

Hester Prynne's Androgyny in *The Scarlet Letter*Li Zhang^{1*}, Huijuan Li²¹The Professor of North China Electric Power University in China, studying American literature, literary and non-literary translation²The post-graduate student majoring in English of North China Electric Power University in China, studying American literature***Corresponding author**

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Article History

Received: 05.05.2018

Accepted: 10.05.2018

Published: 30.05.2018

DOI:

10.21276/sjhss.2018.3.5.4



Abstract: *The Scarlet Letter* has aroused people's attention since its publication. The analysis of the protagonist, Hester Prynne in the novel, has always been a heated topic at home and abroad. Scholars have interpreted Hester Prynne from many perspectives like Archetypal Criticism, Modernism or Feminism, especially eco-feminism. Therefore, this article tries to extend the previous' studies in terms of Androgyny. Based on the theory of Androgyny, this article aims to analyze both the femininity and masculinity of Hester Prynne, which is to reveal the deconstruction of binary opposition in the traditional viewpoint of sexuality. Hester Prynne's femininity can be interpreted from her feminine charm and maternity, while her masculinity can be analyzed from rebellious spirit and survivability. Besides, this article explores the influence of Hester's androgynous characteristics on herself, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and other people around her, which is to embody Hester's self-growth. As a result of her innermost androgyny, Hester grows from an unworldly young woman to a strong-willed, independent and mature woman.

Keywords: Androgyny; femininity; masculinity; Hester Prynne.

INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a famous American romantic novelist, is truly a rich and creative writer. He ingeniously combines serious moral and historical elements with excellent forms of artistic expression, which combines his talented imagination with language skills.

The Scarlet Letter is a good example to show his writing ideas, especially Hester Prynne. Hester Prynne, the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, is a young woman who has the courage to fight for freedom and happiness under the cruel reign of Puritanism. In order to pursue her true love, Hester Prynne is brave enough to break the bondage of marriage, but she was severely punished.

Scholars have interpreted this novel from many perspectives, such as the theme, writing technique and other literary theory. The early Commentators generally regard *The Scarlet Letter* as Hawthorne's complaints about Christian ethics. Recently scholars hold different ideas about it. Su [1] holds that *the scarlet letter* profoundly embodies the Christian ethical spirit: the universality of sin and redemption. They agree that Hawthorne's attitude towards religion is complex and contradictory. Then, the most notable feature of the scarlet letter in writing technique is its use of symbolism. In particular, the scarlet letter A has different meanings for the four characters in different stages. Other images, such as names, needlework images and forest images are also studied by scholars.

Chen [1] extracted the image of needlework independently, interpreting it into a symbol of Hester's gender role and class identity. Moreover, this novel has been analyzed from Narrative theory Archetypal Criticism, Modernism, and Feminism. Pan [2], who systematically discusses the narrative theory of this novel, holds that whether the internal ambiguity or external romance is to hide the unorthodox moral values hidden in that extramarital affair. As for the Archetypal Criticism, Ren and Wei [3] focused on the ambiguity or the multiple meanings of "growing-up ceremonies" and mother archetype in this story. Meng [4] explores this novel from modernism, holding that People could not communicate with others; therefore they are doomed to be lonely. Moreover, people studied it from the perspective of eco-feminism and expressed the expectation for the harmonious relationship among woman, nature and men. Even from the Feminism, few researches interpret heroine in *The Scarlet Letter* from Virginia Woolf's Androgyny. Therefore, this article tries to extend the predecessors' studies in terms of Androgyny. This article will analyze both the femininity and masculinity of Hester Prynne, revealing the deconstruction of binary opposition in the

traditional viewpoint of sexuality. Besides, this article explores the influence of Hester's androgynous characteristics on herself, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth and the people around her, which is to embody Hester's self-growth. It will supplement the previous studies.

