Analogies between Chillingworth and Pearl in The Scarlet Letter

Eriko Toyama

Preface

Chillingworth and Pearl are analogous regarding the constant reminders of the sin of adultery committed by Hester and Dimmesdale. Chillingworth, as a vengeful ex-husband, who was betrayed by his wife, and Pearl, as a symbol of adultery, follow Hester and Dimmesdale. The only difference is, however, Chillingworth is a direct pursuant, while Pearl is indirect.

Although Dimmesdale tells us that Chillingworth's sin of revenge by manipulating the human heart is much worse than his own sin of adultery, Chillingworth has his own ground to say that he is doing the right. As a minister, Dimmesdale thinks that the human heart is most sacred and none except God can manipulate it. However, Chillingworth naturally wants to know who is the lover of his wife or who is the father of the child. Also, only by revealing the fact, he can clear the disgrace which he has incurred; further, the hardships he experienced while captured by the Indians would be rewarded. He is very shrewd to detect the sinner. Keeping his identity as Hester's legal husband a secret, Chillingworth, with cold scientist's eyes, tries to discover Hester's lover. His revenge thus proceeds carefully and precisely. Being a friend or a doctor, he lives under the same roof as Dimmesdale, and watches him day and night.

On the other hand, the very intuitive, elf-like child, Pearl is an innocent agent who condemns her mother Hester. She repeatedly questions her mother why the minister always puts his hand on his heart, and why the minister cannot hold her hand in the day light. Those questions uttered by a mere child torment Hester. The simpler and unconscious the questions are, the more torturous for Hester. In terms of being a constant reminder of the sin, Pearl exists in the same category as Chillingworth. Pearl, known as "the living sin of adultery," or "the embodiment of the scarlet letter," does not relate to Chillingworth at all, however, the roles of Pearl and Chillingworth overlap in the novel. They both act as moral reminders or moral defenders against the concealed sin of Hester and Dimmesdale.

I Chillingworth

Chillingworth sees Hester for the first time in two years, and she is holding a baby and
being punished on the scaffold. It is not only his recognition of Hester after a long absence, but also the revelation that he has been “wronged.” This revelation is too much for him to deal with. Yet, soon he decides to face the problem and find the truth: Who is the father of the child? Who is the lover of Hester? He needs to remove the stain left on him. Yet, two years’ separation results in a distance, and makes them strangers with each other. When he finds that Hester will not reveal her lover’s name, his commitment to search for the seducer intensifies:

“It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known!—he will be known!—he will be known!” (p. 63)

What if she had shown pity for her husband and had been honest to him? Maybe the whole story would have changed, because Chillingworth still loves her. Though he condemns her passion, he is not vengeful against Hester at this point. He says:

“It was my folly, and thy weakness. I,—a man of thought,—the bookworm of great libraries,—a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge,—what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own!” (p. 74)

He freely admits what he lacks and concludes, “mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay. . . . , I seek no vengeance, plot no evil against thee.” (pp. 74–75)

Indeed, Chillingworth’s physical deformity and his scholarly career are factors which contribute to his future tragedy. He is to free himself from feeling, from sentiment and from the delight of the heart which he sees in Hester. It is ironical that his preciseness in character and his scholastic attitude eventually lead him to seek the truth. He says “I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books: as I have sought gold in alchemy.” (p. 75) All small and large tragic elements pile up and after two years, Chillingworth becomes a “wronged” husband without knowing it. Considering his inner agony, his revenge is not completely improper; it is his right and his natural feeling to ask and to prove who is the more greatly injured, he or the man who “wronged” him.

Contrary to Chillingworth’s repentant mood, Hester is very cruel. She had the nerve to say “Thou knowst I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any.” (p. 74) Nevertheless, Chillingworth, even vaguely suggesting that he can forgive her adultery, flatters his betrayed wife. He admits that he, an aging husband wronged Hester by bringing her to a loveless marriage. Yet, Hester’s obstinate refusal to confide the man’s name is too strong to refrain Chillingworth from turning to fiendish revenger. Hester, who wears the scarlet letter as if like a banner of love, will not feel Chillingworth’s pain.
It is Hester's impenetrability which drives Chillingworth to live for revenge. Her obstinate denial makes him desperate. It also gives Chillingworth a feeling of burning jealousy for her affection for and protection of her lover. If nothing had happened, both affection and protection would have been Chillingworth's. He is vexed by the shadow of the unknown man whenever and wherever he sees Pearl with Hester. As if facing the hardest problem in mathematics, Chillingworth tackles the question of the man's identity and he is completely transformed from a scholar to a devil.

