

Research on the Humanized Puritanism of Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract: Nathaniel Hawthorne's fame not only relies on his artistry and writing techniques, but also on his penetrating insights into humankind. This paper analyzes *The Scarlet Letter* by applying the Archetypal Theory of Frye from which the cultural personality of the author is reconstructed. Hawthorne advocated that the achieving of salvation depends on the free wills of humankind rather than God's help. Hawthorne's intention was not to lash Puritanism bitterly, but to add some humanistic elements to it to achieve a balance between religion and human conscience.

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Letter of Hawthorne is not only a representative of literary creation, but also a work filled with many cultural elements, for example, the New England history, the Puritanism, and his techniques in adopting cultural symbols and allegories. E. P. Whipple pointed out that the novel evinced "a keen-sighted and far-sighted vision into the essence and purpose of spiritual law". Bercovitch seeks to re-politicize the book by examining its profound ideological engagement. Desalvo took this book as an autobiography of the writer. In this thesis, the author employs the archetype criticism to reconstruct the cultural personality of Hawthorne with the text of *The Scarlet Letter* from which his pursuit of a humanized religion can be explicitly presented.

2. Archetypal Theory of Frye

The word "archetype" means original type (form). The origins of the archetypal hypothesis can be traced back as far as Plato's *ideas*. One of the most influential archetypal researchers is Frye. In his book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye divides the whole of literature into two categories: comedy and tragedy. Frye states: "the fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death." Frye identifies four mythoi based on the metaphor of the seasons and subdivides literature into four fundamental mythoi and associates each with a season: comedy with spring, romance with summer, tragedy with autumn, and satire/irony with winter and they are all a part of the same cycle.

The first myth of Frye's system is spring (comedy). Comedy is related to spring because comedy is characterized by the birth and revival of the hero. The second archetypal myth is summer (romance) because summer is the culmination of life, and the romance culminates with some sort of triumph, usually a marriage. Tragedy is the third mythos. Autumn is paralleled with tragedy because it is the dying stage of the seasonal calendar, and often ends with the "fall" or demise of the protagonist. The final mythoi are those of irony and satire which is noted for its darkness, dissolution, the return of chaos, and the defeat of the heroic figure.

3. Cyclical Systems of Cultural Archetypes in *The Scarlet Letter*

The story of *The Scarlet Letter* took place in Boston in the 17th century when Puritanism was very powerful. The heroine Hester fell in love with the minister Dimmesdale, which resulted in her pregnancy. Hester insisted on her own bearing of the disgrace wearing a letter "A" and left Arthur anonymous in the affair. But her husband Roger Chillingworth began a revenge on the priest through psychology torture. At the end, the priest confessed his relationship with Hester and then died. Hester's daughter Pearl married to a respectable family in England. Hester, with her warm

heart and her hard work, changed the meaning of letter “A” from adultery to angel.

Hawthorne adopted the cyclical symbols in his masterpiece. The story begins with the birth of the heroes and ended with the death of them just like the plants in four seasons. But death not only means the disappearance of the present one but also symbolizes the rebirth of a new form of life. Hawthorne developed his story in the same way as the cyclical four mythoi introduced by Frye.

3.1 Spring—Comedy

The story is set in the 17th New England where the cruel Puritanism influenced almost all the aspect of human life. Both Hester and Dimmesdale were punished by the existent Puritan society because of their adultery. But they succeeded in escaping the ties of cruel society and establishing their own Eden. What’s more, their happiness increased with the born of their daughter Pearl. Just as Frye stated for a comedy, “The appearance of this new society is frequently signaled by some kind of party or festive ritual, which either appears at the end of the play or is assumed to take place immediately afterward.”¹ The birth of Pearl can be taken as a repay or a celebration of their true love and the mythos of spring are successfully presented at the beginning of the story.

3.2 Summer—Romance

Romance and summer are paired together because summer is the culmination of life and the romance genre culminates with some sort of triumph, usually a marriage. When Hester was set free, she should have left this Puritan settlement and found any other place to hide her character and identity. But she did not flee. As for Dimmesdale, he also started to question the Puritan society and began his painful self-sufferings. His determination to conquer his timid and his hypocrisy is also an inclination to revolt against the harsh Puritanism. Under the pressure of the Puritan society and the Satan-like Roger Chillingworth, the two lovers endured a long suffering of seven years. With their consistent efforts, they finally conquered all the hardship and gained their union in the Eden-like forest. The forest itself is the very embodiment of freedom.

3.3 Autumn—Tragedy

Tragedy is known for the “fall” or demise of the protagonist as autumn is the dying stage of the seasonal calendar. Dimmesdale, one of the most outstanding leaders of the Puritan, committed adultery and thus fell down from Eden, just as what Adam had experienced in the *Bible*. He dedicated himself to the saving of the soul of others and the most distinctive one was his influence on Pearl’s salvation. “It is the absent father Dimmesdale who is responsible for Pearl’s salvation”. When Dimmesdale confessed his sin on the scaffold, Pearl kissed her father on the scaffold at the end of the novel, she felt grief and sorry for this suffering man and it was just this grief that humanized this “demon-child”. With the death of Dimmesdale, the dream to establish a happy family broke into pieces, leaving Hester and Pearl in deep sadness and regret.