Thus, through the analysis of Hester Prynne's androgyny reflected in *The Scarlet Letter*, it will reveal Hester Prynne's complete personality, the union of female sensibility and male rationality, which help her to get out of troubles and realize her self-worth. As a result of her innermost androgyny, she grows from an unworldly young woman to a strong-willed, independent and mature woman. Furthermore, it will lead the young man in modern society to improve them, pursuing happiness and realize the true meaning of life.

Androgyny

The formation of femininity and masculinity is actually an imperceptible process. This is similar to the view of Simone de Beauvoir that women are not born to be women, they are cultivated by society. In other words, Gender traits are not innate, but constructed by society. Due to the influence of the gender system or culture in patriarchal society, men and women have been formed distinct social characteristics. Men are strong, active, independent and rational. At the same time, women are weak, passive, dependent and emotional. This traditional gender stereotype affects all levels of social life. It is customary for people to categorize all phenomena, social experiences and individual behaviors with male or female characteristics. Virginia Woolf bravely breaks the stereotype, putting forward androgyny in her essay *A Room of One's own*.

The work deals with the bewilderment of a female writer concerning her identity and the inspiration of writing, namely, "the famous mind". On the basis of reviewing history and examining reality, she takes her life and creative experience as a starting point. After comparing the differences between the two sexes, she puts forward the artist's ideal creation mentality.

Virginia Woolf [5] stated in her essay:

In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is the harmony of them, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. (p.29)

In fact, Virginia Woolf's androgyny is in line with androgyny in psychology, which is her social ideal and literary ideal. The harmonious state of the

coexistence of both sexes is the keynote of her main point. Through the thoughts on the opposite position between history and literature history, man and woman, Virginia Woolf boldly deconstructs the oppression of women in the traditional patriarchal society and culture. She transcends gender antagonism and restriction, reconstructing women's values. In her opinion, both masculinity and femininity exist in one individual. She is opposed to any sexual prejudice and sexual discrimination, and requires writers to jump out of their own gender and life limitations in their creation. We should not only write from the perspective of man, but woman. We should not be influenced by the authority of the patriarchal culture, and not dominated by the absolute feminist consciousness. Therefore, the reasonable combination of these two characteristics can bring harmony of identity.

Virginia Woolf's development of androgyny is a great contribution to literary criticism, both female literary creation and feminist criticism. It not only puts up a new perspective for feminist theory, but a great contribution for woman's liberation. Of course, Woolf also has her limitations when it comes up with androgyny. In order to achieve the "impersonality" of writing, she appeals that woman should forget their sex. If we want to achieve the full and free development of human beings, it is just a fantasy by weakening the consciousness of differences of sex.

Woolf's androgyny recognizes the reasonableness of the existence of men and women, which means that it transcends gender to pursue human harmony. This paper will focus on Hester Prynne in terms of her masculinity and femininity. The previous introduction to androgyny will lay the foundation for the specific analysis of the latter.

Androgyny in Hester Prynne

Woolf believed that the ideal situation should be that a woman can be as tolerant and outspoken as a man, and a man can be as strange and subtle as a woman [6]. Hester Prynne is such a character with androgyny. For one thing, Hester Prynne has the masculinity like the rebellious spirit, survivability and the pursuit of self-value. For another thing, Hester Prynne represents the characteristics of woman in general, like tenderness, charm, gentleness and maternity.

Femininity in Hester Prynne

Hester Prynne, as a young woman, is full of feminine charm. In patriarchal society, traditional culture requires women to be beautiful, kind, gentle and considerate. The image of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's writing fully accords with the expectation of women in that society. As a whole, Hester Prynne's feminine charm is embodied in her attractive

appearance, good skills in needle as well as her optimism.

Nathaniel Hawthorne [7] stated in *The Scarlet Letter*:

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belong to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was lady-like, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days. (p.53)

This is Hawthorne's portrait of Hester Prynne after she goes out of the prison. It is no doubt that she is still attractive, charming and fair, full of feminine gentility. People who know her expect that her spirits must noticeably sag and she must have lost the past elegant demeanor. The reality is that Hester is still radiant. Later, Hester walks towards the place appointed, and she is neither humble nor pushy, adding her indiscernible grace.

