

Symbolism of Characters in the Scarlet Letter

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Abstract: Many researchers have made a profound analysis of symbolism of the letter “A” in *The Scarlet Letter*. Actually, besides the symbol “A”, there are many other symbols in *The Scarlet Letter*, and they also play a very important role in it. However, researchers neglect these important symbols and they have not touched upon them. In this case, based on *The Scarlet Letter* copyrighted in 1962 by Airmont Publishing Co, Inc, a profound and comprehensive analysis of symbolism was given through the analysis of characters in the novel.

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is generally considered to be the first American symbolic novel. Even someone once said it is an amazingly written book for its time with just the right amount of powerful symbolism, because it includes many profound and important symbols. This device of symbolism is portrayed well in the novel. A symbol is a literary device that is employed to portray another object or individual. In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is most often a tangible object Hawthorne uses to represent undefined idea, complex in scope and significance. More times than not, it represents reverent, profound, or virtuous concepts of merit.

I choose three representative characters—Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl to discuss their respective symbolism.

2. Symbolism of Hester

Hester is one of the important characters in the novel. In my opinion, first, she symbolizes strength. Owing to impulse and solitude, Hester, a Puritan woman, committed adultery, and raised an illegitimate child named Pearl. In her crime, she refuses to reveal the identity of Pearl's father; she chooses to endure the punishment alone. When the Reverend Mr. Wilson tried to persuade Hester to identify her partner, of course, Hester desires to run away from the situation where she has to face all the pressure of the townspeople, but she refuses to do so as the Reverend Mr. Wilson would like. Because she loves Dimmesdale, Pearl's father, she decided to endure the punishment alone. This shows her strength because she must bear the burden for two people. Having to be punished and watching someone else who committed the same crime but was not punished needs some strength. But rather than succumb to self-pity, she faces her punishment with dignity. She chooses to take the punishment and spare Dimmesdale. I think only a strong person can endure the pressure and can be such a martyr.

A second example of her strength is that she remains in Boston, and accepts her punishment. She could have easily left Boston in search of a new life, one in which no one knew her. Instead, Hester continues her life in Boston, serving as a mid-wife and sewing for the same people who had condemned her. She made clothes for herself and Pearl; she even sewed gloves for the governor. For Pearl, she made some beautiful dresses. She made some of these dresses a crimson color, (which was a color close to scarlet) What she did reminds herself of her sin. Her strength manifests itself in her acceptance of her fate and her willingness to persevere in this community—the place of her sin. Hester faces torment and social isolation daily. She must live alone and have no adult communication. The townspeople are afraid to talk to her and refuse to tolerate her. This solitary confinement is tormenting because all human beings need interaction with others. Based on her inner strength, she accepts the solitary confinement and goes on with her life. Most people in the

situation similar to Hester's, would let their lives deteriorate, but Hester has pulled her life together and earned the respect from most of the townspeople at last. Using her strength, she also shows the townspeople that they should not judge people on their past, yet they should accept people for what they are at present, and no one is perfect. She is the strongest character in this novel. On the other side, Hester Prynne represents feminism. As the female-heroine, and truth, she is unweaving in her stand against the wishes of the state, church, family and community with regard to her own truth. Hester is aware of where her truth is and how her truth can set her free. In the end of the novel, it states "People brought all their sorrows and perplexities and besought her counsel." (Hawthorne N. 1962: 221) This point shows how Hester stand for the truth has eventually affected the entire community in a very positive matter, changing its perspective on social norms.

As I have stated above, on one hand, Hester symbolizes strength, on the other hand, she represents feminism.

3. Symbolism of Dimmesdale

Another symbol in the novel is Dimmesdale, the co-adulterer. First, he represents weakness through his insistence on hiding. Dimmesdale's sin is concealed from the town until the novel's final scaffold scene. He is a good man at heart, but he is weak. He takes responsibility for his daughter-Pearl in privacy, as he did kiss her in the forest or hold her hand on the scaffold. However, most likely owing to his high standing within the community, he denies Pearl and Hester alike in public situations. The only exception would be that he helped Hester keep custody of her daughter, but even that was done as inconspicuously as possible.