3.4 Winter—Satire

Winter best represents the ironic and satiric archetypes because it can evoke darkness and chaos. According to Frye, the defeat of the heroic figure mainly results from the fault of the hero. Hester and Dimmesdale should live a happy life elsewhere as they had planned in the forest. But the insistence of the priest to finish his sermons on the Election Day turned their dream into the opposite. If he had followed Hester’s advice, or if he did not persist in his determination to make a perfect end of his career, he should be a dutiful husband and a kind father. But all the things changed at the moment of his ascending on the scaffold. He unburdened the load of his inner sin, but also stopped the beating of his heart. The death of the priest was blue thunder towards Hester and Pearl, and after that the two ladies disappeared. The story of the scarlet letter grew into a legend. The world of New England still prevailed with shock and horror.

¹ Northrop Frye. p163.

3.5 Spring—Rebirth

In the words of Frye, the death or disappearance of one form of life foreshadows the coming of a new one. “In myth, the hero is a god, and hence he does not die, but dies and rises again.”² Hawthorne adopted the myth device of cyclical progress, and arranged his heroine surprisingly returned to this land and to wear as before the scarlet emblem on her breast. But the scarlet letter, once her badge of shame, became an emblem of her tender mercy and kindness. Hawthorne gave his heroine a more humanized way to repent her original sin with her hard work, strong will, and more importantly, her love for the needed. In this way, Hawthorne turned his heroine into a saint or a prophetess who came to help and save human beings. And Hester gained her rebirth from a sinful woman to a holy prophetess.

4. Reconstruction of Hawthorne’s Cultural Personality

The Scarlet Letter develops cyclically according to the four mythoi of Frye. In fact, the literary career of Hawthorne is also a typical one following the four archetypes of mythoi. He enjoyed unspeakable happiness from his works, but he also suffered a lot by perplexities and bewilderment in his creation. Nonetheless, he succeeded in ranking himself as a great genius in literature just as Hester had succeeded in becoming a prophetess in *The Scarlet Letter*. In this sense, the archetypal analysis of the book can serve as a good way to peek into the cultural personalities of Hawthorne.

Influenced by Humanism, Hawthorne perceived both the humanistic and non-humanistic side of Puritanism. He preferred the worship of man as God, and “the virtues of charity and forgiveness, along with God’s unintelligibility, grace, and mercy, are positive characteristics stressed in Hawthorne’s conservatism”.³ In his mind, only mutual love could make human beings reach an ideal state, and also he strongly advocated the right of human beings to pursue enjoy happiness. While Hawthorne’s Puritan family background made Hawthorne’s disgusting towards Puritan Church grew quickly with the decline of the family, his affection towards his family members such as his mother, his wife and his friends that enable him to realize to importance of mortal love and tempt him to form his own humanized religion. During the time of his mother’s death, his wife offered her help both financially and spiritually. “Without her, he tends to slip back into a sub-human or mechanical existence.”⁴ Among the family members, everyone was a spiritual support of the others. Just as what Hawthorne expressed in *The Scarlet Letter* in which Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl was all indispensable part of each other. The Puritan topic veiled gloom and pessimism upon *The Scarlet Letter*, but it failed to conceal Hawthorne’s humanistic view of religion.

Hawthorne’s critical attitude towards the male oligarchy increased with the improvement of the women’s role in society and Margaret Fuller’s feminism. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne presented to the readers a similar self-reliant woman who struggled for her right of pursuing happiness and freedom--Hester Prynne. Hester superficially accepted her penalty wearing a scarlet letter A in her breast as a token of her shame, but she never abandoned her will to pursuing true love and mortal happiness. With her warm heart and hospitality, people forgot the original meaning of the scarlet letter and added it with the new meaning as “able”, “amiable” and “angel”.

The topic of Puritanism and adultery heard to be a very serious problem. But with the magic pen of Hawthorne, the novel turned to be a releasing one with the rebirth of the main characters. Hester undertakes a duty as a prophet or a priest after the death of her lover; Dimmesdale plays a role of Jesus Christ or the scapegoat and rises to heaven with all the evils; Pearl, devil-like girl, marries to a prominent Christian family and lives a happy life in the Old World. In the eyes of Hawthorne, the destinies of human beings were not predestined by God but grasped in the hands of one’s own. Humankind were also given the rights to pursue happiness and enjoy happiness. They can question and explore the world, and achieve perfection with their own efforts. The salvations of the hero and heroine undoubtedly showed Hawthorne’s optimistic view of life.

² Northrop Frye. p215.

³ Lee Trepanier. p8.

⁴ E. Michael Jones. p10.

5. Conclusion

As culture and literature have maintained a close relationship, there is no doubt that archetypal criticism, especially the mythical archetypes, offers powerful access to a deeper understanding of the novel and a penetrative analysis of the cultural personality of the author.

As a descendent of a prominent Puritan family, he believed in the original sin. But the blackness of his thought was eased by the harmony of his family and the progressive concepts of his contemporaries, such as Emerson's Transcendentalism and Fuller's Feminism. As for his attitudes towards culture, he had formed his own critical spirit in his works. Influenced by his uneven life experience, Hawthorne constructed an optimistic view of life. But as a man of independent mind, Hawthorne failed to escape the influence of Puritanism upon his literary creation. This can be seen from his treatment of the destinies of his characters. In this sense, Hawthorne's intention was not to lash Puritanism bitterly at all, but to add some humanistic elements to it to achieve a balance between religion and human conscience.

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