

A Pre-symbolic Struggle: Pearl's Subject-construction in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract—Being identified with the imaginary father to separate from the abject mother, Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* is finally able to construct her subject. This paper takes an excursion into Kristevan exploration of how Pearl's subjectivity develops. It also reveals and analyzes Pearl's bewilderment and dilemma in the process of her subject construction.

Index Terms—subjectivity, symbolic, semiotic, abjection

I. INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is widely regarded not only as a moral, cultural, and religious masterpiece, but also of prescient psychoanalytic insight. The psychoanalytic reading of the novel includes the classic Freudian reading by Frederick C. Crews in *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (1966), the Lacanian reading by James M. Mellard in "Nathaniel Hawthorne and Gender" (1989), and others. Hawthorne's romance "has become almost a paradigm for the psychological interpretation of other fiction." (Mellard, 2007, p. 66) In the late 1970s, Julia Kristeva, the French psychoanalyst, linguist, semiotician, began her psychoanalytic study. Drawing on both Freud and Lacan, modifying their view points, Kristeva walks out a complex and ambiguous road from a unique woman's perspective and does nonetheless provide a particular insightful model for analysis, though perhaps not more privileged nor prevail. This paper takes an excursion into Kristevan exploration of how Pearl's subjectivity develops in *The Scarlet Letter*. It also reveals and analyzes Pearl's bewilderment and dilemma in the process of her subject construction. The excursion starts with how Kristeva parts company with Lacan, and how Kristeva's theory radically expands on Lacan's.

II. THE SEMIOTIC CHORA: AN ENERGY ORIENTATION

Semiotic and chora are two fundamental concepts in Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory. According to her, when one attends to language within the signifying process, one may notice two ways or modes in which it operates: either as an expression of rational and explicit meaning, or as an imaginative re-creation of one's feeling and a discharge of inner drives. These two modes are respectively called *symbolic* and *semiotic*. Put it in another way, the symbolic means the communicative discourse, which includes the field of the sensible object. It is either a transparent representation or a clear idea. At the same time, the semiotic means the non-discursive nature of meaning and subjectivity, which embraces the less comprehensible: vague tone or unclear rhythm.

Chora is often used in conjunction with the concept of semiotic. Kristeva borrows the term from Plato's *Timaeus* to "denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25). Plato meant by the term the original space of the universe, while Kristeva seems to identify the concept to each particular person, indicating a specific individual's confusion before he or she develops a stable personal identity. She downplays the Platonic view of the chora as amorphous, formless, and completely shaped to whatever fills it, in favor of Plato's view of the chora as the caregiver or wet-nurse of any being. In such an early psychological space defined by Kristeva, the infant child experiences a great amount of inner drives or energy that might be rather disorienting and destructive, and it finds shelter by its relation with his or her mother's body. The notion "the semiotic chora" proposed by Kristeva reminds the reader that meaning is produced within the space of the chora. The semiotic chora is an emotional field, which opposes the symbolic. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the forest in which Pearl merrily runs and plays could be regarded as a symbol for a large chora. It signifies the pursuit to happiness, love, and nature. As a prosperous part of nature, it is wild and generous.

In this wise, Kristeva moves away from the father-centered structures Lacan and Freud rely on and suggests that the infant child starts to learn the laws of the symbolic not just from its father, but also from its mother at an earlier stage. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl, a child who solely knows her mother and nothing about her father, learns the ways of the symbolic from her mother Hester rather than her absent father. She is quite conscious about the fact that the only person she can rely on is her mother, when she exclaimed that "I am mother's child" (Hawthorne, 1984, p. 119) and "I have no heavenly father!" (p. 106) This is a fact that forces Pearl to rely on her mother. The child's energy could solely be oriented from Hester since there is no one else to take this role. The fact is consequently available in other situation. Insofar as the mother is the child's primary caregiver, the chora is a maternal space. The infant child orients its energy in relation to its mother, who has not become an "object" for the child's "subject". However, little Pearl is unconscious

about from whom would she derive her energy. In Lacan's terms, the child is in the imaginary realm; while in Freud's terms, the child is experiencing primary narcissism.

On the other hand, the mother is conscious about the caregiver and energy-spring role. Hester announces that she can teach the little girl what she has been taught by the scarlet letter. (p. 120) The mother provides an essential support to Pearl's subject development, despite of the absence of the child's father. Hester puts Pearl in the central position in her life, and she could notice every single change or development of the child. She could recognize Pearl's "wild, desperate, defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloudshapes of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart." (p. 98) As a mother, Hester knows her daughter quite well, thus she could provide the child with any comforts or encouragement she needs. Interestingly, the mother and the daughter have an inter-subjective communication. Pearl acquires energy and inner-drive from the maternal body, while Hester also realizes her lasting life in Pearl. Even Hester's spirit "was perpetuated in Pearl" (p. 98).

