

A Tentative Defense for the Villain Roger Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*

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The paper makes a tentative defense for the villain Roger Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*, regarding that the characterization with a devil's image, cruel and cold-blooded is related to religious and artistic purposes. Actually, with the truth shifted from religious to psychological one, textual evidence shows that Chillingworth is far from that bad, and as one of the protagonists, she also deserves the pity and sympathy from the reader.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Roger Chillingworth, defense

1. Introduction

As a man of letters, Nathaniel Hawthorne had struggled in literary circle for more than two decades in obscurity, before the publication of his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which finally brought him both good reputation and profit with a soaring sale. With this work, it seems overnight Hawthorne was known to the public, as within ten days the work had a sale of 2500 copies, and in the next 14 years this book brought Hawthorne the profit as much as \$1500.

The Scarlet Letter, set in the 1640s New England, narrates the story of adultery and redemption of a young lady Hester Prynne. From the masterpiece, the reader will always generate an endless number of meanings from different perspectives. So far, scholars have conducted their researches from different perspectives, such as redemption of religion, feminism, Freud's psychoanalysis, prototype theory and character analysis.

Some scholars have conducted research on character analysis, trying to explore Hawthorne's creative intention from textual evidence. For Hester, by confessing to God, redeeming and doing charitable work, she finally won the respect from the community, becoming a symbol of angel, "lofty, pure, and beautiful, and wise" (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 224). However, with the sublimation of Hester, her husband old Roger Chillingworth was deteriorating into a devil, cruel and cold-blooded, devoting all his life to revenging. He was "a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office" (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 144). By such contrast, artistic effect has been reached, making him a villain. Meanwhile, through the writing, Hawthorne's religious principle has been revealed, all men are born with Original Sin, "a sense of universal evil [which] was far more pronounced than his [the] sense of actual sin"

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(Donoghue, 2005, pp. 115-16). However, compared with actual sin of adultery, revenge by her husband Chillingworth, should be far worse, deserving no forgiveness at all.

Most of the critics show their sympathy for the heroine Hester and her lover Dimmesdale, criticizing the revengeful husband Chillingworth. For instance, Bruce Ingham Granger in the paper "Arthur Dimmesdale as a Tragic Hero" shows strong sympathy for Dimmesdale because of his great suffering, praising him to be a hero for his great endurance. For Chillingworth, even the author considers him as a leech, "seeking to know what guilt lies buried in his heart and, when this secret is revealed to him, corrupting 'his spiritual being' and bring him to 'the verge of lunacy'" (Granger, 1964, p. 199). Joseph T. McCullen and John C. Guilds in their joint paper "The Unpardonable Sin in Hawthorne: A Re-Examination" treat Dimmesdale and Chillingworth traditionally as unpardonable sinners, and then they narrow the scope down to Chillingworth only, lifting Dimmesdale to the level of the pardonable.

Hawthorne intended to reveal the religious doctrine about sin through the adultery and redemption story happened about two centuries before his age. However, today the reader should not be satisfied with the religious reading only. "As soon as a fact is narrated," pointed out by Roland Barthes, "the author enters into his own death" (Barthes, 2001, p. 1466). In this way, even Hawthorne does not claim the supreme truth about the novel any more, let alone with a gap of two hundred years. Religiously speaking, the doctrine held by Hawthorne makes sense, but not any more in psychology. To Chillingworth, the deterioration of his image because of the revenge is unfair, considering that the person himself was also a victim of the unfortunate happening. Religious truth apart, psychological reading of the character of Chillingworth is necessary (Donoghue, 2005, p. 135).

The adultery young lady Hester Prynne finally gained people's respect by her confession and redemption, being kind to others, and doing charitable work. Hester has been forgiven, from the perspective of non-religion, why should not Chillingworth deserve so?

Indeed, Roger Chillingworth has always been a target of criticism from both the writer and critics. They nearly unanimously agree on the point that Chillingworth is not only ugly in appearance, but also evil in mind. It should be Hawthorne's intention to characterize him as a cruel and cold-blooded person, even from the perspective of the compound name "Roger Chillingworth." "Roger" implies meaning of a rogue, or a villain; and Chillingworth conveys meaning of cold-bloodedness. In other words, it is Hawthorne's intention to target the character as an evil man. However, it is unfair to require a man be silent and do nothing, while he has been betrayed by his wife. Therefore, the paper makes a tentative defense for the character Roger Chillingworth.

