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The Carrier of Shame and Glory-An Interpretation of the Letter A in *The Scarlet Letter* from the Perspective of Symbolism

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Abstract

Hawthorne, an American romantic writer in the 19th century, has a talent for using symbolism as a literary expression. This kind of artistic feature can be specifically seen in his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. From the initial derogatory meaning of “adultery” and “awful” to the later “able” and “adorable”, the letter A in *The Scarlet Letter* has different meanings in various periods. This article starts with the letter A and provides a comprehensive and concise analysis of the use of symbolism, including the symbolic implications and the artistic effects produced by these symbolic means, aiming to help understand the ideological content of the work.

Keywords

Letter A, Symbolism, *The Scarlet Letter*

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne, born in Salem, Massachusetts, was the most ambivalent writer, a consummate romantic in American literary history. Some of his ancestors were men of prominence in the Puritan theocracy. Gradually, the family fortune declined. Consequently, the religious atmosphere of the family and social environment had a tremendous impact on Hawthorne’s thoughts and creations. His works are mostly based on the history or reality of New England, dedicated to the deep exploration of human nature, skilled in psychological portrayal, with a strong symbolic significance and mysterious color, and have a unique style in art. In 1821, Hawthorne was admitted to Bowdoin College and returned to his hometown to begin literary creation after graduation. In his early years, he mainly wrote short novels and published collections such as *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1843) and *The Snow-Image* (1851). After his marriage in 1842, Hawthorne moved to Concord, the American ideological and cultural center, and met Transcendentalist writers such as Emerson and David Thoreau. Before and after that, he served at customs twice and joined the Brook Farm founded by Transcendentalists. After

1850, Hawthorne reached the peak of his writing career, and the publication of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) established his special position in the history of American literature. He served as a consul in Liverpool, England, and briefly resided in Italy. On the contrary, he continued to write novels such as *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The marble faun* (1860).

The Scarlet Letter tells the tragic love story that took place during the colonial period in North America. The heroine Hester Prynne married the doctor Chillingworth, but there was no love between them. In solitude, Prynne fell in love with Pastor Dimmesdale and gave birth to her daughter Pearl. Prynne was publicly punished, and had to put on a red letter A marked “adultery” on her clothes. However, Prynne remained steadfast and refused to name the child’s father. At the same time, the cowardly Pastor Dimmesdale was guilty of concealing his sin and living in pain every day, and Chillingworth launched his revenge. At the end of the novel, Dimmesdale confessed his guilt before dying and realized his own redemption, while Chillingworth died within a year because he lost the motivation for living. The special emphasis on psychological description of characters and the skillful use of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* are two artistic features that complement each other in the novel. This innovative practice has promoted the development of symbolism in literature. In particular, the letter A, which runs through the entire novel as the main line and title of the work, is endowed with multi-level symbolic significance by Hawthorne. The analysis of the entire work from the perspective of the letter A will help to have a deeper understanding of the intertwined emotions of love and hate conveyed in *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as the test of humanity in facing sin and atonement, and perceive why it has become an immortal classic in the history of American literature.

2. The Symbolic Meaning of Letter A

2.1 A Brief Introduction of Symbolism

Symbolism is the writing technique of using symbols to represent something. It’s a literary movement that arose in France in the late 19th century and greatly influenced many English writers, particularly poets in the 20th century. It enables poets to compress a very complex idea or set of ideas into one meaning or even one word. It’s one of the most powerful devices that poets employ in creation. The word symbol derives from the Greek verb *symbollein* to throw together, and its noun symbol “mark”, “emblem”, “token” or “sign”. It is an object animate or inanimate which represents or stands for something else. According to the definition from Webster, the purpose of symbolism is to explain invisible things by using visible symbols and is to make connection and relation between symbols and meanings. It works under the surface to tie the story’s external action to the theme and was often produced through allegory, giving the literal event and its allegorical counterpart a one-to-one correspondence. Often the thing or idea represented is more abstract or general than the symbol, which is concrete. In *The Scarlet Letter*, in addition to letter A, there are other expressions of Symbolism. For instance, the scaffold appearing at the beginning, middle, and end of the story respectively marks the

development, climax, and end of the story. The scaffold is a symbol of the cruel code of puritan society and also represents the place where criminals openly confess their guilt (Jun, Y L, 47). It is not only a stage for Hester and his lover to showcase their emotions to the world, but also a battlefield symbolizing the competition between traditional morality and new freedom. The natural scenes, like the river, is also intriguing. When Hester didn't wear the scarlet letter, her daughter Pearl refused to cross the river to meet her mother. When Hester wore the letter A that symbolizes sin, Pearl jumped over the river and hugged her mother, indicating that the small river also symbolized the boundary between sin and purity. And Hester's name is similar to the sister of Zeus -- Hestier in Greek mythology, who is the beautiful goddess in charge of all stoves. Similarly, Hester also possesses the divine charm and appearance of a goddess. Therefore, the use of symbolism in the scarlet letter is rich and varied.

