

## Pride as the Primary Impetus of Roger Chillingworth's Downfall in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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*The Scarlet Letter* is the story of human frailty. It deals with adultery, punishment, and penance of the sinned pair, along with the vengeance of the betrayed husband. Hawthorne focuses on the processes of the spiritual transformations of the three main characters—Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth. Roy R. Male comments that *The Scarlet Letter* is “the most intensely moving and the most beautifully composed work in American history.”<sup>1)</sup> Hyatt H. Waggoner refers to the ambiguity of this novel arising from Hawthorne’s use of various levels of images.<sup>2)</sup> D.H. Lawrence also comments on the ambiguity of this novel: “It is a marvellous allegory. It is to me one of the greatest allegories in all literature. *The Scarlet Letter*. Its marvelous under-meaning! And its perfect duplicity.”<sup>3)</sup> Because of this ambiguity, there have been different interpretations of this story among the critics. Most critics acknowledge Hawthorne’s intense interest in good and evil, sin and redemption through penance and penitance in this story.<sup>4)</sup> Male classifies three types of sinners: “Hester Prynne as the openly repentant sinner, Arthur Dimmesdale as the half-repentant sinner, Roger Chillingworth as the unrepentant sinner.”<sup>5)</sup> Male reports that most critics are interested in Hester but that Henry James is interested in Dimmesdale. On the other hand, Mark Van Doren refers to Hawthorne’s deep interest in Chillingworth: “And three years later, with or without the

1) Roy R. Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), p. 90.

2) Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 127-132.

3) D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 106.

4) Listed below are the examples of the criticism referring to Hawthorne’s interest in the question of sin in *The Scarlet Letter*. Waggoner, p. 129; Male, p. 91; and Mark Van Doren, “The Scarlet Letter” in *Hawthorne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. N. Kaul (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 137. Waggoner comments as follows: “Among the ideas implicit in the opening chapter, then, are, first, that the novel is to be concerned with the relationships of good and evil; second, that it will distinguish between two types of good and evil; and, third, that moral good will be less strongly felt than moral and natural evil. Male interprets that *The Scarlet Letter* “deals with the consequences of sin upon the individuals.” Doren remarks: “Sin, Guilt, Isolation, Pride were not the husks of Hawthorne’s thought, they were its deep, warm center, and here for once they operate as personalities, no less divine in their power because they are hidden from sight.”

5) Male, p. 91.

husband of such a woman in mind, he had made the entry: 'A Story of the effects of revenge, diabolizing him who indulges in it.' Here was Roger Chillingworth, the familiar devil of the tales, supplied at last with a human motive...."<sup>6)</sup>

In spite of the variety of opinions concerning the three main characters, there is no controversy over the fact that Chillingworth appears as the most tragic figure in this novel because of his gradual moral downfall. He is deprived of the object of his affection and illusions by Hester's adultery; he has only the object for his jealousy and hatred. Since he regards himself chiefly as the wronged husband, he does not ruminate over his own follies and evils. Consequently, he loses chances for sincere repentance. He is enslaved by his diabolic intentions to avenge. Many critics label Chillingworth simply as "the devil figure."<sup>7)</sup> But Richard H. Brodhead calls our attention to the fact that "giving himself up completely to his one evil purpose, Chillingworth brings about his own dehumanization and makes himself 'more wretched than his victim.'"<sup>9)</sup> Brodhead agrees to Frederick Crew's following comment on Chillingworth: "We cannot conscientiously say that Chillingworth is a devil...."<sup>10)</sup> Indeed, Chillingworth is a tragic figure whose moral downfall deserves readers' sympathy. The primary impetus of Chillingworth's downfall lies in his excessive pride.

According to Carol Schoen, Hawthorne is familiar with the sin of pride discussed by Dante.<sup>11)</sup> In Chillingworth's case, his pride dominates his decisions throughout his life. His pride in his wealthy family background and in his scholarly competence misleads him into marrying Hester, a beautiful girl much younger than himself. Though he is "a man well stricken in years and slightly deformed," he is too confident to doubt Hester's satisfaction in the marriage.<sup>12)</sup> He might have felt condescending in marrying a girl from a "poverty-stricken antique gentility" (p. 348). But Darrel Abel discusses how Chilling-

6) Doren, p. 130.