2. The creative Intention: Hawthorne's Detest and Hatred Toward Chillingworth

In order to know the characterization of Roger Chillingworth as a villain, it is necessary to learn the Hawthorne's creative intention related to human sin. By casting the background about two hundred years before his time, Hawthorne had intended to convey in his work the idea of sin. In his mind, all the people are with Original Sin, which is more wicked than actual sin they conduct, including adultery in Hester. By confession to God, people can be pardonable, as Hester did by her act. Because of his religious doctrine, Chillingworth appears to be more detestable than Hester with actual sin.

In the novel, the author's dislike and hatred to Chillingworth is clearly shown in his description. The name Roger Chillingworth that Hawthorne chooses implies us with the image of a villain with cruel and cold-blooded nature. And the address as well as the description to him has also sent us the same message from Hawthorne.

2.1 Characterization Through Name

For artistic effect, Hawthorne needs to create a villain in the novel, striking a contrast with the female protagonist Hester, so as to promote her image. In this way, Chillingworth is characterized as a bad man, even from his name. From his name "Roger Chillingworth" alone, image of cruel and cold-blooded villain has been indicated, showing Hawthorne's disgust. Hawthorne must have been careful in naming the characters, for previously in his own name, he had made some change.

In order to differ from his ancestors, of whom he felt so ashamed due to the notorious Salem Witch Trial incident, he added the letter "w" to his surname "Hathorne," thus making "Hawthorne" finally. Therefore, it is fair to assume that even from the appearance of the character, the author's creative intention and the bias have been determined, labeling him as a villain with cruel and inhuman characteristics.

2.2 Characterization Through Synecdoche

The author's address to Chillingworth specially reflects his uncontrollable hatred, which makes a sharp contrast with his approval of Dimmesdale. In addressing Chillingworth, Hawthorne always uses some synecdoche, including "the leech," "deformed old figure," "the deformed" and even "the devil," demonstrating his utmost detest and hatred toward him. On the other hand, in addressing Dimmesdale, Hawthorne is very generous in selecting the words to show his praise and sympathy. The commendatory addresses, such as "the Reverend Dimmesdale," "the poor clergyman," or simply "Mr. Dimmesdale" are frequently used in the novel, showing the author's respect and compassion for the character, especially under the circumstances that he has been tortured by Chillingworth.

2.3 Characterization Through Description.

The description of Chillingworth shows that the author also tries to magnify his physical deformities to sharpen the point that the old man is not only evil in mind but also ugly in appearance. "There she [Hester] beheld another countenance, of a man well-stricken in years, a pale, thin, scholar-like visage, with eyes dim and bleared by the lamplight that had served them to pore over many ponderous books" (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 50). As for his figure, he "was slightly deformed, with left shoulder a trifle higher than the right" (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 50). Confronted with Chillingworth, Hester saw the frown the fiercest of all. "But his character had been so much enfeebled by suffering, that even its lower energies were incapable of more than a temporary struggle. He sank down on the ground, and buried his face in his hands" (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 165).

It is natural for the characters to have some shortcomings, in one aspect or another, but the physical deformity, distorted face and shape, and even the naturally old age have been exaggerated too much, to the detriment of the verisimilitude of the very character. This means of description, as the above ones, is for artistic sake, making a contrast with Hester so as to emphasize her kind nature.

Hawthorne's detest and hatred to Chillingworth has been carried at home considering the many descriptions of Dimmesdale and Hester. By juxtaposing all the four main characters, Hester, Chillingworth, Dimmesdale and Pearl together in the same chapter, artistic effect in this way has been reached by means of strong contrast, good

and evil, beautiful and ugly, kind and cruel. The juxtaposition, especially with the sketch-like description of Chillingworth, which has already been received firmly in the mind of the readers, offers an ideal way of contrast.