Freud distinguishes between primary narcissism, which is what the infant experiences in the chora (to use Kristeva's term) and secondary narcissism, which is "a withdrawal of the ego from the world of objects even after the ego has been constituted and taken love objects" (Oliver, 1993, p. 71). Kristeva develops Freud's notion that primary narcissism is a structure. In her theory, the narcissistic structure provides a way for the child to start incorporating and thus mimicking what is other to itself, even before it has a concept of a self-other distinction. In this structure, the infant child imagines that mother's "breast", which in fact is an "other", belongs to itself. In Hawthorne's novel, the mother's breast is replaced by the scarlet letter that is always on Hester's bosom as part of the maternal body. The fact that the milk-producing organs and the scarlet letter are in the same position on Hester's chest verifies this conclusion. The letter A has been recognized to embody various meanings, from Adulteress to Angel, from Admirable to Artist. It enables an infinite space for imagination and explanation. But for Pearl, the scarlet letter is exactly the very first thing that she has noticed, just the same as mother's breast, and the letter A is everywhere in her life. This explains why when Pearl becomes anxious and frustrated when the letter is discarded by Hester. The girl feels threatened by the possible disappearance of the shelter she is used to living in.

III. THE PRE-SYMBOLIC DIMENSION: AN ALWAYS COMPANION

Different from Lacan, whose distinction among the realms of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real are "too rigidly demarcated" (Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 26), Kristeva argues that the imaginary is not a lost territory. On the contrary, it continues to be discernible in the semiotic mode of signification, thus the pre-symbolic dimension is never out of range. This is a major difference between Kristeva and Lacan in their psychological contributions. To use Lacan's terms, "[t]he semiotic, ... corresponds to phenomena that for Lacan are in both the real and the imaginary" (Guberman ed., 1996, p. 23). The semiotic chora, with its affect-driven modes of signification, remains a companion in the process of signification. That is, as the infant child takes up the symbolic disposition, it does not leave the semiotic behind. The semiotic will remain a constant companion to the symbolic in all its communications. Moreover, in Kristeva's theory, the symbolic does not always take up the most prominent position. Rather, the semiotic is not only a restriction within which one's subject develops, but also composed of a specific poetic language. "[I]t tends to gain the upper hand at the expense of thethetic and predicative constraints of the ego's judging consciousness" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 34). The semiotic has a potential to take an advantageous position in a seemingly definite identity. It announces that the speaking subject is not a stable one. He or she is something or someone else: what Kristeva defines as a *subject in process*.

To define the self-contradict subject, Kristeva restricts it within the psychoanalytic field. She refuses to admit that it is unitary. "[T]he unitary subject discovered by psychoanalysis is only one moment, a time of arrest, a stasis, exceeded and threatened by this movement" (Kristeva, 1998, p. 134). Any unity is momentary, and every subject is in process. This notion emphasizes the mobility of the subject and ensures the companionship of the semiotic chora.

This subject in process explains Pearl's hazard behavior. In the novel, the girl would always laugh loudly once and once again, just like a creature that is incapable and ignorant to human sorrow. (Hawthorne, p. 100) As remarked by the scholar Chillingworth: "There is no law, nor reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that child's composition" (p. 145). "Law", "authority", these are typical keywords for the symbolic. Ignorant to the orderly world, Pearl is still a child, full of the semiotic power and representation. Pearl's communication with the wild animals, restless birdlike movement, and breaking constantly into shouts of a wild, incoherent, and sharp music are other examples. It seems that little Pearl is more proficient in communicating with the wild, even barbaric creatures than with the civilized people. As a smart and innocent girl, she is curious about the world, in which wild behaviors are regarded as being driven by devils. Even her mother Hester is frightened when she doubts that Pearl is an elf rather than her own daughter. In fact, the girl is just presenting her nature that is driven by the semiotic chora. Indeed, she is "wild" compared with the other children, but it is relative with the fact that she has been refused by the orderly society in the first place. Being regarded as a mark and product of evil, poor Pearl is banished from the world since she was born. An invisible circle has been around her to separate her from the other children. However, Pearl's harmonious relation with nature indicates that she is part of nature. She bravely expresses her strong emotion to every natural thing. She has lived her life with the companion of the semiotic, and she will always be a subject in process.

