

Analysis of the Scarlet Letter from the Perspective of Symbolism

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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the pioneers of the American romantic novels and psychoanalytic novels. The *Scarlet Letter* is one of his masterpieces. In this novel, Hawthorne employed a lot of symbolic techniques. The characters, scenes, plots and even some details have rich symbolic significance. With the development of the plot, some of the symbolic images show polysemy and mobility, leaving infinite imagination space for readers. Among them, the scarlet letter A is the most important image throughout the whole story. From the beginning to the end, it is ubiquitous and deeply engraved in the readers' mind. This thesis intends to analyze the systematic and polysemous symbolic significance in this book from three aspects: the scarlet letter A, four characters and specific images.

Keywords

Hawthorne; The *Scarlet Letter*; symbolism.

1. Introduction

Hawthorne was a romantic writer in the 19th century in the United States. He was deeply affected by Puritanism and transcendentalism. The *Scarlet Letter* is a love tragedy. It is set in the New England governed by North American Puritans in the 17th century. Hester, a pretty young woman whose husband was presumed dead in the sea, fell in love with Arthur Dimmesdale, a holy local minister and gave birth to a girl Pearl. She wasn't willing to expose the name of Pearl's father. As a result of being an adulterer, she was put in prison and punished to wear a scarlet letter A on the chest for her whole life. In order to find the adulterer, Chillingworth the husband disguised himself as a doctor. He approached the minister and soon he discovered he was Pearl's father. So, he tortured the minister psychologically to increase his feeling of guilt and compelled him to tell the truth. Hester lived a hard life but showed deep sympathy to other unfortunate people, and her good deeds gradually earned people's respect. She once planned to elope with Dimmesdale but failed. Dimmesdale couldn't endure any guilt so he ascended the scaffold to pump his sin out. He died in Hester's arms and got Pearl's forgiveness. Chillingworth who got his revenge and found his life meaningless died soon. Hester and Pearl left this place. After Pearl married, Hester returned to the land of sorrow and shame. Hawthorne used many writing techniques in this book, such as symbolism metaphor, and psychological description. Symbolism is the most interesting part of this book. This thesis will further explore the symbolic meanings through the analysis of A, characters and specific images.

2. The Symbolic Meaning of the Color and the Capital Letter A

The scarlet letter A is the most typical symbol in the novel. It appears in various forms more than 150 times through the whole story. Initially, it appears as an embroidery on Hester's clothes, then it shows on Dimmesdale's chest. Even in the development of story, it appears mysteriously in the sky. However, its symbolic meaning is not invariant. It gradually changes

with the development of plot and the author's position. I will analyze the symbolic meaning of the letter A in this section.

a. [The color: red]

Red is the most important color in the story, which is mainly reflected on Hester and Pearl. In the first chapter, Hawthorne described a gloomy prison, setting a desolate fundamental key of the story. However, the appearance of Hester, especially the exquisite scarlet letter A, dispelled the gloomy atmosphere and brought life to the world. From then on, red appeared in front of people again and again, such as the scarlet letter on Hester's gown, the lurid A on Dimmesdale's chest, the red clothes of Pearl and so on. Red is a color of life and passion. The love between Hester and Dimmesdale was passionate and the crystal of such love was vigorous Pearl. On the other hand, this behavior was considered as a shame in Puritan society. A woman wearing a scarlet letter is immoral, so red represents sin and evil. Red was both the origin of Hester's pain and source of strength and courage.

b. [The Capital Letter A]

The letter A first appears in the second chapter The Market-Place. "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-thread, appeared the letter A". The letter A here represents adultery, which also symbolizes shame and punishment. Hester fell in love with the local minister Dimmesdale and had a daughter. This disloyal behavior violated the moral bottom line of Puritanism. According to Puritan doctrine, the woman is to be sentenced to wear the letter A which is embroidered on her gown for her whole life to show that she has committed adultery. For puritans, such punishment is aimed to torture and humiliate Hester psychologically. The scarlet letter means disgrace for Hester. If we say that Hester's scarlet letter is an exposed sin, then Dimmesdale's scarlet letter is an inner sin. As father of Pearl, the minister also violated the canon. In order to defend his sacred identity and dignity, he dared not tell the truth. However, he was filled with guilt and could only relieve his uneasiness by tormenting himself. From his behavior of covering the chest with hands, we can feel his pain. Whether on Hester's gown or Dimmesdale's chest, the letter A is a symbol of adultery.

A is the initial letter of Arthur Dimmesdale's name, which is why Hester stood on the scaffold with a proud smile, not pain. She didn't consider wearing an A as a shame, but as a symbol of her lover. A is also the initial letter of the word amour, which means love. Telling the name of Pearl's father could spare her from the punishment of wearing the scarlet letter, but she protected her lover without revealing a word, so the depth of her love for Dimmesdale was evident. If someone else had suffered this humiliation, she would have fled the place. But Hester preferred to be despised rather than leave this place. Actually, she always dreamed that one day she would be reunited with her lover. After seven years, meeting Dimmesdale in the forest, she dropped the scarlet A and decided to run away with him. However, the plan failed. She wore the letter A again and again and finally passed away on the land of shame, which showed her faithful love for Dimmesdale. In this aspect, the letter A symbolizes amour.