For the description of Hester Prynne and the minister Dimmesdale, Hawthorne is very willing to promote their bright sides of nature, paying barely enough attention to their shortcomings. Hester Prynne is greatly elevated in her beauty:

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, and the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike. [...] And never had Hester Prynne appeared more ladylike, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 45)

From the description above, we see what impresses the reader deeply is twofold, her outer beauty and dignity on the one hand, and her inner strong will on the other. Her actual sin of adultery, compared with her outer beauty and nobility, seems to be petty and trivial. Similarly, the description for Dimmesdale is equally elevated in term:

His eloquence and religious fervor had already given the earnest of high eminence in his profession. He was a person of very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow, large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which, unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint. (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 56)

What we see in the description of Dimmesdale was a reverend minister, who was young, but respectful because of his devotion to his work with theological knowledge. Therefore, the general image of Dimmesdale is quite affirmative, with his actual sin almost forgotten by the reader.

In this way, the three protagonists of the novel have already been juxtaposed together, with all their features revealed to the reader. The three characters, with the different descriptions in the writing by Hawthorne, could be distinguished easily from each other. Hester and Dimmesdale have been given enough commendatory words, showing Hawthorne's approval; while Chillingworth has been given derogatory description, reflecting Hawthorne's detest and even hatred.

These tremendously different descriptions in them, as a matter of fact, are not only for writing purpose's sake. There are also some fundamental reasons, related not only to the family history of Hawthorne's ancestor's, but also to the religious doctrines he formed through his self-education. Firstly, Hawthorne was born to a pious puritan family in New England, and the family tradition influenced his growing up greatly. Meanwhile Hawthorne was ambivalent for this family because one of his ancestors, the judge of Salem, was in charge of the notorious witch craft trials of 1692. Nevertheless, some of the doctrines of Puritanism can never be disconnected with him. What is more, for several years, Hawthorne had been staying at home, focusing on his reading, picking up the knowledge about the history of New England, in which most of his novels are set.

During the years from 1825 until 1837, "He read extensively in colonial histories and documents, which would become important sources for such historical tales" (Baym, 2008, p. 589). The writing of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* is, to a great extent, guided by some of the Calvinism doctrines, and the prevalent religious views in New England then, among which are the attitudes toward physicians and the way of redemption.

The Calvinistic doctrines on redemption in New England then, which is reflected in his works, especially *The Scarlett Letter*, are closely connected with the ones in Europe. After the Protestant Reformation movement, especially with the promotion by German theologian Martin Luther, the French theologian Calvin transformed religious institutions and elaborated different doctrines. For the doctrine of predestination, he put it like as “God adopts some to hope of life and sentences others to eternal death” (Baym, 2006, p. 616). In other words, “only a small number, out of an incalculable multitude, should obtain salvation” (ibid). Hawthorne was in firm belief of the doctrine and he applied Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale as the “chosen people” in the novel. The two characters, either through kindness and charitable work, or through private confession to God, gain their salvation, and finally are pardoned by God for “even despair does not prove fatal if the sinner has a will to return to faith and offer worthy repentance” (McCullen, 1960, p. 224). But Chillingworth is not so lucky, he is considered as the sinner with revenge and blasphemy, which as a sin should never be forgiven or pardoned by God. The “two characters commonly accepted as unpardonable sinners, Chillingworth and Ethan Brand” (p. 222), therefore are deprived of the possibility of being saved by God.

In addition, Hawthorne’s own religious views on science also play an important role for the writing. Privately, Hawthorne had been wary of science, regarding it as nearly as the opposite of religion. In Hawthorne’s works, including *The Scarlett Letter* and some short stories, dislike and detest for people engaging in work of science, such as scholars and physicians, could be reflected. Actually, Chillingworth, as a physician, was very devoting to his work related to science, but he appeared in the work as a devil, a distorted old man governed by feeling of revenge.

This strong hatred and prejudices against scholars and physicians are obviously not exclusive to *The Scarlett Letter*, for we can also get some proof from his short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” In this short story, doctor Rappaccini, for scientific research, planted many different kinds of plants that are fatal at people’s touch. For his medical research, Rappaccini finally became very inhumane as to use his only daughter as object of experiment. The young and naïve girl, at the order of her father, was killed by the fatal poison from the plants.

From this story, image of a distorted and cold-blooded man, engaging in research, has been established, reflecting Hawthorne’s strong hatred for scholars and physicians. The prejudices, as a matter of fact, were deeply rooted in Hawthorne’s mind since they were formed in the process of Hawthorne’s self-education through extensive reading. It is through reading, especially that of his own family, that Hawthorne learnt the history of witchcraft in New England. Since so many people had been hurt by people engaging in witch-craft businesses, the detest from the local people, especially from Hawthorne could be very common in New England in the past.

