

The Symbolic Meanings in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract: *The Scarlet Letter* is the representative work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a famous writer of America in the 19th century. It is regarded as the first symbolic novel in American literary history and is notable for its symbolism. Hawthorne develops the traditional technique of symbolism in this novel skillfully. Therefore, the scarlet letter is endowed with different symbolic meanings which enhance the artistic effects of this work. In an effort to help the readers better understand the use of symbolism in the work and have a good hold of the theme and the artistic charm of the novel, this paper mainly explores the symbolic meanings which are endowed in the scarlet letter "A" and the settings.

Key Words: symbolism; *The Scarlet Letter*; symbolic meanings; Nathaniel Hawthorne; the settings

The American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne is famous for his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, which is regarded as Hawthorne's best work and a masterpiece of American literature. Since this book was published in 1850, numerous critics and scholars respectively explored the novel about the theme, content, creative art, etc. However, nobody could make a final conclusion until now. It is said that *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel that has as many interpretations as there are readers. What leads to this result is Hawthorne uses various symbols in *The Scarlet Letter* skillfully. It has been considered as the first American symbolic novel. Symbolism is the most important technique in his work. It runs through the whole novel, which is helpful to deepen the theme and depict the image of the characters in the novel. Readers are encouraged to use their imaginations to draw their own

conclusions. Therefore, it is significant to study the symbolic meanings in *The Scarlet Letter*.

I. Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Work *The Scarlet Letter*

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts. His father was a sea captain and died when he was a little child. After studying several years in Bowdoin College, in Maine, Hawthorne returned and stayed in Salem for nearly twelve years, living in virtual loneliness. "During this period, he read the annuals and chronicles of the Puritan world, and harvested the richness of his background."^[1] He spent most of his time perfecting the art of writing. *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850 and succeeded immediately. Ironically, this book was not recognized by Hawthorne himself as his best work. However, people regarded it not only as his greatest accomplishment, but also frequently as the greatest novel in American literature history.

The background of the story is set in Salem, Massachusetts. Hester Prynne, a young wife whose husband is presumed dead, is convicted of adultery in colonial Boston by the civil and severe Puritan authorities. She conceals the identity of her baby Pearl's father in order to protect him from the harsh judgment of Puritan law. The man is the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, who is respected as a holy and pious man in the community. Hester is condemned to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her chest as a permanent sign of her sin. The minister suffers a lot but has no courage to confess his sin to the public. Meanwhile, Hester's husband Roger Chillingworth returns to Boston. In order to revenge, he disguises himself as a trust friend of the minister, takes care of his health but by subtle means, he tortures the hypocritical minister vengefully. At last, Dimmesdale confesses his sin and dies. Hester and Pearl leave the colony. For the hatred Chillingworth transforms from a wise man to a fiend. He becomes the real sinner.

II. Symbolism in Literature

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the most productive symbolists in American

literature. He inherited and developed the symbolism device in his works. To understand his novels, it is necessary to study this technique. "Symbolism in literature was a mid 19th to early 20th century European literary movement in French literature centered in Paris that employed symbols and evocative suggestion in place of direct statement."^[2] Symbolism is an ancient artistic technique and is first used in arts such as painting and sculpture broadly. The use of symbolism in literature also has a long history. In literature, symbolism is more complicated. Symbols of literature are usually metaphysical. "A symbol is often a concrete object used to represent an idea more abstract and broader in scope and meaning—often a moral, religion, or philosophical concept or value."^[3] In literature, symbol is used to express the deep and hidden meaning in a piece of work. It does not give a direct and simple description about objective reality but arouses the readers' associations by applying implication and metaphor. So symbolism usually contains multi-layered meanings and is full of ambiguity, which endows the common things with great artistic effects. This may be the real artistic appeal and charm of the use of symbolism. This technique helps to deepen the theme of the story and fire the readers' imagination. "Without applying of symbolism, Literature is only a pile of meaningless words on paper."^[4] In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the application of symbolism is one of the most significant contributions to the rise of American literature.

