

# Self-construction and Self-salvation of Dimmesdale—Based on Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory

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**Abstract:** This paper is applied Jacques Lacan's mirror stage to interpret the self-construction of Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*. It can divide into three stages: pre-mirror stage, mid-mirror stage, and post-mirror stage. Meanwhile, this paper has clarified the influence of external factors (the other) and internal psychological contradictions from the text analysis, exploring the struggle in establishing self-identity from the perspective of the other.

## 1. Introduction

American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was the pioneer of the American psychoanalytic novel and the first writer of short stories in the history of American literature. He was known as the greatest Romantic novelist of the 19th century. His works persistently explore the depths of the human soul and convey earnest concern. *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's most outstanding masterpiece, is the first symbolic novel in the history of American literature. Because of its profound theme, unique narrative strategy, and superb literary writing techniques, it has attracted the attention of scholars all over the world. The research on characters in *The Scarlet Letter* in China mainly focuses on the analysis of Hester Prynne and Pearl, which pays little attention to another hero Dimmesdale. As the character with the most significant contrast between the early and late periods, Dimmesdale is of great research value. His value orientation and mental states almost decide the plotted trend of the novel. Therefore, this paper takes the mirror stage as the theoretical basis to deeply analyze Dimmesdale's tortuous process of self-construction, from identification to disintegration to reidentification.

## 2. Literature Review

There can be no denying the importance of Lacan's theory within social sciences research. Many psychologists, sociologists, or Litterateurs who wish to utilize psychological ideas will turn primarily to Lacan's work. Lacan's key concept is the mirror stage during his reworking of Freud's ideas about the development of the ego<sup>[1]</sup>. Many researchers worldwide have adopted Lacan's Mirror Stage theory in their studies, which provides a reference for later research. For example, Anh, Sang Hyuk supposed that the mirror stage may be the feature of today's media culture by analyzing the correlation between Lacan's mirror stage theory and the remediation process of new media<sup>[2]</sup>. Brenner, Leon S. has utilized Lacan's mirror stage as a novel perspective to research the autistic embodiment, which psychologically propels the treatment of autism forward<sup>[3]</sup>. Shik, Ida A. explored the peculiarities of Lacan's mirror stage in surrealist photography. It was concluded that using mirrors and other duplications of an image can be regarded as a fixation of Lacan's theory<sup>[4]</sup>. The above research reflects the vital role of Lacan's mirror stage theory in sociology, psychology, photography, and other disciplines. In literature, Chinese scholars have extensively applied and enriched this theory. Zhuo Zhang and Lidan Zou used Jacques Lacan's mirror image theory to interpret the conflict and integration of Chinese and Western cultures in *The Joy Luck Club*. They pointed out that the conflict between two generations of Chinese American women is an inevitable experience for Chinese Americans to find their own identity in cross-cultural communication<sup>[5]</sup>. Through Lacan's mirror stage theory and ethics, Zhaoxia Hu and Tianping

Jiang comprehensively analyzed the subject's situation in *Hærmændene paa Helgeland* (*The Pirates of Helgeren*). They found that the heroine was not only a split and broken ego but also another who lost ethics, which promoted the new development of the mirror theory<sup>[6]</sup>. Starting from the philosophical development lineage of the dialectical relationship between the ego and the other, Long Dan found that the identification of the ego and the other would show various ways according to the different states of the ego, providing a better theoretical reference for analyzing the image and mentality of the ego and the other in cross-cultural writing<sup>[7]</sup>. The academics have carried out a relatively comprehensive theoretical analysis and elaboration of this theory. We try to verify further the applicability of this theory by exploring the characters in specific articles, hoping to provide a new perspective for studying contemporary American literature. Based on Lacan's mirror stage theory and the framework of "three stages," this paper studies the shaping and characterization of characters' images and psychology in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. It is used to provide more references for applying this theory in literary analysis.

### 3. The Mirror Stage Theory

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) established the mirror stage theory in his famous paper "The Mirror Stage of the Formation of the Function of 'I' from Psychoanalytic Experience," published at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Psychoanalytic Association in Zurich in 1949. The mirror stage theory is the core category of Lacan's philosophy, which is based on Hegel's master-slave dialectic—the individual subject cannot establish itself; it only identifies itself in another objectified mirror image of the other.