From this perspective, it is fair to assume that Hawthorne formed his view on physicians from New England people. In the story, Chillingworth, on his return back to New England from Europe, met some mishaps and was detained by Indians. During his sojourn he learnt the skills from the Indians, half science and half magic, which he was quite proud of. “My old studies in alchemy [...] and my sojourn, for above a year past, among a people well versed in the kindly properties of simples, have made a better physician of me than many that claim the degree” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 61). No matter how capable Chillingworth boasted himself, he was believed to be “associated all his life with some form of magic-alchemy, laboratory, Indian lore of medicine. These areas, according to Puritans, were controlled by devil” (Wellborn, 1961, p. 25). All that he

learnt from the Indians, turn out to be the kind of magic skills related to nonorthodox ones, cursed by Christianity.

With these views in mind, it is reasonable for Hawthorne to select intentionally the dark sides of Chillingworth as his writing materials. The old learned scholar is a person already in decay, with furrows on face, shoulders unleveled and waist bent greatly. What is worse, Chillingworth is described not only ugly in appearance, but evil and cruel in mind and action as well. He had become a devil, dominated by his thirst for revenge against Dimmesdale, unwilling to accept Hester's beg to give up his action. At this moment, Chillingworth had already distorted and alienated in mind as well as in action. "In a word, old Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office" (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 144).

In order to promote religious doctrine, the novel has intentionally distorted the real image of Chillingworth, revealing the dark sides of his character in a distorted way. Obviously, the kind of arrangement is serving for the author's writing intention, to make a contrast with Hester and Dimmesdale. Thus, religious doctrine in Hawthorne's mind has already been illustrated, only on the condition that Chillingworth as a character has been distorted too much, losing its verisimilitude. Nowadays, since the real character of Chillingworth remains hidden confronted with the repression of Hester, and the reader's interest has shifted from religious truth to psychological one, it is necessary to explore the real character of Chillingworth.

3. The Real Character of Chillingworth.

For the sake of artistic contrast with Hester, Chillingworth has been repressed not only by the author, but by the reader, if the reading always focuses on the religious truth, giving too much preference to Hester. The real character of Chillingworth, if examined from the perspective of psychology, turns out to be very different from the original one. Actually, Chillingworth was not evil in nature, but he became evil-like, driven by the unfairly cruel circumstances to him. As a physician, actually he also had some qualities, such as endurance, diligence, and devotion to his work. However, because of the unfair treatment he got from his wife, he was forced to degenerated into a devil.

3.1 Driven to Revenge.

Chillingworth's revenge is what the author criticizes most, which makes his degeneration into a devil. Actually, the revenge is not out of his real nature, but was conducted when he was driven to do so. It is religious doctrine to choose to forgive, even on the occasion that he had been betrayed by his wife. However, reading of the novel should never be confined to it only, and the re-reading of the novel from the perspective of psychology proves to be more convincing for his revenge.

Chillingworth loved his wife, and he took great efforts to travel to New England to meet his wife, regardless of the fact that he was old and feeble. In addition to that, the long journey was also full of dangers, especially those posed by the Indians. As was expected on his journey, he was kidnapped by the Indians, going through great suffering because of their tortures. Even when he was detained, he tried to learn the Indian medicine and became a physician for future use. In spite of the great dangers and troubles, Chillingworth was finally able to made his escape and set foot on New England. The great efforts he had taken and the great sacrifice he had made, however, were not rewarded kindly by his wife, but was treated in a very unfair way.

Chillingworth arrived there with great difficulties, only to find that he had been cuckolded by his wife, the utmost insult for a man. Now that he had been betrayed by his wife, he chose to accept the fact, forgiving her since he believed that she had not been given enough care, which is obviously a great sacrifice for the poor man. Chillingworth confessed to his wife that he had sought to warm his wife with all his he could offer. For what Chillingworth had done, Hester was greatly moved, admitting that “I have greatly wronged thee” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 64).