2.2 Letter A in The Scarlet Letter

As an important symbol, the letter A runs throughout the entire text in *The Scarlet Letter*. At the beginning of the story, it is mentioned that Hester was sentenced to wear the scarlet letter A for life, indicating that the letter A began to have an indelible impact on her. When she had to wear letter A, everyone found out that she had meticulously embroidered the A on her chest, and even decorated it with gold thread. This excellent embroidery work also laid the foundation for her self-sufficient life in the following text. Subsequently, abandoned by secular society, Hester had to wear the red letter A and move away from the original town with his daughter Pearl to the nearby suburbs. Under this circumstance, she relied on her unparalleled embroidery skills to support herself and her children, and had extra money to do charity. In the eyes of those who knew her, the A on her chest gradually became less dazzling, but transformed into a form of sympathy and praise. In the meantime, Hester's lover, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, had been in decline, especially under the stimulation of Roger Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale had realized that he was dying. So Dimmesdale used his last strength to stand on the scaffold and announced to the crowd that he was the traitor, referred to by the scarlet letter A. He trembled and untied the lace on the front of his vestment, revealing the blood red A on his chest, and loudly shouting out the secret hidden in his heart for seven years, before passing away in Hester's arms. In the end, Hester left and returned to the place where she had suffered great shame for love many years later. Years later, next to a sunken old tomb, a new one was erected, but the two tombs shared a tombstone with the inscription: "ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES." (Hawthorne, 244) We can imply from the inscription that the scarlet letter A has played a considerable role throughout the novel.

2.3 The Symbolic Meaning of Letter A

2.3.1 The Mark of Sin and Misery

At the beginning of the novel, Hester was shown in front of the church with her child under the escort of the guards. When "A" first appeared in front of people, it was just a symbol of shame, being the abbreviation for adultery. (Hamin, 43) For committing adultery, Hester was sentenced to wear the scarlet letter A all her life. The cruelty of this punishment lies in its ability to make everyone who meets

Hester instantly aware of the crimes she has committed, and to make the wearer permanently feel humiliated and guilty. In the eyes of ordinary people, the romance between Hester and Pastor Dimmesdale is romantic and logical. But in the eyes of many Puritans who were deeply poisoned by Puritanism, Hester was definitely an awful woman because a woman who loses her virginity is tantamount to committing a great guilt and is a disgrace. When Hester was taken to the scaffold, the red letter A was the embodiment of crime and punishment. The letter A, which appears at the beginning of the novel and as the opening letter of the alphabet, also embodies the intensely doctrinal color of Christianity, that is, everyone cannot avoid original sin, because as long as people live, they have a degenerate nature. A is also the first letter of Adam's name in the Bible, which is not an accidental phenomena, (Ren, X. J., & Wei, L., 122) but further demonstrates that Hester and Dimmesdale committed the original sin of Adam and Eve stealing the forbidden fruit. Thus the scarlet letter "A" on Hester's chest was undoubtedly a sign of insult and a punishment for her "extramarital affairs" by the secular world, and a proof that Hester is a heinous woman who has lost her virginity.

Apart from that, the single letter A also represents that Hester has undoubtedly been alone and miserable. At first, Hester's marriage to Chillingworth was doomed from the beginning to be unfortunate. Hester was young and beautiful, while Chillingworth was born deformed, both physically and mentally. He doesn't know that only a happy marriage could last, nor does he consider her suffering and helplessness from the perspective of his wife. Accordingly, Hester has been in a state of spiritual loneliness throughout this marriage, which holds the view that why when she meets Dimmesdale, she will have a warm and pure love. On the counter part, Hester was soon alone again. Due to the exposure of this shameful relationship, on the one hand, she was abandoned by her husband, neighbors and the whole society, and on the other hand, she shouldered all the humiliations alone, so that her lover could hide in this sin. In New England, immigrants are accustomed to engaging in social activities to seek a sense of belonging. For Hester, who has been convicted of adultery and morality, she has long been alienated from the entire community, and the only companion left in her lonely and desolate life is her baby Pearl. Consequently, the letter A also indicates to the reader that Hester's abject life is about to continue. Hester's happiness is rare and precious, while her long suffering and forbearance are still synonymous with her life. Therefore, the scarlet letter A clearly has a strong negative symbolic significance at the chapters that comprise the first part of the novel, implying the double misfortunes of the heroine's life and romance, paving the way for the following description of Hester's difficult life.

