

Original Paper

A Study of the Symbolic Meaning and Period Value of Pearl in

The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract

Pearl is a distinctive artistic figure created by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his novel The Scarlet Letter. She is highly symbolic in her identity, name, appearance and character. Her existence not only drives the development of the main characters' thoughts and behavioral changes, but also carries the author's praise of truth, goodness and beauty, his communication of ideals and hopes, and the profound understanding of the awakening of women's consciousness. This kind of praise, communication and understanding has wide contemporary value in today's society.

Keywords

The Scarlet Letter, Feminism, Symbolic Meaning, Contemporary Value

1. Introduction

Hawthorne, one of the greatest novelists in the history of American literature, is an outstanding representative of American Romantic writers in the middle and late 19th century, whose profound ideas and superb writing skills have been renowned in the literary circles of Britain, America and even the world. *The Scarlet Letter*, as Hawthorne's long masterpiece, concentrates on the author's ideology and artistic characteristics, and can be praised to be Hawthorne's best work.

When we talk about *The Scarlet Letter*, we inevitably have to talk about the author's use of symbolism. Hawthorne's use of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* is extensive, ranging from names, characters, imagery, and so on. In recent years, both domestic and foreign academics have written articles on the symbolic meaning of *The Scarlet Letter*, but the literary world has not carefully interpreted the character of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*, nor has it deeply explored its rich symbolic meaning. Indeed, she is not only the love child of her mother Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale, but also a rebel under Puritan oppression, a symbol of life and vitality. The growth of Pearl also reveals the awakening of women's consciousness. It is no doubt a valuable inspiration for the development of the women's

movement. Therefore, this paper will focus on the symbolic meaning of the character Pearl from the perspective of textual, the symbolic approaches and feminism.

2. The Living “Scarlet Letter”

First of all, there is no doubt that Pearl is the true Scarlet Letter, the mark of shame. Although Pearl itself has many symbolic meanings, one of her most direct symbols is her connection to the scarlet letter (Li, 2009). For Hester, she is a drag, yet also a spiritual anchor. When Hester stood in front of people, fully exposed, her first impulse was to clasp Pearl to her breast: “not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours”. Here Pearl is actually another form of that scarlet letter (Note 1). In the article the author compared the scene of Hester holding her daughter in her arms to the Virgin holding the Son, whose very value was offered to the world for the atonement of sins. So Pearl was actually the punishment given by God to Hester (Note 2). As the crystallization of Hester’s secret love with Dimmesdale, Pearl was the result of sin and the product of a fault. If Pearl had not been born, Hester would not have become a scorned sinner. And Pearl’s existence was like an unbreakable pain that stabs Hester’s heart all the time (Amal Nasser Frag, 2019).

On top of that, Pearl herself showed a strong interest in the red letters on her mother’s chest. Unlike other children’s attachment to their mother’s breasts, little Pearl’s perception of her mother’s identity first came from the scarlet letters on her chest. Later in life, she always had a high curiosity about the red letter and always tried to unravel its meaning, as if she perceived some mysterious connection between herself and it, reminding Hester Pearl all the time that Pearl was the child of sin (Note 3).

3. The Symbolic Meaning of the Name “Pearl”

But it is very superficial to define Pearl only as the source of pain and the embodiment of shame. Every detail the author devised in the novel contains a deeper meaning. When giving this little girl the name “Pearl”, Hawthorne wanted to express another symbolic meaning of Pearl—the precious vitality and beauty of life. The word “Pearl” comes from a biblical story and means “something very precious” (Li & Zhao, 2007). Although Pearl’s birth brought great trouble to Hester and Dimmesdale and cost them a heavy price, in their hearts, their daughter Pearl was still the most important treasure in their lives. There is no denying that Pearl was Hester’s only spiritual support and motivation to continue to live. This is how the text describes it: “But she named the infant ‘Pearl’, as being of great price—purchased with all she had—her mother’s only treasure!” Pearl’s presence comforted Hester’s heart and enabled her to suffer in silence from the many physical and mental torments she had to endure because of her daughter’s arrival (Note 4). Because she believed that Pearl was the most precious gift God had given

her. In Chapter 4, Hester says, “I have thought of death. I have wished for it—would even have prayed for it, were it fit that such as I should pray for anything.” From here, the poor woman’s thoughts of death were already revealed, but because of Pearl, she had the courage to live on (Note 5). Therefore, Pearl also carries the symbolic meaning of hope.

In Hawthorne’s writings, Pearl is connected with many beautiful things. She is Hester’s emotional support, “a lovely and immortal flower” (Note 6), a rare ray of sunshine in this depressing dark world. Pearl not only was beautiful, but also dressed exquisitely, and what made people feel more admired is that she was endowed with an extraordinary vitality. She was just like a lovely elf, always energetic, and her heart remained pure despite the harsh environment. A wise man once said that the value of literature lies in truth, goodness and beauty, in hope and a better world. And in Hawthorne’s writing, Pearl is such a being, who has the power to embody truth, goodness and beauty, and is full of vitality.

