

Reflection on Hawthorne's Use of Biblical Allusions and Symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract—Nathaniel Hawthorne's master work *The Scarlet Letter* revealed the impact of The Bible on him. The novel is a powerful tale of passion, Puritanism and revenge, which is treated as the foremost romantic classic of American literature, and is truly one of the greatest triumphs in literary history. Meanwhile, there are correspondences among the theme, main characters and plots with biblical allusions. Therefore, the work is endowed with profound symbolic meanings, thus making the whole story with features of symbolism and implications. In this article, it is focused on exploring multiple explanations of the letter "A" to read the text highlighting the most fundamental archetype in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Keywords—*The Scarlet Letter*; biblical allusion; symbolism

I. INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) is considered as the first greatest American fiction writer in the moralistic tradition. His works belong to romanticism or, more specifically, dark romanticism. Most of the tales suggest that guilt, sin, and evil are the most inherent natural qualities of humanity (Wang Shouren, Liu Haiping, 2004). Many of his writings are inspired by Puritans of New England, combining historical romance with symbolism and deep psychological themes, bordering on surrealism. His depictions of the past are a version of historical fiction used only as a vehicle to express common themes of ancestral sin, guilt and retribution. It is *The Scarlet Letter* which did it for him: not only did the book make his name as a writer of great talent, but it also brought him the money which made him financially comfortable. The novel which is notable for its allegory and symbolism is regarded as the first symbolic novel in American literature (Chang Yaixin, 1996). It revolves around one major symbol, the letter "A". Besides, other objects that are described in the novel also have their symbolic meanings. *The Scarlet Letter* also has some connections with *The Bible*. There are many biblical allusions in the novel; it starts during the summer of 1642, near Boston, Massachusetts, in a Puritan village. This shocking masterpiece mainly tells the destiny of three people, which respectively are Hester, Mr. Dimmesdale and Dr. Chillingworth.

The Holy Bible is often described as "the greatest book ever written". This is because of its permanent significance and influence on people throughout the ages. No other book in history has impacted peoples and cultures like *The Bible*.

So far, *The Bible* has been translated into 2,018 languages and every year more copies of *The Bible* are sold than any other single book. It has a great influence on western culture. *The Bible* itself contains a total of 66 books and is divided into two parts, the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. It's far from a collection of fairy tales as some people supposed it. *The Bible* involves various subjects of religion, history, legislation, ethics, literature, philosophy, wisdom, management, public relationship and counseling, therefore, it also taken as an encyclopedia of life as a classic of world literature.

II. BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

A. *The Function of Allusion*

An allusion is a figure of speech that makes a reference to, or representation of a place, event, literary work, myth, or work of art, either directly or indirectly. M.H. Abrams defined allusion as "a brief reference, explicit or indirect, to a person, place or event, or to another literary work or passage" (Mao Xinde, 2004). It is left to the reader or hearer to make the connection; an overt allusion is a misnomer for what is simply a reference. In an informal definition, allusion is a passing or casual reference; an incidental mention of something either directly or by implication. An allusion serves as a kind of shorthand, drawing on this outside of the work to provide similar context or meaning to the situation being written about. Although allusions can be an economical way of communicating with the reader, they often run the risk of alienating readers who do not recognize these references. Readers who are familiar with the allusions can gain a richer understanding of the work. Frequently, allusion is as a kind of hypertext, linking the reader to another tradition or literary history. However, allusions can also be quite subtle. For instance, Shakespeare's influence on literature in English is so strong that we often cite the famous tales or names as allusions in our writings without being aware of them.