2.3.2 The Mark of True Love and Lover

Hester herself seemed to have a different feeling for the letter A, she infused her love and emotional sustenance into the letter. Hawthorne said in explaining this scarlet letter A: "It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore." (Hawthorne, 45) The symbol of extreme shame in the eyes of others was beautifully and luxuriously embroidered by Hester with exquisite needles and threads,

which is enough to display that the deep meaning of this letter A for her goes far beyond punishment. The exquisite design of the scarlet letter reflects Hester's unique feelings for this A from the side, that is, she adores Dimmesdale deeply. In fact, the letter A is the first letter of the name of Arthur Dimmesdale. So when Hester committed the crime of adultery, Pastor Arthur Dimmesdale was the most closely related person, because the scarlet A seemed to remind Dimmesdale that he was Hester's accomplice all the time. This is also a huge ordeal for Dimmesdale. Therefore, wearing the red letter A is sometimes a form of emotional sustenance for Hester, as it is not only a connection between her and her lover, but also a subtle way to convey her longing for Dimmesdale.

In addition, the letter A also relatively indicates Hester's loyalty and deep affection to Dimmesdale. And the letter A is also the initial letter of the French word "amour (love)". This is not a coincidence, but a deliberate setting to help readers more keenly capture the love flowing through the dark meaning of the scarlet letter. It was not difficult to see this kind of love from the look on Hester's face: "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 neighbors." (Hawthorne, 45). At that time, what Hester held in her arms was not a sin that should not have been born, but the crystallization of her love with her lover and the continuation of their life. In order to protect her lover, Hester was willing to atone for her sins and let herself endure the malicious words of others. This tenderly love is so real that it allows Hester to voluntarily stay in this sad place and endure tremendous pain and gossip, just because she dreams of one day being able to hold a sacred wedding with her beloved. Hester's various forbearance and sacrifices indicate that the love represented by letter A is noble and prodigious. She turned the judgment seat into an altar for their marriage, took the bad reputation as a grave for burying secrets, and only asked her to live with her beloved priest in the next life. It was true love that gave her bravery and strength to continue to look forward to a better life. Therefore, A is a silent, eternal power, and even more a supreme emotion - affection and amour. (Chang Runfang, 34)

2.3.3 The Embodiment of Ability and Kindness

When Hester first appeared in front of people, the scarlet A on her chest could make readers understand how exquisite her needlework was. Her needlework, Hawthorne suggests, "might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore shooting, the passion of her life." (Judith 186) Hawthorne himself has repeatedly mentioned that the red letter A on Hester's chest was embroidered with gold thread, and the exquisite embroidery made everyone around her stare at it. This not only indicates to the reader that Hester is hardworking, capable and skilled, but also lays the groundwork for Hester to start independent life in the suburbs with this skill in the future. Therefore, Hester made full use of this skill and fed herself and her little child Pearl who grew up day by day. Hester used a mother's best efforts to raise Pearl into adulthood, and all the hardships involved were written with needles and thread. After her craft was enough to support her and her daughter, She even donated all the remaining funds to charities and gave them to the poor people, although these people who received the favor often humiliated her for her crimes in past years. This act of repaying good for evil moves readers and

reflects the author's praise of Hester's noble soul. Although people around Hester are still speaking ill of her even when they benefit from her, She insists on doing good: "None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town. In all seasons of calamity, indeed, whether general or of individuals, the outcast of society at once found her place. (Hawthorne 148)" This mirrors Hester's diligent and selfless Puritan qualities. All these descriptions represent that Hester requites injury with kindness, showing the character of altruistic dedication.

Over time, Hester won the respect of some Puritans, the red letter A also symbolizes "able" (Chen, S. Y., 61), and the letter A on her chest also had an additional meaning in the eyes of the public: "Such helpfulness was found in her - so much power to do, and power to sympathize - that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength. " (Hawthorne, 148) Hawthorne also indirectly expressed his sympathy and praise for Hester through this evaluation, that is, women who strive to pursue happiness like Hester and live independently with their own craftsmanship deserve to be respected and loved. People who knew her have gradually stopped regarding the scarlet letter A as a sign of evil, and instead regarded it as a sign of virtue and good deeds. At this time, she was no longer a guilty person who committed adultery, but an angel who has good intentions towards the world and insists on doing good works. The angel in Christianity is created for one purpose: to love and serve everyone without distinction, while the selfless dedication of Hester seems to represent the angel of holiness and integrity, which is in sharp contrast to the original sin she committed earlier and can more inspire readers' feelings and resonance for her. The world has kissed her soul with its pain, asking for its return in songs, and Hester really did that. And her kindness has also moved the public and the entire social environment, making the sin and punishment represented by the scarlet letter A slowly fade away.