At the same time, Hester Prynne's superb needlework shows her feminine charm. Her skill has been recognized by lots people, both personages and the populace. At that time, "It was the art---then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp---of needle-work[7]." It seems that the needlework has become Hester Prynne's spiritual ballast. A lot of imagination has been poured into the ordinary articles with her hands. Obviously, Hester's outstanding embroidery made her an artist. "Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle. To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore something, the passion of her life[7]." Embroidery is Hester's only pleasure in gloomy days. Her embroidery, together with her superb skills and abundant imagination, embodies her creativity and her perception of beauty. It is the only way for her to express her passion for life. This is also the embodiment of her femininity.

In addition, Hester is a warm, generous and kind-hearted woman with optimism and humanism. In this novel, she uses her extra income to relieve others in need who may insult her once. She doesn't care what has happened before, what she cares is helping others in difficulties. Hester's good nature deeply moves many people. Therefore they no longer explained the bright red word in their original meaning, but they said it means "capable" and "angel". Hester sets an example for us with her kindness, benevolence and forgiveness and forgiveness, which is also the embodiment of her feminine charm.

Then, Hester's maternity can be interpreted by her relationship with both Pearl and Dimmesdale, a representation of her femininity.

Although Hester Prynne holds complex feelings towards Peal, she still loves her daughter from the bottom of her heart. On the one hand, Pearl is the love and continuity between Hester and Dimmesdale. On the other hand, Pearl is the result of her adultery with Dimmesdale, a living scarlet letter. Pearl is a symbol of Hester's high price for her pursuit of freedom and happiness. As her only wealth, Hester poured all his love into Pearl. She lives the simplest and most difficult life while the Pearl leads a more comfortable one. She often did her best to buy Pearl the most expensive clothes, and she tried to decorate the Pearl's clothes and dress her up brightly. It seems that Pearl is Hester Prynne's hope to survive from troubles. That is the power of maternal love and her feminine charm.

On the surface, Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale lead a lover's relationship. But, in fact, it is a mother-child relationship in some degree [3] which is also another representation of Hester's maternity. In times of peril, Hester Prynne steps forward bravely, bearing all the external oppression and torture to protect her lover, Dimmesdale. It not only needs courage and determination, but a motherly broad mind and selfless love. Hester Prynne is brave and courageous, full of virtue and wisdom. But Dimmesdale is very cowardly, having a spiritual attachment to his lover. Every time he meets Hester, Dimmesdale will acquire the spiritual comfort and wisdom. Before the reunion in forest, he looks very pale and drawn with faltering steps. Dimmesdale is so dreamy that he is just a dying man. After meeting Hester, he recovers himself and rejuvenates, opening up inspiration and thoughts. In the process of the analyses, before and after comparison, Hester Prynne indeed gives Dimmesdale motherly care and support. Thus, it is a mother-child relationship between Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale to some extent, which is the embodiment of Hester's maternity.

Masculinity in Hester Prynne

Living in a world of binary opposites in gender, the women in a weak position must face the pre-existing social norms. They often have to follow these conventions and norms in this situation, and they have to change their behavior in order to be consistent with the social stigma of women's expectations [5]. However, Virginia Woolf's androgyny breaks through this limitation. In her composition, a complete man should not only have the feminine character like meekness and passivity, but has the power and free character of male temperament. In *Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne embodies the balance of musicality and femininity, which makes her more independent and has more freedom. Hester's masculinity can be interpreted

from her survivability, rebellion against unjust marriage, Pearl's custody and her pursuit of true love.