Dimmesdale also represents guilt through his torment and agony. Instead of stepping forward, claiming responsibility for his actions, and taking whatever punishment he should accept, Dimmesdale chooses instead to hide his affair with Hester and tortures himself. He drives himself to the brink of madness with his guilt and even physically tortures himself by branding an "A" on his chest with a hot iron. Dimmesdale shows his weakness through hypocritical denial and his torturing guilt. Dimmesdale is weak not only mentally but also physically.

Everything has its two sides, on the other side, Dimmesdale is a symbol of courage. Dimmesdale contained seven years of shame and guilt deep inside his heart. The townspeople had seen Dimmesdale's constitution feeble noticeably. with the benevolence of his office acting as holy protection, nobody suspected him of the sinful act of adultery. Suffering from self-inflicted ignominy and physical torture, Dimmesdale struggled to redeem himself in some fashion, which needs a lot of courage. After Dimmesdale had discussed their leaving with Hester, he changed a lot. His sudden insight was "so great a vicissitude in his life could not at once be received as real" (Hawthorne N. 1962: 181) Dimmesdale was happy because he had a reason to live, a chance to be with Hester. Now, we can see that Dimmesdale has much more courage than before, which emerged with the help of Hester. Obviously, after the encounter with Hester, Dimmesdale became a new man. "There was no feebleness of step, as at other times; his frame was not bent; nor did his hand rest ominously upon his heart." (Hawthorne N. 1962: 201) It seems as if Dimmesdale's spirit was reborn. Although he still had a frail body, his spirit became ten times stronger than before. In the past, Dimmesdale covered his heart because he was afraid and ashamed. Now he has set that aside, and displays his ability to quell his fears and maintain self-control, which is another component of courage. Near the very end of the novel, Dimmesdale delivered a poignant confession to the townspeople. When he was about to begin his public confession, Chillingworth was desperately trying to stop him. He tried to reason with Dimmesdale, "Wave back that woman! Cast off this child! All shall be well! Do not blacken your fame and perish in dishonor! I can yet save you! Would you bring infamy on your sacred profession?" (Hawthorne N. 1962: 212) Instead of making Dimmesdale question his actions, it only made him more resolute to carry them out. Chillingworth's reasons for not confessing were good for someone who was not as motivated as Dimmesdale. But because of his strong faith in God, Dimmesdale had to confess, it was his sacred duty to cleanse himself before he passed on to the next world. Afterwards his strength expired and he died.

Dimmesdale has a very strong belief in God, which is another source of his courage. He knew the sin he committed was intolerable, and he must repent some day. Dimmesdale thinks that God is merciful! At this point, Dimmesdale wished to repent his sins because he wanted to be in favor with his God by doing the right thing that is to confess. Just with the wishes, he is full of courage to confess. In this sense, we can see that his belief in God gives him so much courage. Dimmesdale delivered his confession like this “He threw off all assistance, and stepped passionately forward a pace before the woman and the child.”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 214) After Dimmesdale finished his confession, he did a remarkable thing. He torn off the clothes covering his chest and “ the gaze of the horror—stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle; while the minister stood, with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory.” (Hawthorne N. 1962: 215) He has successfully suppressed his weakness and confessed to the people. So far, we can not see his weakness but only his courage. Besides, he even produced the unbearable physical evidence: the scarlet letter engraved upon his breast. The amount of courage it took to stand on a scaffold and face hundreds of people is unfathomable. The amount of courage needed is increased further by the conditions. All the people thought so highly of Dimmesdale, he had kept it a secret for seven years, and Chillingworth was hovering in the background waiting for revenge. It is a surprise that Dimmesdale felt a sense of triumph when he finished the confession with unveiling the symbol on his breast. It is the final seal of repentance. He is a unique priest. He sinned but he still retained his faith and stayed pious, which aroused his courage, within his heart. Dimmesdale even thinks that it is God, who brings “me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people!”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 216) His preternatural faith in God was laudable. The most remarkable thing is that he welcomes the shame, to see if he can cope with it and he does, due to his raw courage and piety. Before he passed away, his self-inflicted badge of shame or rather courage, was just as much amplified as Hester’s object of obloquy was reduced. It is likely that Dimmesdale’s passionate speech, his death, and a combination of the two—his courage may make the high-ranking officials of the city actually eulogize his behavior instead of giving a severe punishment. No matter what other people think, Dimmesdale acts courageously and has redeemed himself with his “ triumphant ignominy”. Just as the scarlet letter “A” does not only mean adultery as its original significance, it also means “Able” and “Angel” with the progressing of the novel.