4. A Rebel in the Secular world and a Distinct Female Personality

The author also clearly endowed Pearl with rebellious and distinctive feminist characteristics. As the product of Hester and Dimmesdale’s free love, Pearl herself was a clear sign of her mother’s courageous pursuit of love, challenge to the rules of the world, and her awakening of female consciousness (Li, 2021). Her(Pearl) elaborate dress reflects Hester’s pursuit of freedom and her accusation of the dehumanization of Puritan dogma (Hilalah Dughayyim Aldhafeeri, 2020). It also reflected her mother’s challenge to patriarchal society and her rebellion against the society of that time. At the same time, Pearl was also fighting against her own unjust fate and the strict Puritan society: she threw stones at children who scorn her and her mother, she categorically declares “I have no heavenly Father” (Note 7), and when the old priest tries to question her about her religion, she ran away and declared that she was not created by God. This is a direct manifestation of her unruly nature and represents her contempt for authority. She was in the company of nature, yearned for sunlight, showing the most primitive beauty and spirituality of life. Her appearance, character and behavior all affirm women’s nature, freedom and self-independence, and at the same time showed an image of a woman who lives a true and vigorous life in an era when women were poisoned by traditional thinking.

As Hester’s daughter, Pearl’s characters were largely inherited from Hester. The characters of Hester, which were suppressed by the dark and despotic Puritan regulations, were also clearly expressed in Pearl’s. Pearl’s rebellion against the suppression of human nature in Puritan society, her vividness, beauty and loveliness, her charming energy and her overflowing enthusiasm were all very similar to Hester. Moreover, Pearl and her mother have suffered from social discrimination and human indifference (Liu, 2013), But even so, they were willing to warm others with all their kindness, and used their hard work to touch people around. In the end, she and her mother together gained the respect and recognition of others with their labor and actions.

5. Reflections on the Awakening of Women's Consciousness and the Women's Affirmative Action Movement

Pearl's image is very similar to Emma in Barbara Taylor Bradford's debut novel *A Woman of Substance*, which successfully portrays Emma as a woman character. She comes from a humble and abusive background, but is resilient and intelligent, pursuing financial independence and personal dignity, and finally building a multi-billion dollar business empire through suffering. Under the background of the American feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, Emma's entrepreneurial story was inspiring and deeply respected by women at that time.

However, the feminist movement has evolved to the point where it has become a bit overdone and overstated. The most common critique of feminism is the feminists' overemphasis on difference. They reduce the traditional morality to the oppression of conservative male society, and use all women's personal choice rights as a means of opposing patriarchy, turning equal rights into privileges, which is out of touch with social reality. This not only deviates from their original intent, but also makes their goals more difficult to achieve.

The essence of feminist movements such as Me Too is to give a voice to a vulnerable group of women without a voice as a way to gain the rights they deserve. Now the movement is being fueled by radical feminist criticism and the media, demonizing men and putting women as a whole in the position of victims. This has ultimately led to a blurring and ambiguity of the boundaries of normal interaction between men and women, which is clearly a departure from ecofeminism's original intent of all beings living together equally and in harmony with each other. Another point to ponder is how much hypocrisy and lies accompany the commercial hype of the Me Too movement, which originated in Hollywood's Vanity Fair. Behind this feminist movement, capital is manipulating the whole movement. The high-profile rhetoric of "feminism" is just a tool for capital to increase its value.

As one of the representative writers of feminism, Barbara advocates women's independence and self-improvement, but she also points out that women's equality does not mean denying the possibility of reconciliation and cooperation between males and females. The optimum way for the union of men and women is to be mutually dependent. Regarding the Me Too movement, which has been gaining momentum in the last two years, she stressed that although the fall of men like Harvey Weinstein is gratifying, the Me Too movement is still "a bit over the top".

One of the major revelations of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* is the reflection on the consciousness of women and the sense of equal rights. What are the advantages of women when they are separated from men, especially when they compete with men in the workplace? Without tender atmosphere, the harsh workplace has left the image of the weaker women behind and replaced them with images of strong and capable females appearing in the workplace to compete with their male counterparts. In many cases (Ji, 2021), women in the workplace perform very well. It is clear that women are never men's subordinates, nor men's playthings. Women's self-improvement and self-reliance are the basis for fighting for equal rights. There were very few awakened women in the era of *The Scarlet Letter*, but

women like Pearl and her mother set a good example for those who came after them. In the context of women's efforts for equal rights, women should take the above-mentioned women as role models, earn respect and equality through their own efforts, and stand up for their equal rights and freedom when their personal interests and other interests are violated, rather than deviating from the category of "equality and freedom" and the environment of the times, blindly condemning the abuse of male power, and eventually degenerating into a product of the strengthening of "political correctness" and becoming an obstacle to social development.

6. Conclusion

Through the ups and downs of Pearl's growth in the novel, Hawthorne conveys that women's personal happiness can also be achieved through their own unremitting efforts. This perception was ahead of its time and a true reflection of the author's thinking, with distinct feminist styles. In the author's writing, Pearl presents a true and complete female image free from secular constraints and full of rebellious spirit, who is willing to treat others with the enthusiasm of life. At the end of the story, the author gives Pearl, a "living scarlet letter", a happy ending, which actually reflects the author's own aspiration for a better life of freedom, harmony and happiness. As a symbol of beautiful hope and ideals in human nature, Pearl undoubtedly inspires every reader to be full of hope in life.

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Notes

Note 1. *The Scarlet Letter* by N.Hawthorne: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015.7, p. 7

Note 2. *The Scarlet Letter* by N.Hawthorne: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015.7, p. 10

Note 3. *The Scarlet Letter* by N.Hawthorne: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015.7, p. 51

Note 4. *The Scarlet Letter* by N.Hawthorne: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015.7, p. 43

Note 5. *The Scarlet Letter* by N.Hawthorne: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015.7, p. 27

Note 6. *The Scarlet Letter* by N.Hawthorne: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015.7, p. 43

Note 7. *The Scarlet Letter* by N.Hawthorne: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2015.7, p. 53