

A Brief Study on the Symbolic Meaning of the Main Characters' Name in *The Scarlet Letter*

Nan Lei
Yangtze University, China

Abstract—As a great romantic novelist in American literature in the 19th century and a central figure in the American Renaissance, Nathaniel Hawthorne is outstanding for his skillful employment of symbolism and powerful psychological insight. *The Scarlet Letter*, which is considered to be the greatest accomplishment of American short story and is often viewed as the first American symbolic and psychological novel, makes Nathaniel Hawthorne win incomparable position in American literature. With a brief introduction into *The Scarlet Letter* and a brief study on the two literary terms, i.e. symbol and symbolism, the paper attempts to expound Hawthorne's skillful employment of symbolism in his masterpiece through the analysis of the symbolic meaning of the main characters' name in this great novel.

Index Terms—*The Scarlet Letter*, symbol, symbolism, character, name

I. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO *THE SCARLET LETTER*

The Scarlet Letter is the masterpiece of Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the most significant and influential writers in American literature in the 19th century. It is also regarded as the first symbolic novel in American literature for Hawthorne's skillful use of symbolism and allegory. In the novel, the settings (the scarlet letter A, the prison, the scaffold, the rosebush, the forest, the sunshine and the brook) and the characters' images, words and names are all endowed with profound symbolic meaning by Hawthorne. It is the superb employment of symbolism that helps readers to probe into the colorful inner world as well as the spiritual conflicts of the main characters and makes the novel more artistic and successful.

The novel describes a love tragedy in the colonial times in Boston in the seventeenth century. An aging English scholar named Roger Chillingworth sends his beautiful young wife Hester Prynne to start their new life in New England. But when he arrives about two years later he is surprised to find his wife in pillory on the scaffold, holding a baby in her arms and wearing a scarlet letter on her breast. Disguising himself as a physician, Chillingworth discovers that the adulterer is Arthur Dimmesdale, the much-respected and brilliant young clergyman. Then Chillingworth begins his cruel revenge on the clergyman physically and mentally for seven years. Although Dimmesdale gets away from the punishment on the scaffold, he is condemned by his own conscience constantly and lives in utter misery. Gradually, Dimmesdale is worn out by the torture of the Puritan moral modes, his inner conflicts, his love for Hester and the ruthless revenge from Chillingworth. Different from Dimmesdale, Hester turns to be brave and positive toward the punishment and the scarlet letter A. Living in complete isolation from the community, Hester is determined to protect her lover's reputation and tries her best to reestablish her relationship with people in town on a friendly and honest basis. She works hard to support her daughter Pearl, gives her hand to people in need and finally regains respect, dignity and admiration. In the end, Dimmesdale dies in Hester's arms while confessing his sin and revealing a scarlet letter carved into his breast at a public gathering. Hester and Pearl leave Boston, Chillingworth withers quickly and dies afterwards. Years later, Hester comes back to Boston and is buried alongside Dimmesdale after her death.

II. AN ANALYSIS OF SYMBOL AND SYMBOLISM

As is mentioned above, symbolism is a striking feature of *The Scarlet Letter*, it runs through the whole novel and plays a very important role in it. The applying of symbolism in the novel revolves around not only the scarlet letter A, but also the natural settings as well as the main characters' images, names and words. It is no doubt that Nathaniel Hawthorne is the pioneer and master of symbolism, his unique gift for using this kind of writing skill taps into the roots of human's moral nature and gives vivid explanation of the implications in his works. As a frequently adopted writing skill in literature, symbolism makes literary works worthy of pondering and provides association and suggestions for thinking. When it comes to symbolism, we must mention another term symbol. These two terms are closely related to each other in literature, without symbol, symbolism may become meaningless and achieves nothing.

