

From Ambivalence to Free Will: The Analysis of Dimmesdale's Psychology in The Scarlet Letter from the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract: The Scarlet Letter is a novel written by American romantic writer Hawthorne in 1850. For many years, researchers interpret Dimmesdale's psychological contradictions through different psychoanalytic theories. However, few scholars interpret this character from the perspective of self-determination theory. This paper employs the three psychological needs in self-determination theory to analyze Dimmesdale's psychological changes. Based on this analysis, this thesis aims to provide a relatively new perspective on the study of Dimmesdale's psychology and help readers better understand The Scarlet Letter as a masterpiece of American romanticism.

Keywords: Dimmesdale; The Scarlet Letter; Self-determination theory; Ambivalence; Free will

1. Introduction

Since the publication of The Scarlet Letter, numerous articles have been issued by scholars focusing on psychological perspectives of the work, as David B. Diamond comments that "Hawthorne provides an abundance of data for psychoanalytic inquiry, namely, the intricate interweaving of the character's conscious and unconscious motivations and their vicissitudes" (648). One of the most analyzed characters is Dimmesdale, with Farida Yousaf interpreting Dimmesdale as someone who "has a complex mind and it demands a vast knowledge of the intricacies of human nature to be able to portray such a mind" (97). Some scholars analyze the character by applying Freudianism. According to David B. Diamond, Dimmesdale experiences three states of transformation, with the third transformation the most significant in which "his ego retakes possession of his psyche" (651). Chen Ping analyzes the nature of Dimmesdale and concludes that the weakness of the character lives in his "personality structure" (13). This thesis, however, aims to interpret the character Dimmesdale from an alternative perspective by adopting self-determination theory.

2. A Review of Self-Determination Theory

In the middle of the 20th century, studies focusing on human's innate psychological needs emerged since researchers discovered that "not all behaviors are drive-based, nor are they a function of external controls some human behaviors occur without outside stimulation" (Deci & Ryan, 11). Things such as hobbies or curiosity come from human's sense of fulfillment of achieving their internal goals rather than the needs for outside rewards. Such motivation is considered as intrinsic motivation, which is "the energy source that is central to the active nature of the organism" (Deci & Ryan, 11). With the development of motivational theories, SDT was formally introduced in 1980s by psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan. It emphasizes the dominant role played by intrinsic motivations and focuses on human's self-determined behaviors, which later becomes a significant part in the study of social psychology.

SDT explicitly believes that human beings are motivated by three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 490). The three needs decide the degree of people's ability in self-determination and affect people's motivation. Competence refers to the ability needed to finish tasks or attain goals, and the motivation increases when the task or challenge matches one's competence. Relatedness refers to people's need for the sense of belonging. When people feel intrinsically connected with other people, they are more likely to better adapt to and control the surroundings (Liu and Zhang 55), and thus their motivations are enhanced.

Autonomy refers to people's independent control of their own choices. As deCharms mentions in his article, autonomy provides the feeling of being "the source of their own action" (qtd. in Kaplan 514). The three psychological needs are recognized as basic human needs, which affect people's spontaneous decision making. When the three needs are satisfied, people's adaptations to the environment and psychological well-being are enhanced (Kaplan 514). On the contrary, when the needs are not met, people's motivation can be impeded.

3. Dimmesdale's Ambivalence: the Need for Competence and Relatedness

3.1 Dimmesdale's Need for Competence

Being a devout man with great "eloquence and religious fervor" which gives "the earnest of high eminence in his profession" (Hawthorne 99) as well as someone who sets high standard for himself and confines himself in the "iron framework" of the creed (Hawthorne 178), Dimmesdale's love affair with Hester is undoubtedly a denial to his competence as a respected minister. As such a zealot believer of God, this violation of the doctrine is unforgivable, rendering Dimmesdale doubt his competence as an admired clergyman. Under such circumstances, people's trust and praise only give him the honor that he thinks he does not deserve, and such mismatching threatens his position which can collapse at any time. This insecurity decreases his sense of competence, weakening his motivation to continue fulfilling his mission as a clergyman. Nevertheless, with "cowardice and obduracy" in his character (Chen 86), it is hard for Dimmesdale to give up his position. The maintaining of this fake but perfect image only makes him experience greater sense of guilty since essentially he is well-aware that he is the opposite of his appearance, and thus his need of competence cannot be satisfied.