7) This paper in discussing Chillingworth as the devilish figure is indebted to Darrel Abel, "The Devil in Boston," in *Philological Quarterly*, 32 (1953), 367; Rudolph Von Abele, *The Death of the Artist: A Study of Hawthorne's Disintegration* (The Hague: Martinus NIJHOFF, 1955); and Waggoner, p. 144. Abel describes Chillingworth as "a Miltonic Satan given the meaner, more realistic embodiment appropriate to the villain of an historical romance." Abele labels Chillingworth as "the damned one, scrutinizing and trying to ruin the the beautiful and the saved." Waggoner identifies Chillingworth with Ethan Brand who "with 'cold and remorseless purpose' conducted a psychological experiment on the heart of a young girl and 'wasted, absorbed, and perhaps annihilated her soul, in the process.'"

9) Richard H. Brodhead *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 61.

10) Brodhead, p. 61.

11) Carol Schoen, "The House of the Seven Deadly Sins," in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 19 (1st Quarter, 1973), 27.

12) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Portable Hawthorne*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), pp. 348-49. Hereafter, quotations from this version of the story will be documented with page numbers in parentheses at the end of each quotation.

worth's marriage is digressing from the ideal Christian marriage. According to Abel, a wife should be chosen "for grace, not for beauty," and, moreover, "there should be no great disproportion in age."<sup>13</sup> If Chillingworth were wise, he should have chosen a more docile and less pretty woman than Hester for an obedient and chaste wife. Ironically, Chillingworth with "a strange, penetrating power" cannot discern the passionate and independent qualities in Hester. He realizes his folly in marrying Hester too late when he sees her on the scaffold.

Chillingworth's pride misguides him even in his brief married life with Hester. Instead of passion he merely shows "the warmth" for her. He himself admits his lack of passion for her: "And so, Hester, I drew thee into my heart, into its innermost chamber, and sought to warm thee by the warmth which thy presence made there!" (p.364). His "warmth" is insulting and disgusting to Hester. When she recollects her life with Chillingworth later, she shudders with disgust: "she deemed it her crime most to be repented of, that she had ever endured, reciprocated, the luke warm grasp of his hand..." (pp.461-62). This lack of passion in Chillingworth's heart helps Hester pacify her troubled conscience: "He betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him!" (p.462). Nor does Chillingworth try to draw Hester into his academic world in an attempt to establish the common ground for mutual understanding and respect necessary for sustaining the ties between husband and wife. He keeps "his seclusion of his study," appearing only at "eventide" (p.461).

But Chillingworth's decisive mistake is sending Hester to Boston by herself. Here again his pride in his status as her legal husband blinds him to the possible temptations a young beautiful wife may encounter when she is alone in a strange city. Hester does not hide the fact that she "feels no love" for him (p.363). He also overlooks the fact that there exists neither any genuine emotional tie nor any child which helps to consolidate a marriage. He overvalues the power of law and ethics of his society, but he undervalues the power of human passion. Indeed, Chillingworth is partly responsible for Hester's moral downfall. If Chillingworth had not sent her away alone, or if he had not been detained in the Indian captivity for so long, Hester would not have committed adultery despite her dissatisfaction with her husband. Hester's dread of Chillingworth in the first scaffold scene supports the fact that Hester is well aware of her moral obligations to her husband:

Dreadful as it was, she was conscious of a shelter in the presence of these thousand witnesses. It was better to stand thus with so many betwixt him and her, than to greet him, face to face, they two alone. She fled for refuge, as it were, to the public exposure, and dreaded the moment when its protection should be withdrawn from her (p.353).