3. The Symbolic Meaning of the Characters

Besides the letter A, characters of the story all have symbolic meanings. All of them were related to the scarlet letter A, that was sin. Hester Prynne committed the sin and steeled herself against it, and Roger Chillingworth was innocent initially but fell into the abyss of sin gradually. Arthur Dimmesdale hid his sin and ended up hurting himself and Pearl, the daughter, was a symbol of sin, reminding her mother all the time. In this chapter, I will analyze the symbolic meanings of these characters one by one.

a. [Hester Prynne]

Hester, the central character in the novel, is a woman who dared to love and hate. She would rather be humiliated by wearing the sinful A than destroy her lover's reputation. She seemed to succumb to the strict rule of Puritanism. In fact, she had been quietly fighting against the Puritan dogma. She supported herself and Pearl without any help from others. At the same time, she tried her best to help the unprivileged people though she lived a tough life. We can see that she is a strong and independent woman. In addition, her name Hester is similar to a beautiful goddess Hester, who is kind and helpful. Hawthorne described a beautiful and glowing image of a woman when Hester walked on the scaffold for the first time. In contrast to the gloomy environment, such a shining image seemed different, implying the virtue of Hester.

b. [Arthur Dimmesdale]

Arthur Dimmesdale is another important role in the novel. As a minister, he fell in love with the married woman Hester and had a daughter Pearl. He was afraid of losing his status and honor although he had a deep love for Hester and Pearl. For many times, he wanted to disclose the secret but his cowardice made him flinch. The guilt of his soul gave him so much pain that he kept torturing himself and wore the letter A on his chest. For the Puritans, He is a holy preacher, the messenger of God's will. For himself, he is a man who concealed his sin. In his name Dimmesdale, dim means vague or indistinct and dale means a valley. This name represents that his heart is full of secrets and can't be clearly seen. In order to seek inner liberation, he exposed his crime and died in Hester's arms. He symbolizes half repentant men.

c. [Roger Chillingworth]

Roger Chillingworth first appeared as a role of a sad husband who just found out his wife's infidelity. At this moment, he was a man deserving sympathy. But with the development of the story, we found that he wasn't worth it because he didn't aim to save their marriage but to revenge the adulterer. He approached Dimmesdale step by step and tortured him to disclose his secret every hour and moment. The only thing he was interested in was revenge. So when this task was finished, he was occupied with nothing and waited for death. His name consists of two words "chilling" and "worth". "Chilling" comes from the word "chilly" which means cold, indicating he is a merciless avenger. "Worth" means valuable so he also had something we should admire. After his death, he left all his fortune to Hester's daughter Pearl. He is a symbol of evil.

d. [Pearl]

Pearl is a living sign of sin and a living scarlet letter. She and the scarlet letter A appeared at the same time when Hester stood on the scaffold for interrogation. Hester unconsciously clasped the baby to hide the scarlet letter on her breast, but suddenly she realized that Pearl was another symbol of her shame. Actually, Pearl was the fundamental cause of wearing the scarlet letter. Without Pearl, her sin of adultery would never have been discovered. Pearl showed a great interest in the letter A since she was born. The author described several scenes of Pearl and scarlet letter. When Pearl slept in the cradle, her eyes were attracted by the scarlet letter with gold lace, and she stretched out her small hand to catch it. After Pearl was big enough to walk, she threw wild flowers one after another on her mother's chest. Every time she hit the scarlet letter, she would dance with joy. These behaviors had been a reminder of Hester's crime, making her painful.

It is uneasy for Hester to get Pearl so she chose the name to express her love. Although Pearl brought a lot of trouble, Hester still treated her as a treasure. The love Hester gave to Pearl was her extended love for Dimmesdale because she couldn't show her love openly. Pearl was the only person by Hester's side. If Pearl were not in Hester's life, Hester couldn't survive and face up to difficulties bravely. What's more, Pearl was in perfect shape and full of vitality, like the passion of Hester and the minister. She was different from the Puritan's children, integrating the pure beauty of the peasant girl and the gorgeous beauty of the princess. Little puritans

despised Pearl and her mother and insulted them. Thus, we can know that Puritans consider the natural love and passion as evil.

Pearl brought Hester not only pain, but also hope for a better life. She reminded Hester of her sin and urged her to atone for it by doing good. Encouraged by Pearl, the minister became brave and finally admitted his guilt in public. Pearl was like an angel, accompanying Hester and Dimmesdale until they atoned for their sin respectively. Hawthorne gave Pearl a happy ending, which indicated his yearning for a free, harmonious and happy life and his dissatisfaction with the cruel Puritan system.