"A symbol is an object that represents, stands for or suggests an idea, visual image, belief, action or material entity. Symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures or visual images and are used to convey ideas and beliefs." (Campbell, 2002, P143) For instance, a lion is a symbol of courage, a wolf is a symbol of greed, pigeons are the symbol of peace, the bald eagle and the Statue of Liberty are the symbol of the United States, a red octagon may symbolize "stop", a red rose may symbolize love and passion, a picture of a tent on a map may represent a campsite, different

colors stand for different meanings and so forth. Symbol is different from sign, as sign just has one meaning. "Symbols are a means of complex communication that often can have multiple levels of meaning." (Womack, 2005, P125) To some extent, symbols reflect culture and are used to convey specific ideologies, social structures and different aspects of different cultures. That is to say, the true meaning of a symbol lies in the cultural background it belongs to. "Symbols are the basis of all human understanding and serve as vehicles of conception for all human knowledge." (Langer, 1953, P93) Symbols help us get a better understanding of the world we live in and guide us through the way we make judgments. When used in literary works, symbols can make the abstract concept more concrete and the complicated things plainer and simpler. Elaborate and skillful employment of symbols can create a kind of artistic conception of the literary works and enhance their expressiveness and artistic effect.

As a form of creative aesthetic, symbolism has a long history and can be dated back to the period of Plato. "Symbolism was largely a reaction against naturalism and realism, anti-idealistic styles which were attempts to represent reality in its gritty particularity, and to elevate the humble and the ordinary over the ideal. Symbolism was a reaction in favor of spirituality, the imagination and dreams." (Balakian, 1967, P217) Generally speaking, Symbolism is a unique artistic technique used to explain invisible things by using visible symbols and it aims to present the hidden things and inner thoughts through certain phenomenon. According to Chadwick Charles, symbolism can be defined as "the art of expressing ideas and emotions not by describing them directly, not by defining their overt comparisons with concrete images, but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are and by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols." (Chadwick, 1971, P82) Different from symbolism in art, symbolism in literature is a literary style that originates in France in the middle 19th century and spreads to other European countries in the 20th century. As an ideological trend and a core branch of the modernist literature, symbolism in literature covers widely and influences greatly. It seeks to discover the rational world hidden in nature and tries to create supernatural art via personal sensitivities and imaginations. Symbolists put great emphasis on men's inner feelings and personal phantom and attach primary importance to the use of image, hint, foil, contrast and association to creation. In addition, symbolism can achieve great success in harmonizing the concrete and the abstract by using colorful concrete objects to express the abstract theory.

III. THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS' NAME IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Nathaniel Hawthorne is known as the first American romantic writer who starts a new tradition, namely the Symbolism Romance, in American literature. As a great master and pioneer of symbolism, Nathaniel Hawthorne shows a strong tendency toward symbolism in his works. The application of symbolism makes his works exceed the narrow individual world and helps connect the subjective with the objective as well as reinforce and typify his individual experiences and thoughts. His ideological and artistic sense are best conveyed in his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*, which is considered to be the first American Symbolic novel. In the novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne makes full use of symbols to express personal inner emotions, disclose the novel's theme and reveal social reality, etc. Throughout the whole novel, symbolism plays a decisive role and nearly everything is endowed with deep symbolic significance, such as the scarlet letter A, the natural setting and the main character's name, etc. The paper offers a brief analysis of the symbolic meaning of the three main characters' name intending to reveal the inherent connection between the characters and the theme of the novel.

A. *The Symbolic Meaning of Hester Prynne*

Hester Prynne is one of the most important characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne expresses his love and attention to Hester by giving her this special name. First, "Hester" sounds like "Hestia", the beautiful virgin goddess of the hearth, architecture, and the right ordering of domesticity, the family and the state in Greek mythology. Hawthorne describes Hester in the novel like this: "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. She was ladylike.....characterized by a certain state and dignity....." (Hawthorne, 2001, P41) From these words, readers can know that in Hawthorne's eyes Hester is as beautiful as a goddess. Hearth always gives people a feeling of warmth, so does Hester. When isolated from the community, Hester makes a living and raises her daughter on her own. Despite the poverty and hardship of life, Hester is still willing to help those who are in need, which brings warmth and sunshine to that indifferent and dark society. The essence of a goddess is also demonstrated in Hester's refusal to reveal her lover's identity, her willingness to endure all the punishments and her courage to protect the reputation of her beloved man. Therefore, just as her name is, Hester is really a charming woman with beautiful appearance, kind heart, diligence, competence and courage.