Chillingworth's first suspicion of Dimmesdale arises when he notices that Dimmesdale, with such eagerness, defended Hester's right to keep her child at the Governor's House. It is strange that the minister cares for Hester when the honorable town's people are trying to persuade Hester to give up the lonely child so that Pearl may have better education in better surroundings. If Dimmesdale had been a mere minister for the mother and child, he might have listened to the people and also suggested to Hester the same thing that the others do. Yet, his paternal feelings understand Hester's plea to raise Pearl by herself, and moreover, he might, as the father of Pearl, think that it is awful to take the child from her mother because Pearl has already been deserted by her father.

The second suspicion that Chillingworth has is revealed at the scaffold one night. He happens to hear Dimmesdale's plea for Pearl and Hester. In this scene, Chillingworth almost recognizes his victim, and proceeds to play upon the minister's sense of sin and guilt. Chillingworth is always with Dimmesdale, like the minister's own shadow. Being the minister's doctor, it is convenient for Chillingworth to watch Dimmesdale. Wherever the minister is, we can find Chillingworth as well. Hawthorne depicts the image of Chillingworth like a snake, which slithers to its prey, Dimmesdale.

This is the real torture for the nervous minister. His health gradually deteriorates. Like a daydreamer, the minister wanders around, losing his sureness and solidity; he lives in an unconscious-like state. One afternoon, Chillingworth uncovers the breast of Dimmesdale while taking a nap. What he sees on the bosom of the minister, Hawthorne does not say. He only implies what Chillingworth sees there is something very important, by showing us the joy and horror on the face of Chillingworth. It says:

But with what a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror! With what a ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by the eye and features, and therefore bursting forth through the whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his arms towards the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor! Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom.6(p.138)
Through Chillingworth’s ecstasy, we surmise that he sees the same stigma of the scarlet letter on his breast. Amid the process of his suffering, Dimmesdale engravés on his breast the letter. The minister’s conscience might make it possible. At least, we may be able to say that at this moment, Chillingworth’s transformation from a doctor to a villain is complete.

Dimmesdale’s health becomes more fragile. The more Chillingworth becomes vivid and full of purpose, the more the minister becomes weak and small. Chillingworth walks around the forest vigorously for the vicious weeds, hopefully to weaken the minister, while pale-faced Dimmesdale walks more frequently in the shadows. During this time, Dimmesdale’s torment increases and his sin is multiplied, and the contrast between the minister and Chillingworth is apparent. The image of Chillingworth as Satan is strengthened by black night and the minister, by falling sun, fading away in the shadow.

Chillingworth’s fiendish revenge never stops; he becomes an enormous horror for the minister. When Chillingworth is reproached by Hester, he shouts back at her, “Who made me so?”(p.173) Hester realizes for the first time how her betrayal injured Chillingworth. Yet, still she has the nerve to ask Chillingworth to save Dimmesdale and tells him to be once more human. She also asks him to release his vengeance. Hester starts suffering because she is between the two men, but her repentance comes too late. Chillingworth does not listen to her any more, of course. No matter how strongly she shows her repentance, it cannot penetrate the cold heart of Chillingworth. Dimmesdale also complains to Hester, “Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!”(p.192)

This honest utterance of Dimmesdale shows the weakness of Dimmesdale. In his lamentation, he completely forgets his ministry. At work, Dimmesdale always has to wear dignity and holiness, pretending he is sacred. Yet inside himself, his heart trembles and his voice, too, shakes. Even though he tries to hide his fear and dubiousness with the help of the robe, it cannot cover up his real state of mind once he is released from his work. In other words, Dimmesdale is persecuted enough to lose his self-control, and in fact he is greatly afraid of becoming prey to Chillingworth. Therefore, he clings to his job; as long as he is the minister, he can be safe outwardly. Yet his inner self is restless; he cannot find even a moment of peace. There is no outlet for his feeling except in complaining to Hester.