Chillingworth's wounded pride as the wronged husband makes him decide to live in

13) Abel, pp.367-68.

secrecy, hiding his identity. He orders Hester to swear to keep his secret because he "will not encounter the dishonour that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman" (p.365). But by preferring to live in secrecy, Chillingworth misses the best chances for revenge. If he had appeared as Hester's legal husband after his hardships during the Indian captivity, Hester's sin would have been grossly enlarged. But Chillingworth's pride cannot allow him to bear the humiliation to be pitied as the betrayed husband. As a result, he couldn't try effective means of revenge. If he had openly cast Hester off as her husband, she would have lived in utmost public shame and Dimmesdale's sense of guilt would have been increased. If he had accepted Hester as his wife and insisted on her living with him, he could have tortured her day and night because she would have had to follow his decision and endure the humiliation of facing him everyday with the symbols of her sin—the scarlet letter and Pearl. Moreover, Dimmesdale would have fallen the victim of jealousy and remorse because he would have had to witness Chillingworth's power over Hester. Instead, Chillingworth makes himself the victim of jealousy by preferring to live in secrecy; he allows Hester to mature and to become strong in her public penance, free from his intervention and domination. Ironically, Chillingworth's secrecy turns out to be the blessing for Hester.

Another possibilities open for Chillingworth is to leave Boston quietly, either with Hester and Pearl or by himself. Without revealing his identity, he could have left Boston with Hester and have attempted a new life where both of them are not known at all. He admits that in spite of his despise for Hester's "weakness," he still believes in the effectiveness of his marriage: "Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me" (p.365). His warmth may have been quenched and might not be rekindled, yet he could have had chances to win Hester's respect and gratitude by showing his generosity. But Chillingworth's pride as "a pure and upright man" prevents him from taking this course. Disdaining Hester in her infamy, he is afraid of "the contagion of her dishonour" as if he himself were blameless (p.405). Chillingworth could have left Boston alone, leaving Hester and her partner to their sins. He might have ascribed Hester's adultery to human weakness and dedicate himself to his studies in alchemy, metaphysics, and medicine. But here again his pride in his power of penetrating human secrets intervenes, and he pledges to seek the unknown paramour. His pride in his abilities is well expressed in his following remark: "But, as for me, I come to the inquest with other senses than they possess. I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy. Sooner or later, he must needs be mine!" (p.364). Thus, the first step toward Chillingworth's perversion is taken. At first, he intends his quest "with the severe and equal integrity of a judge, desirous only of truth" (p.415). But soon he is possessed by his evil intentions by constantly dwelling upon them.

Chillingworth's faith in his sensitivity and intelligence ironically leads him to his doom. He trusts his intuition, and, from the first, he is suspicious of Dimmesdale. Intentionally

he approaches Dimmesdale and becomes "the physician as well as friend of the young minister" (p. 396). When he witnesses Dimmesdale's earnest defense for Hester's right to keep Pearl with her, his suspicion increases. He does not hesitate "to go deep into his patient's bosom, delving among his principles, prying into his touch, like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern" (p. 411). This is the act of "violating the sanctity of human heart," which makes Chillingworth "more sinning than sinned against, as more sinful even than the minister."<sup>14</sup> Hawthorne implies the possibility of "the dissolution of the soul of the sufferer" when exposed to Chillingworth's satanic search (p. 411). This blasphemous search into human heart is deeply related with Chillingworth's professional studies. Alchemy is related with supernatural power, and there are hints that he might have "joined in the incantations of the savage priests to learn their medical secrets during his Indian captivity" (p. 414). Abel indicates Hawthorne's opinion that "the scientist's willingness to probe spiritual nature with his mundane investigations was an impious trespass, and the physician was liable to trespass upon the soul within the 'superior mystery.'"<sup>15</sup> Dimmesdale's violent reaction to Chillingworth's implication that the confession of "the wound or trouble in soul" is necessary to heal the physical illness shows the differences in their opinions regarding the human soul.

Chillingworth's tenacious pursuit of Dimmesdale is also related with his wounded pride. When he finds his suspected opponent to be his equal in intellect and sensitivity, he cannot but feel extremely jealous. This jealousy paralyzes his reason. He guesses that Hester remains in Boston chiefly because of her unquenched passion for her secret lover. His jealousy is further stimulated to witness her fidelity for the unknown man in her seven-year-penance, while she betrayed him in his two-year-absence. If he had found baseness and vulgarity in Dimmesdale, Chillingworth could have derided at Hester's foolery and ceased to torment Dimmesdale. However, in addition to intelligence and sensitivity, Dimmesdale has many good qualities that Chillingworth lacks. Dimmesdale is young and handsome; he has "sweet, tremulous voice" appealing to human heart. Chillingworth has to admit that Dimmesdale deserves Hester's love, which pricks his wounded pride. Therefore, Chillingworth gloates over Dimmesdale's secret agony and determines to degrade Dimmesdale's soul, committing a far greater sin than "prying into human heart." What Chillingworth overlooks in his search into Dimmesdale's soul is the value of remorse and repentance. Dimmesdale can win access to other suffering human hearts because he humbly admits his sin and weakness in his heart. He looks into his own evil in his heart in his rigorous penitance, moving toward his "ascension" as Waggoner says.<sup>16</sup> Of course, Hawthorne implies that penance and penitance are essential for redemption. As for

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14) Waggoner, p. 143.