Moreover, Hester herself is a complex unity of diversified power, an adult child being accompanied by the semiotic

under the symbolic appearance. From a traditional romantic perspective, she is regarded as a heroine symbolizing an ideal to pursue individual freedom and independence. While from a gothic viewpoint, she is a solitary individual who is expelled from the society, being threatened constantly by an invisible and potential hurt. Such contrasting recognitions make the image of the mother a mysterious complex. It also provides a historical thread to explain the origin of Hester's strength. To a certain extent, the mysteriousness could be read from the semiotic. One's subject is always in process, which develops with the fighting and cooperation of the symbolic and semiotic. Hester's apparent symbolic and orderly behavior is and will be accompanied by the semiotic and non-discursive one throughout her life.

IV. ABJECTION: BEFORE THE BEGINNING

Apart from the distinction among the three realms, Kristeva disagrees with Lacan about the point in time when the infant child begins to realize the difference between itself and its mother. She agrees that the mirror stage may indeed bring about a sense of unity. Nonetheless, she believes that the infant child starts to realize the difference between "I" and other even before the mirror stage. It has already begun to distinguish itself and others to develop the border between "I" and other. She posits this break at an earlier moment than the mirror stage, when the infant child begins to eject from itself what it finds unpleasant. "I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself." (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3) To abject indicates to expel what is once part of oneself, and such process is called *abjection*. The content of abjection is radically expelled but never banished altogether. Similar with the semiotic dimension, abjection is not simply a repression. It haunts both in the consciousness and the unconsciousness, and remains a revolting strength to threaten one's seemingly stable self.

Abject is proposed on the basis of the distinction of the semiotic and the symbolic. It is termed for what threatens the boundaries between "I" and other thus threatens the subject. Because abject is neither subject nor object, leading to a place where meaning no longer exists and self collapses. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scene beside the brook in Chapter 19 has typically been quoted as a Lacanian mirror stage. When "(Pearl) peeped curiously into a pool, left by the retiring tide as a mirror for Pearl to see her face in" (Hawthorne, p. 183). The image, with the same face and curling hair, peeped back at Pearl out of the pool. The child felt being invited to enter the pool as a better place than the real world. "This image, so nearly identical with the living Pearl, seemed to communicate somewhat of its own shadowy and intangible quality to the child herself." (p. 227) The Lacanian readings regard the brook as a mirror, which is an opportunity for Pearl to know herself. When she sees that Hester discarded the scarlet letter, she refuses to come back until Hester wear it again. Pearl responds to the loss of the scarlet letter as if there is a fear of castration. However, in this famous and vital scene, the reader can easily find that at this moment, the other Pearl in the water has already become an "other", since Pearl held out her hand and invited to take the other girl's hand to run a race with her. She even communicates with the other girl by "flirting" with her. Pearl is eager to converse with this "other", which indicates the recognition of her "self". Her response afterward informs the fear of the loss of her mother. The situation becomes complicated in that on the one hand, Pearl is willing to identify the girl-image in the brook, on the other hand, she is reluctant to leave her mother behind. Her double-bind comes to a climax when she was "pointing her forefinger, first at the scarlet letter on her bosom, and then at the clergyman's own breast" (p. 159). She is willing to be identified with an "other", the imaginary father, but at the same time being in fear of the loss of her mother. The return of the letter makes her feel safe and erases her anxiety temporarily, for she cannot lose both at the same time.

The brook has no origin, just as Pearl know nothing about her father. Both of their lives are mysterious. Nonetheless, the most pointed case of abjection is the abject mother. The abjection first arises when the infant child is still in an imaginary union with its mother, before it has recognized its image in a mirror, and well before it begins to learn language and enter Lacan's symbolic realm. The infant child could not yet be regarded as a subject, even not quite yet on the boundary line of subjectivity. In order to get there, the child has to abject the mother's body, which is also the child's own origin. As Kelly Oliver (1993) writes, "The not-yet-subject with its not-yet, or no-longer, object maintains 'itself' as the abject" (p. 60). Abjection is nearly a way to expel the primary narcissistic identification with the mother.

The scarlet letter A is the symbol for the maternal body to little Pearl, as well as an object for abjection. She kisses it and decorates it to express her love to the letter. While on other occasions, she just hates it and attacks it. Here Pearl is in a dilemma. She longs for a narcissistic union with its first love and an urgency to renounce this union in order to become an independent subject. The same as the semiotic chora, this state of "maternal abjection" is an ever-lasting companion of consciousness. The infant child longs to draw back into the maternal chora with a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing her subjectivity. In order to become a subject, Pearl must renounce its identification with its mother; she must draw a line between herself and Hester. As Dimmesdale's peculiar fancy articulates: "this brook is the boundary between two worlds, and that thou canst never meet thy Pearl again." (Hawthorne, p. 227) Her Pearl back from the brook is no longer the original girl. The brook signifies the child's realization of otherness. But it is so difficult to identify her borders, for it was once in her and now here it is outside her.