Lacan's mirror stage theory involves demonstrating a spiral rising sequence in three stages: Identification (pre-mirror stage), Disintegration (mid-mirror stage), and Reidentification (post-mirror stage).

1) Identification: This period is what Lacan calls the pre-mirror stage, during which there is no self for the child. In the early months after his birth, the infant fails to distinguish the self and mirror image, mistaking it for a playmate existing in the real world<sup>[8]</sup>.

2) Disintegration: This stage usually occurs between six and eighteen months through the mirror as an external medium. The infant begins to see himself as a whole and totalized entity in such a critical stage for developing the child's selfhood. The relationship between self and the image in the mirror thus constitutes the scope of the "the Imaginary Order." The reflection from the mirror image is not the actual "me" but something manipulated by "the other." Lacan believes that it is a moment of self-deception, a process of infatuation caused by illusory images, and the starting point of imaginative thinking.

3) Reidentification: This period completes self-recognition. To achieve self-realization, the ego, an imaginary self, should be formed and then broken with the help of "the other" in the third stage.

Lacan adds in the subsequent study that the mirror stage was not just a particular moment confined to infancy. The permanent construction of subjectivity is the proposition of life in a broad sense. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the people around Dimmesdale and the religious environment play the role of "the other" in his self-salvation process<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 4. Root of Evil & Cause of Conflict—Pre-Mirror Stage

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* begins with the result of Hester's crime and public disclosure. Hester's adultery as the hidden background of the novel effectively extends the novel's period. When we try to deduce the author's deliberately hidden antecedents from characters' reactions and environmental descriptions, it is surprising that the priest, Arthur Dimmesdale, stood on the opposite side of the scaffold on which Hester Prynne stood, was suffering a dividing point in his self-construction. It is safe to say that Dimmesdale was in the pre-mirror stage of self-perception before he became an enforcer who induced Hester to name her accomplice.

The pre-mirror stage emphasizes that the subject himself only has fragmented body experience, without a sense of wholeness and unity of self. If we only focus on the standpoint and external comments of the priest when he first appeared in the third chapter. He will be judged as a saint singly,

revered by the public, and worshiped by the whole society. Hawthorne generously describes him in a profusion of favorable terms, *"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."* Pitifully, all of these views reflect his superficial image in the eyes of the beholder. Taken the whole story, Dimmesdale, an embodiment of Puritan doctrine, was Hester's accomplice in adultery. It indicates that his choice of intrinsic value was not self-consistent when he carried out the doctrinal violation with Hester long before the public execution. His seemingly orthodox religious behaviors were mechanized body experiences of a priest rather than internalized self-cognition. There are related hints in Chapter 3: *"She will not speak!" murmured Mr. Dimmesdale, who, leaning over the balcony, with his hand upon his heart, had awaited the result of his appeal. He now drew back with prolonged respiration"*. Hester did not disclose Dimmesdale to the public under interrogation. Dimmesdale's first reaction was a relief. From his subconscious reaction, it could be seen that he had not formed enough moral constraints on himself at that time, which blindly guards the identity of the priesthood and refuses to admit the self with dark sides.

Although the priest in this stage was physically mature, he was in the pre-mirror stage of self-construction. He did not have a clear definition of his identity and did not realize his integrity. His crime shows the mismatch between his behavior and value orientation caused by the lack of self-consciousness and the dominance of body experience in his pre-mirror stage. In other words, Dimmesdale's absence of self-cognition buries the root of evil.