15) Abel, pp. 372-73.

16) Waggoner, p. 149.

Chillingworth, he does not repent; consequently he does not introspect to search for his own evil, losing the opportunity for redemption.

Chillingworth shows his stubborn pride again in his defiant attitude toward his tragic fate. He is transformed into a satanic figure: "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" (p. 455). Hester feels responsible for his terrible transformation, and she implores him to seek vengeance against her and to cease his persecution of Dimmesdale, if not out of generosity or forgiveness, for his own soul. Chillingworth is moved by her strength and dignity even in her afflictions, and he admires and pities her for the first time: "Thou hadst great elements. Peradventure, hadst thou met earlier with a better love than mine, this evil had not been. I pity thee, for the good that has been wasted in thy nature!" (p. 459). But he refuses to forgive Dimmesdale and to give up his vengeance. Bitter as he is, he prefers to follow his fated course regardless of its consequence: "By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but, since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity.... It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may!" (p. 460). Brodhead comments on Chillingworth's decision: "Chillingworth relinquishes his own freedom and adopts, in a perverted because atheistic way, the deterministic outlook of the Puritans."<sup>17)</sup> Chillingworth's remorseless stubborn attitude is also a good contrast to Dimmesdale's obedient and receptive attitude. Dimmesdale accepts even "Chillingworth's persecution as Providential."<sup>18)</sup>

The final state of Chillingworth is a broken man "with a blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed" beside dying Dimmesdale (p. 538). Chillingworth has to admit that Dimmesdale has "escaped" from him and his vengeance is thwarted. In his vain attempt to check the minister from his public confession, Chillingworth tries to appeal to Dimmesdale's pride in his profession: "Do not blacken your fame, and perish in dishonour! I can yet save you! Would you bring infamy on your sacred profession?" (p. 535). Accused as a tempter by Dimmesdale, Chillingworth experiences the crumbling of his pride in his power. He undergoes another "remarkable change" after Dimmesdale's death: he "withered up, shrivelled away...like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun" (p. 542). While Hawthorne attributes his sudden decay in health to the fact that "there was no more devil's work on earth for him to do," Hawthorne also suggests Chillingworth's later remorse:

It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry, whether hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom.... Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions seem essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and

17) Brodhead, p. 63.

18) Waggoner, p. 149.

lurid glow. In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love (p.543).

There is another indication of Chillingworth's remorse: he left Pearl a large portion of his fortune, making her "the richest heiress of her day" in Boston. On Hester's part, she also appears not to be indifferent to him from the fact that she does not leave Boston until after Chillingworth's death.

Chillingworth's gradual downfall and transformation into the incarnation of the devil shows how pride can mislead an intellectual man. Chillingworth who prides himself in his erudite knowledge cannot predict the tragic outcome of his own marriage which is not based on mutual love and understanding. He fails to impress Hester with his wealth and knowledge. Paradoxically, he cannot discern Hester's passion and unyielding spirit despite his knowledge, and he exposed her to temptations by sending her alone to Boston. Chillingworth's failure shows us that sometimes knowledge from books and studies unrelated with reality may be ineffectual in practical affairs. Moreover, Chillingworth's neglect in showing his affection for Hester and her consequent adultery imply the importance of communication in marriage. Indeed, the wedding itself does not insure happiness if there exists no mutual affection between the married couple. Chillingworth's failure as a husband and his consequent downfall show how important the marriage life is to a man. For all his knowledge, Chillingworth fails in controlling his hatred and turns into a man who wants devilish vengeance. *The Scarlet Letter* teaches us the value of generosity, compassion, penance, and penitance in human life.

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