novel, there is the scene John Wilson suggests Priest Dimmesdale to persuade Hester to tell the public the truth about the father, he opposes that it is incorrect action to force her to speak out her secret in daylight. At first glance, Dimmesdale takes Hester into consideration for her reputation. In fact, he is trying his best to protect himself from being found. He knows his wrongdoings but he is timid and selfish that makes him have no courage to admit his sin in the public, let alone taking responsibility as a father. On the spot Dimmesdale stands by and persuades Hester into speaking out the infant's father which fully reveals Dimmesdale's hypocrisy and irresponsible attitude toward his mischievous and his own soul. This is also his root of tragedy[3].

Dimmesdale has wonderful speech skills and the skill to hide himself on his appearance and he disguises himself successfully. At the beginning of the novel, Dimmesdale graduates from a great English university, full of energy and knowledge. Puritan citizens are attracted by his voice that is sweet, rich and deep. He gets very good reputation for himself and respect from the citizens. At the end of the novel, there is another speech that makes him "stand on the very proudest eminence of superiority". His speech makes people believe that the young man

brings them the joy because they think they have never had a man who speaks out the doctrine with such a wise, noble, and holy voice that day [3].

It is the fact that both of them are sinners. By contrast to the treatment that Dimmesdale receives it is a great irony to her situation. To the citizens Hester is a sinner. All of these torment, shame and sufferings are what Hester has to tolerate. Dimmesdale also lives in sufferings and tolerance in his mind although citizens accept him with respect. They believe that they do not see the letter A on his bosom until he reveals it himself at last. What is worse, she is refused and she is abandoned once again when Hester prepares a leaving plan for him, Pearl and herself. Dimmesdale says that he would rather die than leave Boston with her. After her punishment on the spot, it is reasonable that Hester could have left the place with so much misery. But, she chooses to stay here and still calls the place her home, because she thinks her life is closely connected with the man and she is willing to live here [3].

In his mind he only cares his God and God's instructions and he is afraid that he will not be forgiven by God. If he leaves away from God, then he is deemed to have no chance to be redeemed once again. At the bottom of his heart, there is the full room for God and little room for Hester, even though she is so faithful to him and she is so considerate for him during the course.

Although she suffers a lot from so much unfair treatment that are partly brought out by him, Hester makes no complaint about him and she has little hatred for him. On the contrary she still tries to protect him. To Dimmesdale Hester shows her devotion by her spirit of sacrifice and constantly love for him. Facing his weakness, Hester only thinks about her responsibility for him, and she just put aside his unfair treatment for her. For example, Hester goes to meet with Chillingworth and she begs him not to seek punishment on Dimmesdale. Although she knows that it is impossible with her weak force, still she tries to save him from the claws of Chillingworth.

Unfortunately Hester leaves Boston for some time after Dimmesdale's death. She can live another life, but in the end, she unbelievably chooses to come back and wears the scarlet letter A again. Because of her lover who is buried there, she thinks this is the place that she is deeply concerned about. In her mind what she can do is to accompany him the same as the vine winds around the tall tree. When she is alive, Hester is unwilling to leave the Puritan community where her lover Dimmesdale stays. Even after her death, Hester is buried beside her lover with a gules A on her tombstone.

From the beginning to the end, the writer implies that the letter A has become a symbol of their love which

shows her firm love and her faith to him. From her story we may find that the letter A has already become a part of Hester's life. It is the love towards Dimmesdale which shines beautiful color of humanity. Thus, the letter A becomes holy and pure badge [5].

To Hester Pearl brings her hope, because baby is the witness of their love, especially her love to Dimmesdale wholeheartedly. Thus Hester gives her a beautiful name Pearl, which means that baby is her only treasure of great price, purchased with all she has. As a result, Hester regards little Pearl as an apple in her eyes. In the story Pearl has her deep and selfless motherhood towards her. Considering it from another angle, Pearl also give us the impression that Hester presents her total devotion to her lover, because it is known that Pearl is a love fruit between them.

5 Conclusion

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester gives a full interpretation of Christian spirit through her lifetime. Christian spirit includes qualities such as tolerance, philanthropy, devotion, and sacrifice. Christian spirit arises from selfless love like Jesus Christ. The main character Hester as a practitioner experiences hardship and redemption. The positive figure fulfills Christian spirit in her life and her behavior. In her life the heroine makes selfless devotion to others, which demonstrates her Jesus-like broad mind. When Hester is punished on the scaffold, what she receives is nothing but scold, curse, and humiliation from the Puritan citizens. Because she breaks the rule of the doctrine, she is like an epidemic. People force her to be away from the Puritan community. Faced with such a harsh reality, Hester tolerates all Puritan citizens and helps anyone who is in need. Her philanthropy shows that there is no room for hatred but love in her soul. Throughout her life, Hester is totally faithful to her pure love with Dimmesdale. Compared with them, in the novel Hester is courageous to takes on responsibility and she is respected by the community. The miracle circle of great and sacred Christian spirit shines around her.

There stands a unique Hester in each reader's mind when each of us finishes reading. In this paper, the author tries to present another aspect about Hester based on the materials of her spirit. As for Christian spirit on Hester, further study needs to be done.

References

- [1] Loring, George B. *Hawthorne's 'Scarlet Letter'*. *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*. 3.12 (Sept. 1850): Rpt. in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris. Vol. 10. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985.
- [2] Boudreau, Kristin. *Hawthorne's Model of Christian Charity*. *The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings*. Ed.

Leland S. Person. US: W. W. Norton&Company, Inc, 2000. Print.

[3] Hawthorne. Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Bantam Dell A Division of Random House, Inc, 1986.
Print.

[4] Holy Bible. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983. Print.

[5] Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding The Scarlet Letter A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2007. Print.