The character Dimmesdale is not only symbolizing weakness, but also symbolizing courage, which can be showed by his many changes that he starts from a God like man to a crazy guilt ridden man, to a relieved man ,and to a man who has finally relieved himself of all his guilt.

4. Symbolism of Pearl

One of the most complex and elaborate characters in *The Scarlet Letter* is Pearl, the daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. At the beginning, she is the living symbol of Hester and Dimmesdale’s illegal connection. “In her was visible the tie that united them. She had been offered to the world, these seven years past, as the living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hid—all written in this symbol, all plainly manifest, had there been a prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame! And Pearl was the oneness of their being.”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 176) Pearl is also a symbol for Hester.

Initially, she is the symbol of Hester’s public punishment for her adultery. Pearl firstly noticed her mother’s “A” in her chest and throwed flowers towards the scarlet letter, which caused Hester anguish, as displayed in the novel, “Still came the battery of the flowers, almost invariably hitting the mark, and covering the mother’s breast with hurts for which she could find no balm in this world, nor knew how to seek it in another.”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 87) Pearl symbolizes the wreck of Hester’s life and mental state by keeping on asking her about the scarlet letter “A” as she grew older. Pearl in a sense wants her mother to accept and live up to her sin, she achieves this by constantly asking her about the scarlet letter. And even when Hester and Pearl have a walk in the forest, it is also Pearl who found that the sunshine runs away, and she said, “Mother, the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom.”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 156) As I have showed above, what the little Pearl said and did would remind Hester of her

sin. In this sense, Pearl symbolizes the sin Hester has committed. The most remarkable thing is that Pearl prevents her mother from running away from her sin. In the forest, the little Pearl refused to go up to her mother no matter how Hester requests until Hester “ took up the scarlet letter, and fastened it again into her bosom.”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 179) Pearl is the living symbol of the scarlet letter, as stated in Chapter 7 “ It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 90) What causes Hester more anguish is not the scarlet letter itself but his daughter Pearl,

Pearl is also a symbol to Dimmesdale. The existence of Pearl causes him anguish. When Dimmesdale ironically asked Hester to point out Pearl’s father on the scaffold, even the poor baby was affected by the same influence, for it directed its gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and held up its little arms. As Pearl grew older, also on the scaffold, she asked his father whether he was willing to stand on the scaffold with her and her mother or not. When Dimmesdale refused her request, Pearl “ attempted to pull away her hand”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 132) from Dimmesdale’s hand. A few minutes later, Pearl complained that his father was not bold and was not true. When Pearl knows that it isn’t possible for Dimmesdale to go back with them, she runned to the brook and bathed her forehead, until the unwelcome kiss given by Dimmesdale was washed off. Pearl will not let him be into her life until he accepts his sin; she wants him as a father but will not let him until he reveal his sin in public. At the end of the novel, Dimmesdale bravely stands on the scaffold, and publicly confesses his sin in the light of day. Finally a sense of peace is given by the confession. Pearl has longed for his public love and affection and at this moment, she achieved it. After Dimmesdale’s confession, Pearl received him as a father, when Dimmesdale asked, “Dear little Pearl, wilt thou kiss me now? thou wouldst not, yonder in the forest! But now thou wilt?” “ Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken.”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 215) As a result, she cries with real human emotion for the first time in the book, foreshadowing that her past is put away and she will be able to live a normal life in the future. So far, “ Pearl’s errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled.”(Hawthorne N. 1962: 215) and Pearl, the symbolic character finishes her mission as a symbol.

In a word, Pearl is not only a symbol of Hester, but also a symbol to Dimmesdale. She is a symbol of sin and adultery in the sense that she leads Hester and Dimmesdale to their confession and the acceptance of their sins.

5. Conclusion

The successful use of symbolism makes the novel more implicit and more rememberable, and also makes Hawthorne rank the first during the romantic period of American literary history. Just as Hyatt Waggoner says, “The Scarlet Letter is Hawthorn’s most widely read and admired novel.” It will be timeless.

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