When Hester reveals to Dimmesdale that Chillingworth is her husband, the minister’s lamentation is enormous. Out of his despair, he calls Chillingworth’s revenge “unpardonable.” Dimmesdale sadly observes, “there is one worse than ever the polluted priest! That old man’s revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart.”(p.195)

Then the end comes. Dimmesdale voluntarily stands on the scaffold. He, who learned that Chillingworth is Hester’s husband, seems to admit his sin and determines to make it public. On the scaffold, he calls Hester and Pearl to come up, and victoriously declares to Chillingworth, “Thy power is not what it was! With God’s help, I shall escape thee
now!" (p.178) Considering that this is Dimmesdale’s first and the last show of courage that he musters up, this scene is not as victorious for Dimmesdale as it might have been. Rather, the fact that Dimmesdale’s only escape from Chillingworth is death strikes upon us, and because of his weakness, death is the eternal escape from the harshness that he cannot deal with. It is ironic that Dimmesdale is purged as the sinner on the same scaffold where Hester stood in the beginning of the story. At that time, Hester alone was the accused sinner and Dimmesdale was the minister who told her to reveal the name of her lover.

Suggesting “coldness” and “worthiness”, the name Chillingworth demonstrates the man’s duality. His name even supports his revenge as “worthy” or righteous, and it justifies his chilling heart. He, the “wronged” husband, has every reason to want revenge upon Dimmesdale. In the earlier scene at the market place, among the Indians when Chillingworth first witnessed Hester’s punishment, the attire of Chillingworth, “clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume” (p.60), symbolizes his future. His chaotic turnabout is ominously depicted in his attire.

II Pearl

Pearl also serves as the reminder of the sin. Pearl is, in a way, a constant watcher, of the scarlet letter. Reminded of the guilt, Hester learns lesson from it and from Pearl. It is she who always sees the scarlet letter on her mother’s bosom. It becomes a constant adornment of her mother’s. When Hester takes it off one afternoon on the way to convince Dimmesdale to leave Boston and live together in a different place, Pearl rebels. Hester only wants Dimmesdale to cheer up so that he can start living again. In the process of encouraging him, she takes her scarlet letter off and throws it. She also takes the turban off of her head. But Pearl does not understand that. As soon as she sees the different mother, she freezes. Pearl cannot allow the difference.

Beyond the brook in the forest, there is a different woman calling Pearl to come closer. Next to Hester, there the minister also watches Pearl anxiously. For the first time in seven years since she accepts the punishment, she regained womanhood. Her hair, usually confined in her turban, falls dark and rich upon her shoulders, shining elegantly, making Hester beautiful and young again. Freedom also returns to Hester. Not only Hester alone, Dimmesdale too becomes alive for the expectation of the bright future.

Only Pearl, to the contrary, reacts strangely. She is at a total loss, when she sees Hester without the usual stigma, the scarlet letter. While the two adults talk alone, the child is to play all by herself in the forest. After a while, Hester calls Pearl to come. She never comes closer to them. She just looks at them as if they are strangers. Hester is irritated when she finds Pearl stubbornly stopped in front of a brook and won’t move toward them.

Poor Pearl has lost her returning point. While she plays in the forest, her mother is
gone. Now the woman calling Pearl to come is a different woman. Pearl cannot accept the
difference. She feels left out. Dimmesdale says: "I have a strange fancy that this brook
is the boundary between two worlds, . . ."\(^{12}\) (p. 208) and asks Hester to make her come quickly,
otherwise he cannot bear this tension. Hester then stretches out both her arms and
encourages Pearl to leap across the brook and come to them. "Pearl, without responding
in any manner to these honey-sweet expressions, remained on the other side of the
brook."\(^{13}\) (p. 209) The child's capricious temper does not make her do so, but both Hester
and Dimmesdale should know that Pearl does not know why her mother changes in such a short
time. Where is the mother Pearl used to know? Where is the scarlet letter she always wore?
The child needs explanations if she is to understand.