## **5. Personality Polarization——Mid-Mirror Stage**

### **5.1 The implication of "the other"**

People establish an illusory ego during the mirror stage through "the other." Lacan divides "the other" into "the big other" and "the little other."<sup>[10]</sup> "The big other" is not a person. In the symbolic order of the society, it is reflected in the interactive norms, material economic structure, or cultural ideology that determine social and interpersonal relations. "The little other" consists of "the body of the infant itself, its parents and other close friends, and its surroundings."<sup>[11]</sup>

### **5.2 The Little Other: Walking with Satan—— Chillingworth**

#### **5.2.1 Therapy out of malevolent curiosity**

Roger Chillingworth is the primary "the little other" of Dimmesdale. He has become the closest companion to Chillingworth by purposefully approaching him and acting as his medical adviser. Not only did the disease interest the physician, but he was firmly moved to look into the character and qualities of the patient. *"The kind and friendly physician--strove to go deep into his patient's bosom, delving among his principles, prying into his recollections, and probing everything with a cautious touch, like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern."* Although before Dimmesdale met the physician, the priest showed signs of self-awareness. At the expense of his physical and mental health, he tortured himself in an attempt to counteract his inner guilt and rationalize his sanctity as a priest. Luckily, it is not to a great extent. However, Chillingworth accompanied Mr. Dimmesdale with the repulsive addiction of peeking into others' inner minds, constantly sending malicious psychological hints, exerting unlimited pressure on his patient, and disguising his evil intentions as a cure<sup>[12]</sup>. The influence of the others made Dimmesdale sink deeper into the abyss of morbid psychology<sup>[13]</sup>. It was even an accepted fact of society— *"The Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, like many other personages of special sanctity...in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth. This diabolical agent had the Divine permission, for a season, to burrow into the clergyman's intimacy and plot against his soul"*.

#### **5.2.2 Behavior out of pure revenge**

After Chillingworth pulled open the priest's vestment while he was sleeping and found the scarlet letter on his chest, the physician determined that the priest was Hester's accomplice in adultery. The evil vengeance has officially begun. *"Calm, gentle, passionless, as he appeared... we fear, a quiet*

*depth of malice, hitherto latent, but active now, in this unfortunate old man, which led him to imagine a more intimate revenge than any mortal had ever wreaked upon an enemy".* The physician repeatedly induced Mr. Dimmesdale to chew on his sins and made him construct himself in self-isolation and self-torture until Dimmesdale treated himself with hatred. And then even the agony with which this public veneration tortured him. The mental torture rises to physical abuse. Arthur Dimmesdale chose to abuse himself in various ways. For example, the Protestant and Puritan divine had plied it on his shoulders, which made the fast as an act of penance until his knees trembled beneath and kept vigils night after night.

The existence of the other, the physician, constructed an evil illusion with multi-level guidance, forcing Dimmesdale to magnify his ugliness and mistook the despicable side as the totality of the ego during the mirror stage. Because of the massive deviation in self-perception, he obliterated all his good qualities and made self-tramping behavior, living in self-loathing. Walking with Satan, Arthur Dimmesdale regarded himself as the unforgivable evil.

### **5.3 The Big Other: Ideology of the Mass**

#### **5.3.1 Institutionalized Puritanism**

Hawthorne set *The Scarlet Letter* in 17th-century New England under Puritan rule. The harsh Puritan system cut people's natural and intuitive will to life, taking humble service to God as the highest virtue and self-highness as the first sin. As a collective unconscious, strict Puritanism has infiltrated into every puritan's bone marrow and cells, dominating their values orientation and self-construction.

Puritan ideology also became the standard by which Dimmesdale defined himself. He ignored the rationality of the desire and put abstinence above emotion. His one-sided understanding of human nature inevitably leads to inadequate and contradictory self-construction. Yubo Gong and Yunhui Hao once argued in the *An Unholy Love is Hell—An Analysis of Dimmesdale's Salvation in The Scarlet Letter* that The Puritanism of New England in the 17th century was a personality mask over the face of all new Englanders, imprisoning them, controlling them, and keeping them under the constant "supervision" of God. Dimmesdale wore this mask consciously. He devoted himself to preaching, disciplined himself, and repaid God's favor with specimen sermons. As a spokesman for Puritanism, his priesthood and his complete acceptance of the idea hammer him from crossing the line. Hence, after he defied dogma and showed obedience to the human instinct, the shackles of thought and the weight of guilt fastened him to the column of shame. By the end of the story, Dimmesdale had been exhausted by self-loathing that he had never really tried to escape. It can be said that the rigid Puritan thought was the source of his self-loss and the destruction of humanity. The Puritan dogma had drained all his courage and strength. Moreover, his perceptions of his identity had been torn away. It's the institutionalized Puritanism that forced Dimmesdale to define himself as a sinner, divide actions into sin, and map him as a religious guard and martyr rather than a man with feelings and impulses<sup>[14]</sup>. Most frightening, Dimmesdale accepted all the ideologies that doctrines had taught him and the illusory, rigid images they had created for him. The confusion of self-identity is inevitable on account of the existence of "the big other"—Puritanism.