III. Symbolic Meanings in *The Scarlet Letter*

In this work, symbolism runs through the whole novel where the main characters and the scarlet letter "A" are all endowed with a deep symbolic significance. It enhances the artistic effects of this work. The novel revolves around one major symbol: the scarlet letter. Besides, the settings have their symbolic meanings respectively.

i. The Symbolic Meanings of the Scarlet Letter A

The most important symbol which is carried throughout the novel is undoubtedly the scarlet letter "A". The letter "A" is the focus and center of *The*

Scarlet Letter. For different characters, it has different symbolic meanings.

a. The color of the letter "A"

It is commonly agreed that colors are used as a major form of symbolism. For example, "Pearl is dressed in a red gown with gold trim, which symbolizes she is a red represent of Hester's sin."^[5] Whereas Hester is mainly dressed in plain, emotionless colors, Chillingworth is dressed in black. In *The Scarlet Letter*, red most obviously represents Hester's sin, as shown by the scarlet letter "A" she is forced to wear. At the first sight, it would be taken as a representation of evil, because a scarlet woman usually refers to an immoral woman. So the red color is associated with the devil. It implies degeneration and adultery. On the other hand, red is the color of blood and fire, which symbolize vitality, power and passion.^[6] Fire is the source of light and warmth for people's daily life, and the fire of love is the source of living. In the novel, red color symbolizes the pure, happy and enthusiastic love. The birth of Pearl is a reflection of her parents' immorality and love.

b. The symbolic meaning of the letter "A" to Hester

For Hester, "A" is not only a symbol of "adultery" and "abandon", but also a symbol of "able" and "acceptance." The main symbolic meanings of the scarlet letter is the red A that Hester Prynne was sentenced to wear on her chest. To the townspeople, author, and reader, it is clear that the original meaning of the "A" stands for "adultery." When Hester became pregnant during the absence of her husband she was accused and convicted of adultery. People looked down upon her and got far away from her. Society condemned her for her sin. Hester was forced to live alone on the outskirts of the city. She was an outcast from society and people treated her differently by constantly sneering at her in public. She was abandoned by the community and little Pearl was the only companion of her lonely life. With the development of the story, the letter "A" began to represent "able," and "acceptance." Hester worked hard and lived a simple life with her daughter. She tried her best to help the poor who were suffering sorrow or illness. After years of Hester's helping, serving and sympathizing with the townspeople, her letter "A" was thought by the Puritans to mean "able" and "acceptance" rather than "adulteress" and "abandon." Gradually, people began to regard Hester as a

diligent, kindhearted and able woman. Her tender mercy and kindness gained people's respect and acceptance.

c. The symbolic meaning of the letter "A" to Dimmesdale

For Arthur, the "A" means "agony" and "accomplice." "A" is an agonizing reminder of his concealed sin because he is the unknown accomplice of the crime of fornicating. Whether actually or metaphorically, Dimmesdale always wears a scarlet letter over his heart and is constantly aware of it. In the public's eyes, he is the most holy man in the community and enjoys high prestige. Considering his identity and position, Dimmesdale has no courage to commit his crime of adultery and to stand on the scaffold together with Hester. The "A" on his chest reminds him that he is the accomplice of Hester from time to time. Although he feels guilty in his inner heart and hates his hypocrisy, he cowards to acknowledge it to the rest of the community. Rather than accepting the truth of his nature, the secret sinner is agonized and tortured by his holy duty and his sin. "He seems more suffering than any other characters in the story." [7]

d. The symbolic meaning of the letter "A" to Chillingworth

The letter "A" has different individual meanings to different characters. To Chillingworth, he sees the letter as the unknown "adversary" and a quest for revenge. After he finds that his wife bore another man's child, the old scholar gives up his freedom and becomes fascinated in his new aim in his life—to find out the accomplice of his wife and avenge. When he doubts that Dimmesdale is Pearl's father, he disguises himself as a trust friend of the minister, revenges his opposite for many years. He sacrifices all things good, even his own life and health to revenge and torture the man both psychologically and mentally. The poor man's suffering turns to sin that is heavier than the minister. After Dimmesdale—the adversary of him confesses his sin in the scaffold, the old man loses his purpose for living.

e. The symbolic meaning of the letter "A" to Pearl

In the novel, "A" also reflects "aspiration of the new life." Hester's daughter Pearl shows great interest and fondness for the letter, which has accompanied the girl ever since she was born. One time she plays alone, she weaves a letter "A" with the eelgrass and wears it on her breast in imitation of her

mother. However, the letter is fresh green instead of scarlet and full of vitality. "The green letter symbolizes the aspiration to get freedom from the conservative ideas embodied by the letter and pursue a new life." [8] To her mother, Pearl is a blessing more than a punishment. Pearl gives Hester aspiration to live a new and good life. At the end of the story, Chillingworth dies and leaves Pearl a great deal of fortune. Pearl lives a good life in Europe. The good ending of Pearl represents the bright future of people who are suppressed by the Puritan society.

