



The Creative Launcher

ISSN: 2455-6580

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Perception Publishing

India

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The Creative Launcher, vol. 2, núm. 4, octubre-, 2017, pp. 218-223

Perception Publishing

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The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English
UGC Approved- (Sr. No. 62952)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.4.32>

Symbolism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

Symbolism is a literary device regarded as the most aesthetic device that the American writers based on in their writings; it helps them in conveying their messages indirectly in order to avoid problems that may fall upon them; so, they used animals, objects and characters as a symbol. In American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is a worthy symbolic novel, in which symbolism invades all its components. In it there is a great deal of symbolism, it would be impossible to deal with all the symbols; therefore, I focus on the major ones and try to depict the different interpretations they stand for. This article explores the major symbols used in this novel.

Keywords- *Aestheticism, symbolism, Naturalism, Realism*

Introduction

Symbolism as a movement refers to an aesthetic movement originated in France in the last half of the 19th century, it is often referred to as a 'decadent movement' mainly because of the use of imagination as a reality; it mostly associated with French literature considering it as its fertile land from which it spreads to other literatures; Symbolism started as a reaction to the naturalism and realism movements. Naturalism is a kind of realism in novels, stories, and plays, usually involving a view of human beings as passive victims of natural forces and social environment. Realism is a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or reflecting faithfully an actual way of life. Later it was developed by many authors around the world. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was among them and he used symbolism in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. The book is considered to be his masterpiece. Throughout the book he also explores the themes of legalism, sin, and guilt.

Cuddon (1998) states: "The word symbol derives from the Greek verb "symbolleîn", "to throw together", and its noun "symbolon", "mark" or "sign". It is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else." Symbolism in literature is the

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deepness and hidden meaning in a piece of work; it is often used to represent things, a moral or a religious belief or a value by symbol; for instance: scales symbolize justice, the dove symbolizes peace, the lion symbolizes courage and the cross symbolizes Christianity. (Cuddon, 1998)

In *The Scarlet Letter* there is a great deal of symbolism, it would be impossible to deal with all the symbols; therefore, we focus on the major ones and try to depict the different interpretations they stand for. This paper explores the major symbols on objects and characters used in this novel and their various interpretations.

1. Symbolism in Objects

Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* used a lot of symbols; he used to make one stand for another, and he based on presenting things and objects with two meanings, the invisible meaning and the hidden meaning which is the real meaning that stands for the symbols.

1.1 The Scarlet Letter "A"

The most prominent and noticeable symbol in the Hawthorne's novel is the scarlet letter "A" that is embroidered on the bodice of Hester's dress when she committed adultery and brought Pearl as her illegitimate child. In the Second Chapter, Hawthorne writes:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the 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.....was THE SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom'. (Hawthorne,1994:45-46)

.....she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real (Hawthorne,1994:50).

In the novel, the meaning of the scarlet letter changes different times. It begins as a symbol of sin and especially adultery, it becomes a symbol of loneliness, alienation and isolation and finally it becomes a symbol of ability, admirable and angel.

Firstly, the scarlet letter is a symbol of adultery in which Hester wears the scarlet letter on her breast as symbol of her sin against Roger Chillingworth. The Puritans punished her and obliged her to wear a scarlet A upon her dress in order to show the world that she is adulteress because she brought shame upon them. In the Fifth Chapter, Hawthorne wrote, "Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment." (Hawthorne,1994:68).

The second meaning of the scarlet letter is aloneness and alienation that stands for Hester's isolated life in New England. She lives in cottage near the outskirts of the city. Hester became isolated because of her shameful history, she has no friend in the world; Pearl, her

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illegitimate child is the only companion of her lonely life. Hawthorne wrote, "Lonely as was Hester's situation and without a friend on earth who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred on risk of want." (Hawthorne,1994:69).

Finally, the meaning of the scarlet letter takes another direction which is ability, admirable and angel; because later, the townspeople view the scarlet letter to stand for the ability of Hester's needlework and for the ability of the poor and sick without selfishness. Therefore, Hester's personality grows to be admirable amongst the people of the town. In the Chapter Thirteen, the townspeople said, "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 difficult!'" (Hawthorne,1994:138) The three changes of the meaning of the scarlet letter show the progressive possession of Hester's sin, her lonely life and her ability.

1.2 The Scaffold

The second symbol in this novel is the scaffold, which is a platform on which Hester stands and wears the scarlet "A" on her dress and carrying her illegitimate child for approximately three hours:

It was, in short, the platform of the pillory, and above it rose the framework of that instrument of discipline, so fashioned as to confine the human head in its light grasp, and this hold it up the public gaze. The very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron..... her sentence bore that she should stand a certain time upon the platform, but without undergoing that grip about the neck and confinement of the head. (Hawthorne,1994:47).

For the puritans, the sinner must stand on the scaffold to show his/her sin. The scaffold, like the scarlet letter to the puritans, is a place of public shame for those persons who decide to break the puritan laws; it represents the sin of the person standing upon it and it shows the puritan way of dealing with sin. It also symbolizes punishment, shame and the fate of isolation.

1.3 The Forest

The forest in the novel is a place where Hester and her lover Dimmesdale were met together in order to be alone far from the eyes of the people. To many puritans, the forest is a dark and evil place hunted by the black man (Kirk,2000).It is a place free of laws where people can go to escape the harsh strictness of the puritans.

Therefore, the forest symbolizes the free world and the dark world at the same time. It represents the dark world because it is a place where no puritan laws exist where witches gather, and where individuals soul their soul to the devil, as Mistress Hibbins said to Hester in the Eighth Chapter:

Wilt they go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest, and I

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well-nigh promised the Black man and comedy Hester Prynne should make one....had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and that with mine own blood. (Hawthorne,1994:98).