V. THE IMAGINARY FATHER: THE IDENTIFICATION WITH ANOTHER

It is discussed in the first part that the infant child begins to comprehend the laws of the symbolic not only from its father but also from its mother, and the child relates its energy to its mother. In Freud's terms, the infant child is

experiencing primary narcissism. Kristeva develops Freud's later notion that it is a structure. In her theory, the narcissistic structure provides a way for the child to start incorporating and thus mimicking what is other to itself, even before it has a concept of a self-other distinction. This structure paves the way for the infant to become a subject in a signifying order. Kristeva draws both on Freud's idea of the "father of individual prehistory", and on the Lacanian notion that metaphor is one of the foremost mechanisms of the unconscious, to indicate what she calls *the imaginary father*. As John Lechte (1990) explains, the Imaginary Father is "the basis for the formation of a successful narcissistic structure" (p. 30). In the imaginary realm, while the child is beginning to lose its mother, it also begins to incorporate or identify with an imaginary father, a phantasm of the logic of identifying one thing with another. If the structure works successfully, the infant child will complete its separation from its mother while at the same time learning to use words to name what he has lost. "Primary identification initiates a compensation for the Thing and at the same time secures the subject to another dimension, that of imaginary adherence..." (Kristeva, 1989, pp. 13-14). The primary identification makes the subject believe that one object in the world could possibly stand in for another. Therefore the mother of both sound and image could be connected with a signified meaning. The primary identification gives the subject faith to believe that there will be consolation in the realm of signs.

Kristeva defined the pre-history father or pre-Oedipus father as pre-Oedipus mother. In that stage, the mother plays the role of both father and mother. The imaginary exists before the symbolic and the mirror stage. This symbol is not threatening. It is a combination of father and mother. Consequently, though regarded as an "other", the imaginary father is never opposite to the self. It is closer to the self, thus makes it rational to identify with it. During the process of Pearl's subject development, she is always longing for identification with her imaginary father in order to construct her subjectivity. Even when she was a poor baby, she "was affected by the same influence" with her imaginary father. (Hawthorne, p. 73) She stares vacantly at the minister, and held up its little arms with a murmur to him. Without self-consciousness, the child has already expressed her need and desire to hold a father. When Dimmesdale helps Hester defense her right to raise Pearl, Pearl takes his hand "in the grasp of both her own, laid her cheek against it; a caress so tender, and withal so unobtrusive" (p. 125). At this moment, even Hester the mother doubts whether it is Pearl or not. Both her restless inquiry to Dimmesdale about whether he will stay there with them for noontide the next day, and endless question on why he keep both hands over his heart express her desire to welcome and identify him with something other. From this perspective, the separation from the maternal body is not only a misery process, but also a delightful and desirous one. The infant child enters the society or language not only because of the father's threat, but also of his kindness.

Similar to Pearl, who deeply loves nature, Dimmesdale is a nature-enthusiast as well. Although he is somewhat afraid of their meeting in the forest, he is nonetheless longing for it. He even accepts Hester's suggestion to flee to the Britain, which testifies that he is also a father pursuing love and freedom. However, the appearance of the imaginary father in the brook scene is a misery to Pearl. Returning from her wandering, Pearl could not get back to her fertile and warm chora, even hardly knew her position. This either-or relationship with Dimmesdale confuses Pearl and traps her into dilemma. Besides, Hester refuses to tell the father's name, indicating a refusal to a father's authority in the family. Ignorance of the farther intensifies Pearl's dilemma. Until the last moment, when the scarlet letter appeared on Dimmesdale's chest, "Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken" (p. 279). The symbolic becomes the more powerful mode at this very moment.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Kristevan exploration of how Pearl's subjectivity develops in *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates the four developments Kristeva contributes to psychoanalytic approach based on Freud and Lacan. It also reveals and analyzes Pearl's bewilderment and dilemma in the process of her subject construction. Being identified with the imaginary father to separate from the abject mother, Pearl is finally able to construct her subject. Like everyone else, Pearl's subject is and will be always in process; unlike everyone else, Pearl has experienced a typical mother-oriented development with the absence of her father. However, this subjectivity will be an on-going pre-symbolic struggle since the semiotic and the abjection will be always companions throughout her whole life.

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