ii. The Symbolic Meanings of the Settings

In the novel, besides the scarlet letter, settings are one of the major elements of symbolism. Much of Hawthorne's symbolism is very hard to find but several symbols are also obvious. The prison, the rosebush, the scaffold and the forest—all are endowed with symbolic meanings in *The Scarlet Letter*.

a. The prison

In the first chapter, Hawthorne describes the prison like this: "The world jail was marked with weather-strains and other indications of age which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front." [9] The prison is old, rusted, and yet strong with an "iron-clamped oaken door." This represents that the prison is a symbol for the Puritanical severity of law. It also implies that the severe enforcement of law and it is impossible to break free of it. "The prison is a metaphor for the authority of the regime, which will not tolerate deviation." [10] Hawthorne describes the prison as "the black flower of civilized society." It represents the crime and punishment that is a part of the early Puritan life.

b. The rosebush

It is also in the same chapter that Hawthorne describes that a wild rosebush outside the prison stands in full bloom. The rosebush is a symbol of passion. Hester's sin is one of the passions linked with the image of the rosebush. The writer links the rosebush with the wilderness surrounding Boston. "He comments that the bush may be a remnant of former forest, which covered the area. It is only in the forest wilderness that the Puritan's law fails to have any force." [11] The rosebush in full bloom indicates that Hester is at the peak of her passion so that Pearl was born. The child is thus comparable to the blossoms on the rosebush. In

the novel, the rosebush contrasts the prison and cemetery in colorful and beautiful aspects. It lives in society freely. It implies that passion is an aspect of human nature that should be admired and not judged.

c. The scaffold

The scaffold also plays an important role in the book. It refers to the judgment of God and the Puritan community. "Whenever the scaffold is mentioned, it is the part of the three major climaxes of the story."^[12] Hester is sentenced to stand atop the scaffold for three hours, to stand before God to receive their just judgment. At the end of the story, with all his strength and courage, Dimmesdale finally confesses his sin to the masses on the scaffold. The confession finally gives him a sense of peace. Standing on the scaffold as a guilty sinner would mean that they would be laughed and isolated for the rest of their lives, just as Hester is. The Scaffold is a place of public humiliation. "It also represents the strict moral code of the puritan community."^[13] It displays Hester's sin to the whole town. It is the only place in which Dimmesdale must confess his sin to God and the community. Moreover, the scaffold is not merely a cruel device of humiliation and scorn; it is the acknowledgement of sin. Here both Hester and Dimmesdale paid the price of admitting their sins. In words, the scaffold is a place of public humiliation and acknowledge of sin.

d. The forest

The forest is not only a symbol of nature where people seek freedom and refuge, but also a symbol of devil for the puritan. "Hawthorne uses the forest to provide a 'shelter' for members of society in need of a refuge from daily Puritan life."^[14] In the forest, the strict morals of the Puritan community cannot apply. Hester could bring about many hidden emotions, and show her love for Dimmesdale. The forest is the only place where both of them can have open conversation without the constraints of the Puritan society. Dimmesdale also can show his true emotions to Hester. The forest brings out the natural side of people. Hester takes off her hat, unloosens her hair and takes the "A" off. She is so beautiful that it is as if we see another person. Dimmesdale also becomes vibrant and full of vigor, which was never seen in other place. "The Puritan society may be a cruel and harsh place to live in, whereas Hawthorne makes the forest a place

for people to get away from law and religion and express the true feelings.” [15]

IV. Conclusion

As is mentioned at the beginning of the paper, some people say that *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel in which there are as many interpretations as there are readers. Much of the trouble in interpreting *The Scarlet Letter* is that the story is highly symbolic. The letter “A” is the focus and center of the novel and has various meanings. From the color, the red “A” stands for evil, vitality, power and passion, while from the meanings, the letter “A” has different individual symbolic meanings to different characters. Furthermore, the prison, the rosebush, the scaffold and the forest also have their own symbolic meanings. The story of *The Scarlet Letter* is short and compact with only a few scenes and several characters. However, almost each object and character has different symbolic meanings of their own. Although readers are left to use their own imaginations to draw conclusions by themselves, the symbolism is inconclusive with its rich meanings. Due to this figure of speech, the story is more vivid and sets people thinking. Maybe this is the reason why Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is the most famous symbolic novel in American Literature.

Notes:

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