The forest also symbolizes freedom, because it is a place where men and women can open up, be themselves and pull out secrets. It is a place where Dimmesdale openly expresses his undying love to Hester, and she can do the same for him. Hawthorne uses the forest to present protection for members of society to become safe from the daily puritan life where all the strick and religious laws are vanished.

1.4 The Meteor

When Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl in chapter twelve, a scarlet meteor appears and traces a red "A" in the night sky. In the Chapter Twelve, Hawthorne wrote: "... Dimmesdale had done speaking, a light gleamed for and wide over all the muffled sky. It was doubtless caused by one of those meteors, which the nigh-watches may so often observe burning out to waste, in the vacant regions of the atmosphere." (Hawthorne,1994:130). Things like meteors in the shape of an "A" and stars while occur in the sky of America are common and regular, especially in the puritan communities, and the community leaders and religious men would interpret these meteors to be messages from God to give them warning about bad things or offences affecting the community (Kirk,2000).

Hence, identical to the scarlet letter on Hester's breast, the meteor serves as Dimmesdale's personal symbol for his share of the sin. The meteor explodes onto the scene as a divine sign of wrongdoing and a message to the world that God sees all.

2. Symbolism in Characters

The novel achieves greatness in its dramatic, objective presentation of conflicting moralities in action: each character seems at once symbolic, yet red (Gross,1960:45). There are four major symbolic characters in the novel, which are Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth and Pearl.

2.1 Hester Prynne

Hester Prynne is a woman who falls in love with a religious man called Dimmesdale and commits adultery. She presents a lot of symbols (Kirk,2000). Firstly, She is a symbol of strength and ability, in the sense that she remains in Boston alone without her husband for two years, and accept her punishment; this shows the great strength because she could easily have left Boston searching for new life, and also she later on becomes a voluntary nurse in the town and gives advice in matter of the heart for the people who condemned her.

The second example of her strength is her refusal to reveal the identity of Pearl's father, and chooses to face the insults and the punishment alone, because watching someone who commits the same crime remains freely and did not expose to any sentence is so difficult. Hester is also a symbol of passion and affection because she lets her heart controls her, and

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thinks as her heart prompts her. She is a very passionate and affectionate woman whom the heart predominates. She sinned through blind passion, and her passion and affection leads her to fall in love with the reverend Dimmesdale and commits her sin, because with whom she knows the real meaning of love, affection and safely which was never felt before with her husband. She is a symbol of beauty and attraction as Hester describes as a very beautiful woman with dark eyes. In the Second Chapter Hawthorne wrote:

The young woman was tall, with 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. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the dedication, evanescent, and indescribable grace which is now recognised as its indication. (Hawthorne,1994:45).

2.2 Arthur Dimmesdale

Dimmesdale is a religious man who commits adultery. He is a symbol of weakness, because he was trying to hide his sin. His sin is concealed from the town until the novel's final scaffold scene. He is weak in the sense that he attends Hester's punishment on the scaffold, but he could not reveal his sin, and makes Hester suffer alone and wear the scarlet letter A on her dress alone. Normally, he is obliged to wear the scarlet letter as Hester has done, because they share the same sin. However, Dimmesdale chooses to hide his guilt which leads him to suffer mentally and also he tortures himself by branding an A on his chest with a hot iron.

Dimmesdale is also a symbol of hypocrisy because he was broken the religious laws and committed the sin of adultery secretly, and we all know that adultery is forbidden in any religion and especially in the puritan religion, and the sinner must be punished severely.

2.3 Roger Chillingworth

Roger Chillingworth is Hester's husband who sends his wife before him to the puritan settlement, while he remains two years in Amsterdam looking after some necessary affairs. He is a symbol of devil and hell in which he returns on quest for revenge against Dimmesdale. He is a scholar who used his knowledge to discuss as a doctor, intent on discovering and tormenting Hester's anonymous lover. In order to take revenge for his wife, he took up residence with Dimmesdale.

Hence, here since the devil tries to damage and corrupt the most holy of humans, Chillingworth's secret act for revenge against a religious man makes him equal to the Satan himself because of his devilish operation.

2.4 Pearl

Pearl is the illegitimate child of Hester and Dimmesdale. She is the living

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personification of the secret letter "A" that her mother wears upon her chest.

Pearl is a symbol of childhood's innocence, because she is the only major character in the novel that does not know what the scarlet really means; this appears when Pearl shapes an A on her bosom. In the Fifteenth Chapter, Hawthorne writes, "..... Pearl took some eelgrass and imitated as best she could on her own bosom the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's. A letter-the letter "A"-but freshly green, instead of scarlet." (Hawthorne, 1994:151). Pearl is a pure innocent child who does not know anything. If she knew what the letter A means, she did not shape it on her bosom, she was only imitating her mother.

Pearl also symbolizes the intelligence; her acts suggest the intelligence which a child at her age cannot have. The example of Pearl's intelligence is that she asks strange questions that no one equal to her age can ask. She asks her mother, "What does the letter mean, mother?-and why dost thou wear it?- And why dost the minister keep his hand over his heart?" (Hawthorne, 1994:154).

Conclusion

After examining the symbols of the novel, it is clear that Hawthorne presents his attitude towards the rigid and the strict Puritan society; he used a lot of symbols, in order to express social and spiritual status at that time of his work, and to explain more his themes is sin and isolation. The present paper has focused more on the major ones and tried to explain their meanings in order to add an extra meaning to the novel which is mixed between different emotions and feelings towards the sinners and their society. In addition, He used symbolism in an intelligent way to express his beliefs and his own views on human nature and religion.

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