B. *Allusions of Adam and Eve*

Hester and Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* are similar to Eve and Adam in *The Bible*. Their experiences are exactly the same. Just as the ancestors of all the livings — Adam and Eve who were induced to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden to pursue wisdom became depraved, Hester and Dimmesdale also became depraved for the pursuit of

free love. They all committed the "original sin". Before the birth of Eve, the Garden of Eden was in peace and order. However, once she came into being, the obedient Adam dared disobey the order of the Lord and ate the forbidden fruit. In terms of this, Eve was incompatible with the Garden of Eden and her appearance indicates the collapse of the Garden of Eden. But why the Lord created Eve, perhaps it is an indispensable part of the Lord's perfect plan. At the beginning of the whole world, there was only one human — Adam, he knew nothing about himself clearly. In order to let Adam know himself, Lord created Eve; in order to seek knowledge, Eve can't resist the temptation of eating the forbidden fruit and let Adam follow suit. After eating the fruit, they acquired the knowledge, but they were expelled from the Garden and cursed. Maybe because of this, the human beings knew the kindness and greatness. In a word, Eve is the mother of all the livings who brought wisdom to her offspring. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester also has a sacred mission. Hester does not belong to Boston where the religious atmosphere is very strong. She is enthusiastic, imaginative and rebellious (Wang Shouren, Liu Haiping, 2004). She is also incompatible with the land. Before Hester came, the life of Dimmesdale is tedious and boring. He just repeated what a clergyman should do, just as a duty without passion.

C. Allusion of the Letter "A"

The critical symbol of the novel is undoubtedly the mysterious scarlet letter "A". On the one hand, the scarlet letter "A" worn on Hester's breast of her gown would remind you of the cross worn on the breast of the nun's. When Hester stands on the scaffold to bear the punishment for the guilty of adultery, Hawthorne wrote, "Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent" (Hawthorne, Xiong Yupeng, Yao Naiqiang trans, 2006). Here Hester is compared to Divine Maternity who bore the hardship for human beings' sin. So the scarlet letter "A" symbolizes the cross. On the other hand, the scarlet letter "A", like the thorn in Paul's body, is not only the symbol of her past sin, but also the symbol of the weakness of her humanity. At the beginning of the novel, Hester wearing a scarlet letter "A" stood at the prison door. Hester has the same appearance with the original Paul, for both of them were committed crimes. During the period of salvation, they all confronted a lot of difficulties. Finally, Paul became a sacred Christian; Hester was forgiven by the local residents and was honored by them for her kindness. The scarlet letter "A" and the thorn are the stigmas of their past sin. The stigmas remind them the sin that they have committed and warn them to be cautious in future.

III. ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLISM IN THE NOVEL

The symbolism is the use of symbols to represent substances, especially in art and literature. A symbol is a word or object that stands for another word, object or idea, which is intended to create or emphasis on the deeper

meaning of a story. Symbolism in literature can be subtle or obvious, used sparingly or heavy-handedly. The author may repeatedly use the same object to convey deeper meaning or may use many varieties of the same object to create an overarching mood or feeling because symbolism is often used to support a literary theme in a subtle manner. Symbolism is an art style developed in the late 19th century characterized by the incorporation of symbols and ideas, usually spiritual or mystical in nature, which represented the inner life of people. Symbolism is a movement of the 19th century in which art became infused with exaggerated sensitivity and a spooky mysticism. Influenced by the connections between music and poetry, it sought to achieve the effects of images and metaphors to symbolize the basic idea or emotion of each poem. Symbols of literature are usually metaphysical.

A. Symbolic Meaning of Letter "A"

The most pervasive symbol is the scarlet letter "A" from which the book gets its title. The main symbol of *The Scarlet Letter* is the red "A" that Hester Prynne was sentenced to wear on her chest. This is the most important symbol in the story, and symbolism is a major literary device of the story. In the novel, Hawthorne didn't tell us what the scarlet letter stood for. Hawthorne's intention was to make the meaning of the scarlet token worn on the bosom of Hester was highly ambiguous.

The letter "A" worn on Hester's bosom is a symbol of her adultery against Roger Chillingworth. The puritan treatment continues, because as Hester walks through the streets, she will be looked down upon as if she is some sort of demon from hell that commits a terrible crime. The letter "A" is meant to be worn in shame and to make Hester feel awkward. "Here, she said to herself had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment" (Hawthorne, Xiong Yupeng, Yao Naiqiang trans, 2006). Hester is ashamed of her sin, but she chooses not to show it. She commits the sin out of the heart of passion and fully admits it because, though she is ashamed, she also receives her greatest treasure, Pearl, out of it. She is a very strong-hearted woman to be able to hold up so well against what she has to face. She could have fled Boston and sought a place where no one knows of her great sin. However, Hester chooses to stay, which shows her bravery and integrity. Any woman with enough nerve to hold up against a town, which despises her existence, and to stay in a place where her daughter is referred to "a devil child" or has some sort of psychological problem, is a very tough woman.