In addition, "Hester" is the variant of "Esther", a Jewish queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus. As a queen, not only is Esther beautiful, but also she is smart and capable, she tries her best to protect her people from massacre and bring welfare to them. The life of Esther is a story of exile and empowerment, in which she evolves into someone who plays a decisive role in both her and her people's future. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is also exiled by the puritans because of her adultery. Instead of leaving New England, Hester stays to take the cruel punishment and tries to atone for her sin through beneficence. Esther has been interpreted as a model for marginalized groups and a post-feminist icon. Hester is

also a soldier who challenges and defies the puritan society in her own way. At the end of the novel, people in town come to respect Hester and think of the scarlet letter as a “cross on a bosom”, which explains that Hester surmounts herself and becomes a great woman with noble qualities.

What’s more, “Hester” bears a degree of resemblance to the word “hasty” both in form and in pronunciation. The dictionary meaning of “hasty”, acting or deciding too quickly, without enough thought, is an appropriate explanation for Hester’s reckless behavior. Hester’s marriage to Roger Chillingworth is an action without due thought and it has nothing to do with love. The combination of a beautiful, passionate, young wife and an ugly, indifferent, old husband who puts all his energy into learning and researching is definitely a strong contradiction and inevitably indicates tragedy. To some extent, Hester’s haste in her marriage has a great negative influence on her later life. Then Hester’s falling in love with Dimmesdale and giving birth to Pearl once again illustrate the “hasty” elements in her character. Due to lack of exact news from her missing husband and long time’s suffering from the abnormal marriage, Hester can’t restrain her desire for the handsome, promising, respectable young clergyman and commits the so-called sin of adultery. Hester’s reckless but deep love for Dimmesdale shoots an arrow into her tragic destiny and forces her to start the miserable life of expiation with a scarlet letter on her breast. It’s obvious that Hawthorne chooses the heroine’s name with great deliberation which makes the character become alive and vivid.

The heroine’s surname “Prynne” also conveys certain symbolic meaning. First, “Prynne” is related to the word “prurient”, which means having or showing excessive interest in sexual matters. Lacking mutual understanding and affection for each other in marriage, Hester is restrained in sexual matters and falls for Dimmesdale quickly. In this sense, “Prynne” reveals Hester’s sin of adultery. Second, “Prynne” sounds like “prune”, a word with the meaning of “cut out parts of something and purify”. For seven years, Hester tries hard to “cut out” her sin and to “purify” her soul through hard work and beneficence. Third, “pry”, the first syllable of “Prynne” reflects Hawthorne’s intention to probe into the essence of human evil, which is one of the main themes of the novel.

To sum up, “Hester Prynne” implies the symbolic meaning of beauty, indiscretion, competence, courage, diligence, passion, desire, the purification of human souls and the exploration of human nature. Among the listed symbolic meaning, beauty is Hester’s outward appearance, passion and indiscretion is her personality, desire reflects her evil, i.e. the adultery. Meanwhile, purification of human souls is the moral behavior which Hawthorne advocates, and the exploration of human nature and evil reveals the theme of the great novel.

B. *The Symbolic Meaning of Arthur Dimmesdale*

Arthur Dimmesdale is another important character in *The Scarlet Letter*, to whom Hawthorne puts much more attention. The description of Dimmesdale’s psychological conflicts reveals Hawthorne’s standpoint of human inner conflicts and dilemma as well as his ambiguous attitude towards Puritanism. The symbolic meaning of the name Arthur Dimmesdale is obvious.