Chillingworth’s last request upon Hester, to know who that man was, was refused by Hester, which forced him to make the investigation all by himself. Now the religious doctrine gradually shifted to secular revenge, only on the condition that it is based on the circumstances, rather than out of his real will or nature. In addition to that, Chillingworth was a scholar, armed with the spirit of seeking truth in an independent way. He needed to find out the man who had spoiled his happiness. Since his wife had been punished by the local rules, it is unfair to keep the culprit hidden before the public, and remained at large from punishment. In this way, Chillingworth, like the way he seeks truth through his experiment, attempted to find out the culprit concealed before him. “Believe me, Hester, there are few things whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought—few things hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreserved to the solution of a mystery. [...] I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books: as I have sought gold in alchemy” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 64). Therefore, it is fair to assume that Chillingworth finally started to revenge for his dignity, not out of his nature, but out of the unfair treatment he received.

3.2 Kind in Nature.

Chillingworth is not evil in nature, and on the contrary he is blessed with kindness inside. As husband, he never reserved his love to his wife, taking great risks to travel to meet her, in spite of his feeble physical condition; as a physician, he spared no efforts to treat his patients, trying with his skills to save them.

What is more, his kindness, or even altruism, can be proved most typically through his treatment of the sick baby Pearl, the bastard girl of his wife and her mistress. Casting all his own personal hatred aside, he tried to cure her of the disease with his medicine, showing his kindness and generosity in nature.

For artistic effect, the author intentionally omits or understates the good deeds done by Chillingworth, including his serving of the local people of New England. Actually, with his good expertise, Chillingworth had saved a lot of people, thus gaining the respect from local people. Moreover, his kindness was not confined to his service to others, it also included other aspects, such as his arrangement for his property. As Chillingworth had accumulated some wealth from his work, before his death, he wrote the will, pointing out that Pearl should be the beneficiary of his property in Europe.

All in all, from all the deeds Chillingworth had done, which has been understated so much within the text, it is fair to conclude that Chillingworth was a man with kindness and love in nature.

3.3 Great Eagerness in Pursuit of Knowledge and Happiness.

The appearance of Chillingworth as an eyesore has always been the target of others, and it has been used to reinforce the evils within his heart by Hawthorne. But inside the very body, it was a heart bestowed with a strong will, dedicating to the pursuit of knowledge and happiness. Chillingworth was not a person who would idle his valuable time away, but was devoting to the cause that was meaningful. Just as what he claimed, he had spent his

“best years in feeding the hungry dream of knowledge” (Hawthorne, 1994, p. 63), and that was not only for his personal improvement, but also for the advancement of human welfare. This spirit of pursuing knowledge, with the aim of making contribution to human beings, is the eternal heritage of all times that should be cherished.

As for his marriage with Hester, regarded as mismatched for the age gap, it should not be considered as Chillingworth’s dishonesty or cheating. All the textual evidence proves that the marriage, in spite of the age difference, had been conducted out of the approval of Hester first. In other words, the marriage was done fair and square, with the previous agreement from both sides. Therefore, the seemingly mismatched marriage, actually proves Chillingworth’s virtue, the pursuit for love and goodness.

Conclusion

Within the work, what we read in Chillingworth is a character as an eyesore in appearance, and with evil nature. The author and many critics, nearly bear the same hatred toward him. In other words, Chillingworth has long been labeled as a devil-like person, who can never be forgiven by others. The hatred and prejudices are actually the reflection of Hawthorne’s own puritan views. Born to a Calvinism family, he had been greatly influenced by the doctrines. God only chooses limited number of people in His salvation, but for the rest, Chillingworth for example, they should never be forgiven. Besides, Hawthorne also holds derogative view on physicians, considering them to be none but cheaters. Therefore, in his writing he intentionally emphasizes Chillingworth’s dark sides to serve for the theme of the novel.

Through the novel, Hawthorne has revealed his religious doctrine on human sins. For artistic effect, Chillingworth as one of the main characters has been greatly distorted, with his good deeds omitted or understated, and the dark sides in him greatly exaggerated. Nowadays, with the re-reading of the novel from the non-religious perspective, the research has also shifted from religion to psychology. It is high time that the real character of Chillingworth be explored.

Through the re-reading, and research from perspective of psychology, we can get a new image of Chillingworth with bright sides of his nature. He made his revenge not out of his own nature, but because of the unfair treatment he received. Moreover, from the good deeds he has done, what we see is a character with new image.

To sum up, with what Chillingworth has done into consideration, forgiveness to his wife, devotion to the research for the advancement of human being, and the services for the welfare of the local people, it is fair to conclude that Chillingworth was actually kind in nature, deserving our sympathies also in the process of our re-reading.

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