Letter "A" also stands for alone and alienation. It refers to Hester's lonely life in New England. After she is released, Hester lives in a cottage near the outskirts of the city. It has been built by an earlier settler and abandoned it later, because the soil is too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of the social activity which already marked the habits of the emigrants. Hester's social life is virtually eliminated as a result of her shameful history. Hester comes to have a part to perform in the world with her native energy of character and rare capacity. However, there was nothing that made her feel her

belonging to it. Every gesture, every word and even the silence of those with whom she came to contact, implied and often expressed that she was banished and she was alone as if she inhabited another sphere or communicated only with the common nature by other organs and senses instead of contacting with the rest of human beings by the mouth. "She stood apart from moral interests... seemed to be the sole portion that she retained in the universal heart" (Hawthorne, Xiong Yupeng, Yao Naiqiang trans, 2006). Hester has no friends in the world and little Pearl is the only companion of her lonely life, so the scarlet letter "A" is also a symbol of the words "alone" and "alienate" (Kang Jie, Wang Xindong, 2005).

Later in the story, the scarlet letter "A" changes its meaning to "Able". Hester is a very capable woman. She was too strong of a woman for Puritan Boston right from the start. She was able to accept her punishment. Hester was also a capable mother, nurse and seamstress. She was able to bring up a strong daughter. In the end, the letter "A" appears in the sky, signifying "Angel" and "Admirable" (Zang Xiaohong, 2007). The people in the cottage who condemned her now believe the scarlet letter standing for her ability of her beautiful needlework and also for her unselfish assistance to the poor and the sick. "The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her — so much power to do, and power to sympathize — that many people refused to interpret the scarlet letter A by its original signification" (Hawthorne, Xiong Yupeng, Yao Naiqiang trans, 2006). At this point, a lot of people realize what a noble character Hester possesses. "Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge? They would say to strangers. 'It is our Hester — the town's own Hester — who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!'" (Li Yan, 2009). The town's people soon begin to believe that the badge served to ward off evil, and Hester grows to be quite admirable among the people of the town. Hester overcomes the shame of her sin through the purity and goodness of her soul. She has been unselfishly offering her time and love to those who need her most, which proves that she is not worthy of the fate which has been dealt to her.

B. Symbolic Meanings of Names in the Novel

Hester Prynne is one of the most complex characters in the novel is Hester Prynne. The writer endows her with many symbolic meanings by giving her this name (Zang Xiaohong, 2007). The word Hester has two meanings. On the one hand, Hester sounds like Hestier, Zeus's sister in Greek mythology, who is a kitchen god and a very beautiful goddess. This makes us feel that Hester is a passionate woman and make other people feel warm and comfortable. In this novel, she is the symbol of the truth, the goodness and the beauty. "The young woman was tall, a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam; and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes" (Robert Clark, 1984). The society condemned her for her sin, without knowing anything else. Hester was forced to live alone on the outskirts of the city. She was a seamstress, but got very little

business. When she used her skills to decorate the scarlet letter "A", things only got worse. People felt that she was trying to show off the fact that she was an adult, or that she was proud to be so. Clearly it was the first intention of the symbol to reveal that Hester Prynne was an adult. Hester's guilt, however, is derived from both Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. Chillingworth married a woman who did not love him, which is one of the causes of Hester's guilt. On the other hand, Hester is the homophone of hastier. In indeed, she was hastier to her love. When she was young, she married Roger Prynne, a very old scholar whom she did not love. When she met the young clergyman — Dimmesdale, she fell in love with him hastily and gave birth to Pearl, for which she was condemned to wear the scarlet letter "A" on the breast of her gown.