First, “Arthur” is similar to “author” in pronunciation, which indicates that he is a man of profound learning and thinking. Graduated from a famous university in England, Arthur Dimmesdale is a holy clergyman with great religious accomplishment and high social status. His parishioners turn to him for guidance and direction, and in their mind he is a perfect model and almost sinless. Then, readers may tend to associate “Arthur” with “Adam”, the first human who commits the “original sin”. As is written in the Holy Bible, Adam and Eve, yielding way to the temptation of the serpent, eat the fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the Garden of Eden. After that, their eyes are opened and they begin to have self-consciousness and come to know good, evil, sex and other things. As a result, God punishes them and drives them out of the Garden of Eden. Just like Adam, Arthur also can not resist the temptation of love and desire, he falls in love with Hester quickly and commits the so-called adultery. What’s more, careful readers may find that the initials of “Arthur Dimmesdale” are “A” and “D”, which may be viewed as the abbreviation of the word “adultery”. Apparently, Hawthorne intends to tell his readers who are the hidden sinner in this disgraceful love affair at the very beginning of the novel.

“Dimmesdale”, the surname of this young clergyman also conveys a lot. The first syllable of the word “Dimmesdale” is “dim”, which means not bright, hopeful or good, and the last syllable “dale” has the meaning of “valley”. People always tend to draw an analogy between human mind and valley. That is to say, “dim dale” stands for Dimmesdale’s dark and hopeless inner world. He has to hide his deep love for Hester and Pearl in his heart. Hester’s suffering from the sin they have committed makes Dimmesdale live in a state of the worst agonies, but he lacks the courage of making a public confession about his sin because of his cowardice and vanity. And the behavior of concealing the sin definitely adds great mental agony to Dimmesdale. For seven years, he suffers from severe disease and the tortures of his troubled soul. He even carves onto his own chest a scarlet letter A, the symbol of hidden and unforgivable sin. Finally, near the very end of his life, he overcomes himself and gathers all the courage to confess his sin in public, exposing the previously hidden scarlet letter on his breast. He earns people’s forgiveness and escapes external damnation from his soul at the expense of his life.

Therefore, the symbolic meaning of “Arthur Dimmesdale” is “a man who has committed adultery conceals his sin in his dark inner world because of his cowardice and vanity”. At the same time, through “Arthur”, Hawthorne intends to convey the information that the sin Dimmesdale committed is not the disgraceful adultery in people’s mind but the forgivable original sin. What deserves to be mentioned is that

Arthur Dimmesdale finally triumphs over his cowardice and hypocrisy, escapes from his dark hopeless inner world

and makes a public confession of his sin, which once again indicates that good will always triumphs over evil in the end.

C. *The Symbolic Meaning of Roger Chillingworth*

As a “crazy avenger”, Roger Chillingworth is marked as a bad character, a cruel devil and an absolute villain in *The Scarlet Letter*. And actually, the name “Roger Chillingworth” contains the symbolic meaning of the character’s wickedness.

In the first place, there is some similarity between the form of “Roger” and the word “rogue”, which refers to dishonest or unprincipled man. Being Hester’s husband, Roger puts all his energy and time into learning and researching, totally ignoring his beautiful young wife’s feeling and life. Old and ugly as he is, he intends to cover up his physical deformity through the veil of his intellectual talents. The reason of his marrying to Hester has nothing to do with love, he just wants to “light a household fire in his lonely and chilly heart.” (Hawthorne, 2001, P60) To some extent, Roger Chillingworth’s ill intention in this abnormal marriage is the indirect source of Hester’s tragedy. Secondly, “Roger” may remind people of the “Jolly Roger”, the traditional English name for the flags flown to identify a pirate ship about to attack during the early 18th century. With the skull and crossbones symbol on it, the black flag is now most commonly identified as the Jolly Roger. As is known to all, pirates are always characterized by revenge and hunting for treasure. So does Roger Chillingworth. After knowing his wife’s betrayal, he dedicates all his time and energy to seeking revenge and hunting for “treasure”, which is not the precious things like gold, silver, pearls or jewels, but the deep-hidden secret in Arthur Dimmesdale’s heart. Hawthorne describes the physician’s action of hunting for “treasure” like this: “He now dug into the poor clergyman’s heart like a miner searching for gold; or, rather, like a sexton delving into a grave, possibly in quest of a jewel that had been buried on the dead man’s bosom.....He groped along as stealthily, with as cautious a tread, and as wary an outlook, as a thief entering a chamber where a man lies only half asleep—or, it may be, broad awake—with purpose to steal the very treasure which this man guards as the apple of his eye.” (Hawthorne, 2001, P108)