2.3.4 The Embodiment of Respect and Praise

Although Hester was bearing everything silently, Dimmesdale still suffered a great deal in his heart, and Hester failed to persuade her husband Chillingward to give up his revenge on Dimmesdale. Therefore, at the end of the novel, Pastor Dimmesdale finally chooses to atone for his sin between reputation and morality, and decides not to let himself stay out of the troubles of Hester and Pearl. Instead, he asked Hester and Pearl to stand with him again in public and announced that he was the adulterer. At the last moment of his life, Pastor Dimmesdale finally overcame his own inner cowardice and entanglement, walked firmly onto the scaffold, publicly admitted his relationship with Hester, and the secret that had been hidden in his heart for a long time was finally revealed. He finally passed away in Hester's arms without regret. At last Hester left the place with Pearl. After a long time, Pearl got married, and Hester returned to this place again. She put the scarlet letter A on her chest again and went on living. The scarlet letter was no longer a sign that attracted the ridicule and scorn of the world, but became a sad, awe inspiring and admirable symbol, and this symbol was earned by Hester herself with kindness, courage, and a sense of responsibility.

As an independent woman, Hester has an optimistic and resolute attitude towards her love with Dimmesdale and her own life, which is very worthy of people's respect. First of all, in the face of the repression and severe persecution of Puritans, she bravely broke free from the shackles of traditional ethics, abandoned the so-called "women's way" of Puritans, firmly pursued her own beautiful love, and gave birth to Pearl, the crystallization of her love with Pastor Dimmesdale. Secondly, she has the courage to bear all the charges and pain after the matter is discovered, and is willing to drag her pregnant body to prison. She has also endured tremendous humiliation, just to protect her lover from being insulted and harmed. When her husband Chillingworth deliberately went to prison as a doctor to interrogate her child's biological father, she simply resolutely replied: "Ask me not! That thou shalt never know!" (Hawthorne, 65) Simultaneously, after wearing the scarlet letter A, she did not lose any hope of life, but actively faced all difficulties and obstacles. In the long years, Hester's life was full of hard work, consideration for others and self dedication. But through her own labor and craftsmanship, she not only achieved her material self-sufficiency, but also raised her daughter Pearl. She cherished her daughter's right to education and strove to safeguard her pure and natural nature from external pollution. And she can calmly and rationally face her lonely situation abandoned by society, and rebuild her image in the eyes of the world by virtue of sincerity and good deeds. The society wanted to transform Hester, but the result was that Hester, with her rebellious spirit and benevolent heart, to a certain extent, transformed stereotypes and promoted social progress. (Du, X. J., 101) Therefore, although she has committed secular "crimes", her noble free will, glorious and beautiful heart, and constancy to true love are truly worthy of respect.

3. Conclusion

Hawthorne is one of the most important novelists in the American Romantic period. His works are mostly based on the history or reality of New England, dedicated to the deep exploration of human nature, skilled in psychological portrayal, with a strong symbolic and mysterious color. The Scarlet Letter is a literary work that made Hawthorne famous at one stroke. The symbolism used by the scarlet letter A marks an important breakthrough in American novel creation. As the plot of the novel progresses, the meaning of the letter A changes from "adultery" and "awful" to "ability" and "angel", and finally to "admirable", expressing the author's praise for Hester's brave and tenacious personality and the criticism of the cruel punishment of the Puritans. The transversion of the meaning evolution of the letter A is precisely the process of the author's redress of Hester's injustice and the overturning of the "original sin" from the perspective of humanity. This is why The Scarlet Letter, as a novel with a uncomplicated plot, is able to have a shocking power. Hawthorne's use of symbolism to endow the letter A with multiple meanings not only enriched the content of the entire literary work and highlighted the theme, but also gave people a true sense of the realistic landscape of modern American society at that time, triggering readers to ponder deeply about the religious disciplines, the position of women, the existence of women, and human nature of that time. The scarlet letter A, as a carrier of shame and glory,

has successfully demonstrated the charm of symbolism to people. Thus, Hawthorne is well deserved to be known as “the pioneer of symbolism”.

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