Reluctantly, Hester picks up the scarlet letter and wears it again on her bosom. She
wraps turban around her hair, too. She again wears sadness, the usual gloominess. Finally,
Pearl comes to them. Pearl, after Hester returns to what she has been, comes back to her.
Hester has to admit that the child is honest about her feeling, and hard to manipulate.
Even if she can convince Dimmesdale, she cannot make Pearl listen to her.

Pearl, a strange child, symbolizes a precious gem and capricious human girl to Hester.
She certainly represents the preciousness of Hester. First of all, Hester "named the infant
'Pearl,' as being of great price, - purchased with all she had, - her mother's only
treasure!"\(^{14}\) (p. 89) Her daughter is the precious gem which Hester keeps. Pearl is the one
and only "adornment" Hester has, except the scarlet letter on her bosom. Hester herself
is not allowed to wear beautiful clothes, but she makes bright or beautiful dresses for
Pearl and seems to enjoy adorning her.

Similarities between the gem pearl and girl Pearl are also found in other characteristics.
Pearls are easily injured by outer force. Their round shapes, however, are protected. The
girl, Pearl, is uncontrollably swift and capricious. Because she does not stay still in
one place, she is free from being scarred. The gem's dim shining echoes her father's name,
Dimmesdale, too.

At the last scaffold scene, Dimmesdale leaves some confusion to Pearl. He asks Hester
and Pearl to come up to the scaffold and stand with him. When Pearl kisses the lips of
her dying father, her tears fall upon her father's cheek. We understand that Pearl's tears
are a sign that she is not only a mischievous child, but also a warm-hearted girl. However,
it is a controversial scene. It is doubtful that she understands the whole situations of
what is happening. It seems more natural to understand that her capriciousness makes her
kiss the minister, rather than thinking that Pearl's tears are a sign of her graduating
from a mere mischievous elf. By kissing him, "Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish
was all fulfilled."\(^{15}\) (p. 256) On the scaffold, the curious girl who always questioned and
vexed her mother is no more.

Imagine the surroundings of Pearl on that day: a huge crowd of townspeople and strangers,
music, noise, a gay, festive mood, and then the minister's firm, serious face. To her
surprise, she is even asked to come close to the minister with her mother in public! Until
that day during the past seven years, she has never been among people, none the less, is now in the center of the people. Rather, she has always been living in a far-away hut with only her mother. Whenever she goes to town, nobody comes near them. She has no friend. She always is alone. So this last scene is the first honorable opportunity that Pearl has since birth. It is more natural to think that Pearl, in a rapture of delight, kisses Dimmesdale. Or without any further thought, she might kiss Dimmesdale, as was asked by a sick minister. No one knows how a seven-year-old girl is to react in this confusion, especially in this odd situation.

Conclusion

Both Pearl and Chillingworth serve roles as constant reminders of the sin of adultery. They bring the scene of the minister's confession at the end. Yet that result does not bring any happiness. It means just one secret is gone; a long-time secret in Boston is revealed by Chillingworth and Pearl. As its result, the minister has died. Hester left alone with Pearl as they were.

Even Chillingworth dies shortly after Dimmesdale. It is apparent that he has lost his aim to live when Dimmesdale dies. Chillingworth repeats more than once, "Thou hast escaped me!"(p.256) Ironically, he lived because of Dimmesdale. In conclusion, this paper discusses mainly Chillingworth as a reminder of sin. Although his role is crucial, he is the most misunderstood character in The Scarlet Letter. For a long time, readers have described him as merciless, yet considering his role, he is also worthy to be defended. It is oversimplified only to depict his fiendish part and emphasize him as the villain. To be fair with Chillingworth, we need to take his tragedy in consideration: he is the victim of adultery. Then, when seen from that perspective, we notice that he has every reason for his revenge.

Hester stands by her lover, nevertheless. Chillingworth stands against the wrong that has been done to him. The ending is somehow convincing, because Chillingworth finally completes the "task" for which he risks his life.

Reference

The text used here is The Scarlet Letter (Centenary Edition I), Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ohio State University Press, 1983.