Arthur Dimmesdale is one of the most complex and misunderstood symbols in the book. Dimmesdale's sin is not adultery but not having the courage to admit that he had adulterated. Therefore he has the sin of concealment. Dimmesdale's guilt is filled with mental anguish, which serves as a constant reminder of his sin. He remains silent so that he can continue to do God's work as a minister. The word Dimmesdale also has many symbolic meanings. "Dim" means dark and weak; and dale means valley. So the dimdale here is actually a symbol of the "dim-interior" of the clergyman. He loves Hester deeply and he is the father of Pearl, but he can only show his passion for her in the forest or in darkness.

The name Roger Chillingworth also has the symbolic meaning, words "chilling" and "worth" compose the surname Chillingworth. Chilling comes from the word "chilly", which means this man is a merciless avenger. In this novel Chillingworth looks like a gentleman, but the truth is the opposite — he is a devil. The devil can transform himself into an angel of light. He soon becomes obsessed with his new mission in life and he is turning from a victim to a sinner. "Chillingworth" also means that the avenger's life is worthless. As a result, the poor forlorn creature is more wretched than his victim.

Pearl is the daughter of Hester Prynne. The name Pearl has five symbolic meaning (Tian Junwu, 1999). Firstly, she symbolizes both a rose and the scarlet letter. If she has not been born, Hester would not have had to wear the scarlet letter "A". Secondly, Pearl is treasure. She is her mother's only treasure and the only hope of survival which is a very strong device for punishing Hester than the letter "A" on Hester's breast. Pearl develops into a dynamic symbol in the story. Throughout the novel, Pearl is linked to the scarlet letter "A", even when she was just a little baby, "her infant's eyes had been caught by the glimmering of the gold embroidery about the letter" (Fan Gexin, 2004). Thirdly, Pearl also symbolizes a part of nature. She was incompatible with the social circumstances since she was born and she becomes a happy spirit only when she returns to the nature. Fourthly, Pearl symbolizes the moral of the story. Hawthorne is not merely telling a story, but he is also trying to make a moral point. Pearl is really a constant mental and physical reminder to Hester of what she has done wrong. With Pearl at her side, Hester will never escape the punishment of her

sin. She plays a game when she throws flowers at her mother and jumps around in glee every time she hits the scarlet letter. She also makes her own letter "A" to wear. When she finds Hester removes the scarlet letter from her breast, Pearl starts screaming and convulsing and refuses to cross the stream until Hester reattaches the letter. Pearl's action foreshadows the ending of the story. Lastly, Pearl also symbolized the rebellion (D. H. Lawrence, 2002). Since she was born, she was abandoned by the society. She was considered to be an evil child. She once declares that she has no God, which shows her rebellion. She likes to play with the trees and makes friends with wolves also showing that she is a rebel.

The rosebush is a symbol of passion. As will become obvious later, Hester Prynne's sin is one of passion, thus linking her crime to the image of the rosebush. Hawthorne also indirectly compares Hester with Ann Hutchinson via the rosebush, and again makes the same parallel in Chapter 13 (Yuan Wang, 2003). Actually, Hawthorne's comment on the rose may serve as a "moral blossom", which is saying Hester's child serves as the moral of the story.

IV. CONCLUSION

Hawthorne is a famous writer of romanticism in American literature, and he is skillful at using symbolism in his creations. The technique leads the way to an independent literary genre, the symbolic novel. As his friend Herman Melville said, he fully deserves the title "the largest brain with the greatest symbolism" (Melville, 1979) by describing Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*. In his novel, Hawthorne made his characters play their own roles freely. Those characters are just between "true" and "untrue", which have painted some of the most vivid scenes of the human drama, so that formed the most remarkable feature of Hawthorne's writing technique, symbolism. The use of biblical allusions and symbolism has inspired contemplation and feeling on the part of the readers. In *The Scarlet Letter*, different settings have their own separate meanings and all those are the embodied expressiveness of Hawthorne's romantic writing style. The novel has made a great contribution to the progress and prosperity of American literature. Therefore, Hawthorne will always be one of the most important figures in the field of world literature.

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