4. The Symbolic Meaning of the Specific Images

Hawthorne also used some specific images in the novel. They run through the whole story, making it more coherent in the plot. I will take the prison, the rose bush, the scaffold, the forest and the brook for example.

a. [The prison and the rose bush: evil and hope]

In the first chapter The Prison-Door, Hawthorne described the bleak prison and called it the black flower of the civilized world. The rusty oak door and the messy weeds made people feel depressed. The author introduced that the founders of a new colony must build a ceremony and a prison at first because Puritans have their own values which must be strictly followed. If someone fails to live out these values, he must be punished. The prison is evidence that Salem is an austere Puritan society. Although it was old and rusted, it couldn't be destroyed easily. That is to say, it is hard to break the Puritan colonial rule and the rigorous law. So, the prison here represents all evils in the world and cruel rules and punishments in the Puritan society. It embodies the restraint of Puritanism on people's life and thoughts. However, there was a bush of wild roses by the threshold of the prison, bringing a little warmth to the surrounding environment. Even though the prison was gruesome, it couldn't prevent the wild rose from growing. The rose bush was the flower of morality and hope. It was in stark contrast to the dead surroundings, like Hester was different from other townspeople. It also indicated the bright future would come after all.

b. [The scaffold: punishment and judgement]

The scaffold is an important image throughout the whole story. Different from the omnipresent scarlet letter A, it appeared in four chapters: The Market-Place, The Recognition, The Minister's Vigil and The Revelation. The scaffold was located to the west of the market, almost under the eaves of the oldest Boston church. It looked like the ancillary building of the church. Hawthorne described that the scaffold was a part of the punishment machine. It was regarded as a valid tool for educating people to shun evil and do good. For Hester, the scaffold was a place where her pain began. For her violation of the rule, she was punished to stand on the scaffold with a shameful scarlet letter A on her breast. So, the scaffold symbolizes punishment.

For Dimmesdale, the scaffold symbolizes judgement. Dimmesdale didn't tell the truth when Hester stood on the scaffold for trial. He was in anguish and kept torturing himself by fasting and engraving the letter A on his chest. In the chapter The Minister's Vigil, Dimmesdale couldn't bear the psychological pain so he invited Hester and Pearl to stand on the scaffold together at night. Pearl asked him when they could stand here together in the daytime, and he answered that they would stand here together at the great judgement day. Finally, the day came. Because of the failure of the plan to escape Salem, Dimmesdale could hold on no longer. After his final sermon, he blurted out his sin and died surrounded by his lover and daughter. At that moment, he freed himself from his unquiet soul.

c. [The forest: nature and darkness]

The forest has two symbolic meanings. One is a symbol of pure nature where everyone can be treated the same. In the forest, there were no Puritan laws and people could show their true self and emotion. It resembled a shelter for society members to briefly escape from daily life. For Hester, she could show her love to the minister with impunity. She removed the scarlet letter and threw it aside. The real Hester, a beautiful and lively young lady came back. Dimmesdale also could show his true emotions to Hester. Walking into the forest, he was not fettered by the Puritan society any more and got rid of Chillingworth's cruel torment. They could have conversations without the restrictions of Puritanism. However, the forest was a dark world for Puritans. According to Puritanism, all natural things in the forest were totally unacceptable. The environment of it was gloomy and bleak with only a little bit sunlight getting in and witches always gathered here. It is a symbol of evil and darkness.

d. [The brook: a boundary between purity and evil]

In the sixteenth chapter, Pearl was playing on the side of the brook when Hester was chatting with Dimmesdale. Pearl was like the brook, clear and mysterious. Hester asked her to come to the other side, but she was unwilling to do that. Because without the shackles of the scarlet letter, Hester was not the same as before. The minister observed that the brook was a boundary between two worlds, one is purity and the other is evil. Pearl was at the pure side while the couple was at the evil side. When Hester wore the scarlet letter again, Pearl was back to her former vivacity.

5. Conclusion

The *Scarlet Letter* is an excellent symbolism novel written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It describes a love tragedy in the colonial period of North America and also criticizes the cruelty and inner depravity of Calvinism. In the novel, Hawthorne used a lot of symbols to deeply dig into the good and evil of human nature. The letter A, the central symbol in the novel, appears in different forms and places and presents various symbolic meanings. Initially, it symbolizes the sin of adultery committed by Hester, but later it shows the meaning of amour between Hester and Dimmesdale. With the effort of Hester, it becomes a mark of able and angel. With the skillful technique of Hawthorne, the four characters also have symbolic significance. Hester is a symbol of beauty and strength. Dimmesdale represents hypocrisy and cowardice. Chillingworth stands for revenge. Pearl is a living scarlet letter and a symbol of love and hope. As the background, some specific images make great importance to the whole story. The prison represents harshness of the Puritan society; the scaffold is a symbol of punishment and judgement; the forest is a place where nature and evil coexist; and the brook in the forest symbolizes the boundary between purity and evil. Hawthorne successfully showed the polysemy, mobility and metaphor of the symbols. All these symbols functioned as the cells of the novel show us a story fully interpreting the struggle between human nature and religion.

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