Hester Prynne's survivability is mainly reflected in her independence both in economy and personality, which is the embodiment of her masculinity. In the patriarchal society ruled by Puritanism, the status of women is rather humble, and woman must admit that their husbands are the masters of the family. The rulers even make the husband occupy the property of the wife in marriage and the inheritance after marriage. Therefore, women must rely on men politically and economically. Obedience, piety and chastity are widely supposed as their virtues. But in contrast, Hester is a laborer in this novel, not a man's appendage. During her exile, she earned her respect by making a living by embroidery. Chen [1] believed that the needle and thread in her hand stands for the weapon for her to fight against the unjust, which made her get rid of the shackles of male ideology. With excellent stitch skills, Hester becomes an economically independent woman. Namely, Hester, with her own needlework, survives and raises her growing daughter. She doesn't seek help from her husband nor priest, although she has enough reason to do. In this novel, it is able to clearly see that Hester gains the independence of thoughts by taking the economic independence of needlework. She is not a woman to beg for food from man. When the novel ends, Hester Prynne is deeply marked with hope and happiness.

As for her marriage, Hester's masculinity can be reflected in her rebellion against the unjust marriage and her pursuit of true love. Hester is a very beautiful, young and charming image in this novel, full of passion and enthusiasm. But, Hester's husband, Roger Chillingworth is "small in stature, with a furrowed visage, which, as yet, could hardly be termed aged." [7] Indeed, Chillingworth is a man of thin visage, a slight deformity. It's hard to associate the two into a couple, which means that they are an ill-assorted pair. In fact, their marriage is not a combination of love, and their marriage may be bounded by some kind of interest or religious thought. Hester Prynne doesn't taste the sweetness of love until she met Dimmesdale. She fell in love with Dimmesdale, and then gave birth to Pearl. It seems that Hester betrays her marriage. The betrayal of this marriage, to some extent, is the emancipation from the family and social constraints of patriarchy. Later, she even brides the captain and books the ship's ticket to escape with Dimmesdale, which embodies her yearning for love and desire for love and freedom.

In addition, Hester's rebellion is represented by her silence at the trial. At the beginning of the trial, the jailer took her to the front of the cross. Hester pushed the jailer to show her natural modesty and stubborn personality. In Hester's heart, she never regards her behavior as guilt. Therefore she refuses to

reveal her daughter's father. This is no doubt a kind of contempt and irony for the Puritan society. Hester's silent resistance can be interpreted from the scarlet letter A in her chest. The letter is set with a lace of gold, very brilliant in the sunshine. When the puritans in the town first see the red letter A on the chest of Hester, they are surprised and angry with their gorgeous colors. Wearing the scarlet letter A does not make Hester realize her guilt, but a new way to show her excellent embroidery. And the clothes she wears are much more colorful than the simple standard of the time, which shows her inner impulse and resistance. Furthermore, Pearl should have been dressed up as usual to avoid arousing people's attention in common views. But Hester acts in a diametrically opposite way. Hester was proud to dress Pearl in a very beautiful way to release his repressed enthusiasm.

Moreover, Hester's actions to win custody of her daughter also represent her rebellion against the unjust patriarchy society. When Hester heard that some influential men of their town wanted to take Pearl away from her, depriving her custody, she took Pearl and went for the governor's house to argue. "God gave me the child! He gave her, in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness! --- She is my torture, none the less... You shall not take her! I will die first!" [7] As Pearl's mother, Hester tried to protect his daughter from injury and she will never give up her right to be a mother, fully maintaining the dignity of a mother.

Influences of Hester Prynne's Androgyny

Hester Prynne's androgyny indeed exerts great influences on herself, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and the people around her. That means the Hester's self-growth, Dimmesdale's last repentance, the punishment that Chillingworth deserves, and the good turns of those people around her.

Under the joint action of androgyny, great changes have taken place in Hester Prynne. She changes herself from a naïve woman into a strong-willed woman. Her androgyny is also gradually formed with the tribulation. Hester suffered a lot in the process with her androgynous characteristics. When she was a young and charming woman, she suffered spiritual emptiness in marriage. After her trial, Hester silently endures the spits of the world. Therefore, she separated herself from the outside world and started her humiliating and lonely life in the outskirts of the city. However, in any case she did not give up the hope of life and lives strongly. At the end of this story, Hester becomes a mature woman who could exclude the difficulty and anxiety for women around her, like a psychologist. Moreover, in her atonement of wearing the scarlet letter "A", Prynne sincerely repented of her own sins and begins to do good things on the one hand. On the other hand, she shows her unyielding rebellious

spirits. Seven years had made Hester strong and mature, but her love for Dimmesdale did not change for a moment. Her repentance and rebellion have been intertwined, just like the combination of femininity and masculinity, which is sometimes difficult to distinguish.

For Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne's androgyny helps him to admit his sins bravely, realizing the true liberation of himself. Dimmesdale is really cowardly and passive in comparison with Hester Prynne. But he transforms a lot under the influence of Hester Prynne. Dimmesdale is a talented young minister who is both handsome and respectable. He is very devout about Puritanism, and his deeds are in accordance with his teachings. However, his love with Hester Prynne changes everything. He does not have the courage to stand on the bench with Hester to openly admit his crimes, and dares not to accept the fact that he betrays the pious faith. He couldn't bear the consequences of the violation of the religious rules and is afraid of being condemned and abused by the public. In fact, he suffers mental and physical torture. For a long time, Dimmesdale's self-whipping and self-torture gradually depletes his miserable life, and finally comes to the brink of collapse in both spirit and body. At last, he plucks up the courage to stand out and opens his guilt. In his last breath, Dimmesdale shows the scarlet letter on his chest. Finally, he dies in the arms of Hester and realizes the self-salvation of the soul.

Besides, Hester bravely reveals Chillingworth's guilt, making the punishment that Chillingworth deserves. In this novel, Chillingworth is a matter of medicine, a learned man, and a sinner with vengeance. When he finds the adultery between Hester and Dimmesdale, Chillingworth appears as a doctor and disguises himself as a reliable friend of Dimmesdale. Chillingworth, like a devil, loses his mind in order to achieve his personal revenge, and cruelly torments others' soul and heart. After identifying his hypocritical veil, Hester stands out bravely, exposing us Chillingworth's true personality. Furthermore, when Chillingworth works hard to torment the Dimmesdale to death and eventually go to the platform, Chillingworth was not happy to achieve the goal of revenge. On the contrary, he fell into depression without the aim and motive of life, and he died in less than a year.

In this novel, Hester changes the hypocrisy and apathy of the society through her sincere behavior. That is to say, through her efforts, Hester endows the scarlet letter A in her chest with multiple meanings. The original word "A" expresses "the crime of adultery (Adultery)". However, as time went on, her independent character showed the word "A" as "Able" or "Angel". Moreover, some people also interpret "A" as "forward (Advance)" and "respect (Admire)" according to Hester's good will. By helping people, Hester win the trust and respect of others. She earns people's respect

and rewrites identity with her own actions. She emancipates herself, to a great extent, as well as the people around her.

CONCLUSIONS

Woolf's ideas are indeed progressive, pointing to the perfect healthy personality of modern society, that is, the people with good adaptability should have the characteristics of dual personality, which means that men should have some female personality traits, and women should have some male characteristics. If Jung's "anima" male femininity and the "animus" femininity theory were true, the world would be in harmony. *The Scarlet Letter* successfully shaped the rebellious character of Hester Prynne. Under the cruel reign of Puritans and Calvin's teachings, she never stopped pursuing a good life, equal rights and a longing love. She dared to fight against the Puritan ruler and fight for her rights. In the patriarchal society, Hester has the courage to resist the fate of injustice. Hester Prynne's masculinity is embodied in her self-independence, spiritual freedom.

As Hawthorne's heroines, Hester have characteristics of femininity and masculinity, which influence people around as well as herself. At the end of the novel, Hester took Pearl leave the land that brought her true love. The story seems to have come to the end. But Hester returned again, bring the story to a climax again. On the one hand, she was fearless against the unreasonable dogma and pursued her own happiness. On the other hand, she cannot completely get rid of the limitation of religion, that is, the rebellion against religion is not thorough. This embodies the dual nature of her mind, resistance and obedience. In a way, it was also a compromise of her femininity and masculinity. In short, her courage and spirits challenging patriarchy and traditional society are worthy for us, especially the modern women, to study.

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