#### **5.3.2 Worship of the Mass**

In the novel, the clergy in the Puritan society were respected by the whole community. As a young priest, Dimmesdale's status in the world was already unattainable. People regarded him as a saint in the world. The Puritans paid too much attention to the appearance of godliness, bordering on idolatry. Hawthorne constructs images of "angels," "holy spirit," and "god" in *The Scarlet Letter*, highlighting the worship mode of substituting humans for God<sup>[15]</sup>.

*"They deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness. They fancied him the mouthpiece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, rebuke, and love. In their eyes, the very ground on which he trod was sanctified."* From the description in the novel, we can detect that the reason why he refused to reveal "the secret and guilty heart" was that he had been occupied and dominated by the imperceptibly inflated image and was unable to recover his true self. Even the virgins of his church grew pale around him, victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment, sacrificing without hesitation. This

imaginary image from the reflection of the big other brought him to the summit of glory and was worshipped by thousands of parishioners; It is also this image that made him trapped in the polarity of opposites, pulling him into the abyss of repressed pain, enduring seven years of "unspeakable torture." In particular, every time he tried to tell the truth, the public's blind worship of him modified his words of self-condemnation into an expression of empathy for the sinner, which contributed to one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame, without the momentary relief of being self-deceived. He had spoken the very truth and transformed it into the veriest falsehood<sup>[16]</sup>. The worship of the mass widened the identity gap between being the angelic priest and the dirty adulterer. However, both extremes of self-recognition are illusory images. The ego does not exist in false prosperity or cowardly self-abuse.

## 6. Reidentification & self-salvation——post-mirror stage

Dimmesdale stood on the scaffold and confessed his sin publicly before God and all the citizens seven years later. The "scaffold" image here is derived from a biblical cultural model: "He who dwells in the secret place of the Highest will dwell in the shadow of the Almighty." Meanwhile, in chapter 23, When Dimmesdale decided to stand with Hester and Pearl, confessed his crimes, and waited for the judgment of people and God, Chillingworth signed, "*Hadst thou [Dimmesdale] sought the whole earth over, there was no one place, so secret--no high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me--save on this very scaffold.*" The secrecy of the platform does not mean that it is invisible because of its geographical location but refers to God's forgiveness to Dimmesdale on account of his sincere confession. Therefore, Dimmesdale was protected by God from the devil's attack (Chillingworth) and the continued domination of evil. The scaffold was a god-protected hiding place in the shadow of the Almighty, a symbol of Dimmesdale's deliverance.

At this time, Dimmesdale obtained the victory of personality. His self-cognition collapsed and rebuilt under the influence of the other. The contradictory and opposing sides of personality finally reached reconciliation. He gained the courage to face the natural appeal of the heart from Hester's encouragement, and then he was endowed with the power of the ego. Although he gave his life, he finally received self-redemption at the personal level and value identification at the social level. This "Identification, Disintegration, Reidentification" process should also be a process in which a person intensely persecuted by Puritanism constantly sought self-construction in his own struggle, felt the call of his heart, and fought against the dark rules of Puritanism with his ordinary and insignificant life.

## 7. Conclusion

In Lacan's mirror stage theory, individuals seek and construct themselves with the help of "the other", and finally achieve the ideal state of balance between themselves and images through a struggle with "the other" to establish a perfect self<sup>[17]</sup>. The results are shown that Dimmesdale's self-construction has completely gone through the pre-mirror stage, mid-mirror stage, and post-mirror stage. From unconscious body experience to self-contradiction under the burden of sin and finally to self-construction and redemption. What Hawthorne focuses on is not only the weakness of human nature but, more importantly, how individuals can transcend the weakness of human nature and then achieve identification of the ego. Hawthorne made a valuable attempt on the road to salvation by moving towards the return of morality and humanity in *The Scarlet letter*.

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