It is worth noting that after the love affair with Hester, his motivation to maintain the image of a clergyman no longer comes from his confidence in fulfilling his duty, but from the force from the society and people's anticipation, which are all extrinsic. Deeply inside he is no longer intrinsically motivated to be the respected minister. Therefore, when his competence is questioned and his ability cannot match his position, his motivation to retain his position is weakened, which as a result makes him become more anguished and ambivalent.

3.2 Dimmesdale's Need for Relatedness

While Dimmesdale's lack of the need for competence makes him suffer from the sense of guilt, his another psychological need—the need for relatedness—is fulfilled this time. This relatedness comes from the bond with Hester and Pearl, which provides him with love and support but on the other hand makes his concealment more painful.

One indicator of Dimmesdale's fulfillment of relatedness can be discovered at his first encountering with Pearl at the governor's hall where Pearl grasps his hand and "laid her cheek against it; a caress so tender, and withal so unobtrusive" (Hawthorne 168). And her father afterwards "laid his hand on the child's head, hesitated an instant, and then kissed her brow" (Hawthorne 168). Such behaviors are innate, indicating the natural connection of their blood. Another scene which shows this connection is when Dimmesdale with Hester and Pearl stand on the scaffold together, and Dimmesdale feels a rush of new life "pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying through all his veins, as if the mother and the child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system." (Hawthorne 219). This connection enables Dimmesdale to experience his true emotion towards his loved ones, providing him the sense of belonging and therefore satisfying his psychological need for relatedness. It also helps him acquire the bravery and support which intrinsically motivate him to achieve the confession at last.

However, despite the power given by his loved ones, such connection on the other hand throws Dimmesdale into greater despair. In one respect, this fulfillment of relatedness motivates him to shoulder the responsibility for his loved ones, but being unable to protect and support them as a man adds to his guilt. In another respect, it allows Dimmesdale to face his true desire of love as a human being, but with the constraints from his social position, Dimmesdale has to "suppress his satisfaction of his primitive desire" (Chen 15). Such suppression brings him greater depression, making him a split character.

4. Dimmesdale's Realization of Free Will—the Need for Autonomy

According to SDT, autonomy is the most significant element of the three psychological needs, which allows people to make decisions according to their own wills. Both Dimmesdale's resistance against Chillingworth and his final confession signal the return of his free will and the mastery of his own fate.

The secret control from Chillingworth threatens Dimmesdale's autonomy for years. Therefore, when Dimmesdale finally knows the truth about his physician, the call for self-master outbreaks, as he reflected that "[t]hat self was gone. Another man had returned out of the forest; a wiser one; with a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former never could have reached" (Hawthorne 311). Instead of being a victim from Chillingworth, Dimmesdale chooses to confess his guilt by himself in order

to achieve the mastery of his own fate against Chillingworth's subjugation, so that he can expel his physician from his surroundings literally and mentally (Diamond 671).

Dimmesdale's confession is another significant embodiment of autonomy. Before the confession, Dimmesdale has always been mastered by someone else: as a clergyman, he has to act in accordance with his parishioners' expectation; living with Chillingworth, he is secretly watched and controlled by the wicked scheme; and in front of his own fate, he has to ask Hester for help as he says "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!" (Hawthorne 276). However, neither of these enables Dimmesdale to gain his free will. By contrast, Hawthorn's arrangement of Dimmesdale's willingly confession in the end happens to reflect the return of his independent will, signifying the satisfaction of his need for autonomy.

5. Conclusion

By using the self-determination theory, the thesis explains how the fulfillment or the unfulfillment of the three basic psychological needs contribute to Dimmesdale's ambivalence and his return of free will. While both of the needs for competence and relatedness lead to Dimmesdale's ambivalence, they in turn provides the intrinsic motivation for Dimmesdale's escaping from Chillingworth's control and his confession at last, which signifies the recapture of his free will, fulfilling his last psychological need for autonomy. Therefore, by applying SDT, Dimmesdale's psychological change from ambivalence to the realization of the free will can be explained and understood. Also, SDT as a psychological theory may provides an alternative approach to the psychoanalysis of literary characters.

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