The surname “Chillingworth” is made up of two words, i.e. chilling and worth. The word “chilling” means frightening, usually because it is connected with something violent or cruel. The words like frightening, violent and cruel are the best description of Roger Chillingworth. On the other hand, “chilling” is derived from “chilly”, a word with the meaning of “too cold to be comfortable, not friendly”. Roger Chillingworth is too cold and of course unfriendly, outwardly he is mild-tempered, but inwardly he is a merciless avenger with all the evil intentions. Disguising himself as a physician and a friend worthy of trust, he follows Dimmesdale wherever he goes and cruelly digs into the clergyman’s inner world. Just like a ferocious wolf, he “dissects” the painful heart of the poor lamb Dimmesdale, and causes severe harm to the clergyman physically and psychologically. When the physician finally catches sight of the scarlet letter “A” on the bosom of the minister, he is as excited as a pirate who has found the hidden treasure after countless hardships. At that moment of great happiness the physician shows “a wild look of wonder, joy and horror” (Hawthorne, 2001, P116) and he has to “throw up his arms towards the ceiling and stamp his foot upon the floor” (Hawthorne, 2001, P116) to express his ecstasy. Hawthorne then makes the following conclusion: “Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom.” (Hawthorne, 2001, P116) By using the word “worth” in the name “Chillingworth”, Hawthorne intends to imply that the physician’s life is totally worthless. In order to seek revenge on the clergyman, Chillingworth gives up his identity and goes to great lengths to cause physical and mental suffering to Dimmesdale. Chillingworth “had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge” (Hawthorne, 2001, P223) and when “there was no more Devil’s work on earth for him to do” (Hawthorne, 2001, P224), “all his strength and energy—all his vital and intellectual force—seemed at once to desert him, insomuch that he positively withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun.” (Hawthorne, 2001, P223) The decease of Chillingworth comes after Dimmesdale’s death a year later. Without revenge and hatred, Chillingworth finds life meaningless, which is a powerful illustration of his worthless life.

In a word, the symbolic meaning of “Roger Chillingworth” is a combination of revenge, rouge, pirate, indifference and cruelty. Being a wicked man full of all evil, he is hateful and totally worthless.

IV. CONCLUSION

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne successfully applies Greek mythology, biblical allusions, words initials, implications of words and similar words in form or pronunciation to name the three main characters: Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, which makes these names full of symbolic significance. The three names are not only an exact summarization of the characters’ image, personality and inner world, but also are the hint of the plot and the reflection on the theme of the novel. The symbolic meanings conveyed by these names become more effective and vivid because they are so natural and profound. While exposing the main characters’ spiritual world, the symbolic meaning of the names also expresses Nathaniel Hawthorne’s superb craftsmanship and his powerful psychological insight into the guilt and anxiety of human soul as well as his conflicting views on the world and Puritanism. At the same time, readers are left to use their fertile imagination to get the charm and inner feelings of the characters. It is the use of symbolism by Nathaniel Hawthorne that makes this novel outweigh the plain words and

convey profound significant implication and it is the colorful symbols that help develop the depth of the novel.

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Nan Lei was born in Jingzhou, China. She received her Master's degree in English Languages and Literature from Wuhan University of Technology, China in 2010. She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, China. Her research interests include language teaching and American literature.