

Ambiguous Hawthorne, Symbolic Pearl

—An Analysis on Pearl's Symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract—The writing device ambiguity is used frequently throughout Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Critics and readers have given many different interpretations of the novel which eventually leads to the study of Hawthorne's perplexed ambiguity and character symbolism. Ambiguity is one of the features of this literary and artistic creation, symbol is images or objects that suggest or refer to something else. Symbolism is the use of symbols to represent things, especially in art and literature. Ambiguity can be achieved by symbolism. Hawthorne is extremely ambiguous regarding the child, Pearl, who is never plainly angelic or devilish. Pearl's artistic effect of ambiguity is achieved by her symbolism of truth, symbolism of grace, symbolism of the New World, and individuality. Hawthorne's ambiguous writing device is enhanced by the symbols of Pearl.

Keywords— ambiguity, Hawthorne, symbol, Pearl

I. INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* has been generally rated as his representative best. It is essentially a story of sin and punishment. It tells of the disgrace of a woman with an imp-like child who has broken scriptural and statutory law in a community governed by patriarchy and the Puritan system. This novel has enjoyed a continued popularity.

Critics have employed different types of approaches to analyze the novel, among which are the historical approach, biographical approach, feminist approach, and reader-response approach. Also, readers have proposed their own interpretations of the novel. Although the novel is popular, it creates some confusion among both critics and readers, especially Chinese readers who are not used to open-ended questions or answers. They feel puzzled in understanding, Hawthorne's use of the device of ambiguity, which is called "multiple choices" by some critics. Readers are also puzzled about the characters' symbolism generated by ambiguity.

Although many critics frequently touch upon the issue of ambiguity in *The Scarlet Letter*, few of them seem to have regarded it as an individual subject or dealt with it systematically, especially Pearl's ambiguity and symbolism. This paper, therefore, makes a tentative study of Hawthorne's use of ambiguity and Pearl's symbolism in the novel.

First, the general definition of ambiguity, symbolism is given, and the connection between the two is analyzed. Then, Hawthorne's use of ambiguity in Pearl's character is examined which leads to an evaluation of Pearl's symbolism due to the ambiguity. Readers will see how Hawthorne forces his readers to interpret Pearl's symbolism for them.

A. The definition of "ambiguity"

In ordinary usage "ambiguity" is the presence of more than one meaning; that is, the use of a vague or equivocal expression when what is wanted is precision and particularity of reference. Since William Empson published *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), the term has been widely used in criticism. Multiple meanings and plurisignation are alternative terms for this word.[2] As a writing device, ambiguity is the expression of an idea that enriches the work with multiple possibilities and is characterized by uncertainty and confusion and conflicting or contradictory feelings or attitudes.

In the novel, the multiple images of the little girl, Pearl, are very ambiguous, conflicting and contradictory. Pearl is ostracized by the society; her unavoidable seclusion is due to her mother's sin. Pearl is always different somehow. She is the living embodiment of the letter, a constant reminder of Hester and Dimmesdale's sin. Pearl is also the great treasure of Hester costing her tears and her reputation to get this baby. Pearl is also evil yet pure. She grows positively terrible "in her puny wrath, snatching up stones to fling at them, with shrill, incoherent exclamations that made her mother tremble, because they had so much the sound of a witch's anathemas in some unknown tongue." [5] But she is well accepted in the forest, which is the home of the "Black Man" or the representative of evil. Pearl is also wild yet tame. She injures a tiny bird as she flings pebbles at a flock; she loves to broadcast her dragon teeth which symbolize hostile enemies. She fits with the wild things, and they seem to accept her. She is the representative of wildness, as Hawthorne says. She is yet tame under Hawthorne's pen. She has bird-like voice. When she drives the little puritans away, usually she returns quietly to her mother, and looking up, smiling in her face, her smiling is gentle and self-satisfaction. When Hester punishes her, she usually sobs asking her mother's pardon. [5]

In these cases, Hawthorne leaves the readers to draw conclusion about what is or isn't true. As said by Jerry J. Dibble, "Hawthorne's method of narration gives him the best of two worlds. He is somewhat like the trial lawyer who

withdraws a telling remark upon the judge's objection, but knows that the implications of his remark will remain in the minds of the jury members." [4]

B. The definition of "symbolism"

A symbol is anything which signifies something else. In discussing literary works, it is applied to "an object or event which signifies something else, or has a range of references, beyond itself." Some symbols are prevalent or commonplace. For example, the rising sun symbolizes birth, the setting sun represents death, a rose symbolizes love, and a peacock is associated with pride.

Some writers repeatedly use symbols generated by themselves, and this originality poses a more difficult problem in interpretation. Hawthorne is one such author who employs uniqueness in creating symbols for his works.

The first character to be discussed on much symbolism is Hester. Being gifted for needlework, Hester's embroidery with her ability for charitable work not only allows her to make a living, but they also serve to earn her a good reputation, the Letter A means "Able", some people refuse to recognize A as its original signification. The symbol is also compared to "the cross on a nun's bosom." [5] Instead, "they" say "that it" means "Able". [5] For another example, in the last part of the novel, people have different views about the letter on the dead minister's chest, that is, Letter A has symbols. Some people regard the letter as the light of redemption, some deem it to be deep memory in Priest's mind, some think Pearl is the live Letter A in the Priest's chest. As other examples, the scaffold is the symbol of the stern Puritan code, it is also the rosebush is the symbol of the open acknowledgement of personal sin. [8] The brook in the forest is also symbolic in many ways. It means Pearl's unclear origin because Pearl has been asking the brook its source. For its mournful babbles, it becomes a symbol of a kind of sorrowful history. Because of Pearl's refusal to cross the brook to join her father and mother, it becomes a symbol of "boundary between two worlds." [5]

Hawthorne's ambiguity is one of the features of his art. This technique of multiple views applied in *The Scarlet Letter* offers a good illustration of different characters, especially Pearl.

C. Connection Between Ambiguity and Symbolism

Hawthorne's ambiguity is used all throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. He suggests that an incident may have happened in one way or another. The scarlet letter "A" clearly is ambiguous, it is not a definite symbol which means "Adultery", it is also a symbol of "Able" or "angel". This kind of symbols is easy to find. For example, when discussing the importance of Hester's conversation with Mistress Hibbins, Hawthorne describes it in this way, "...if we suppose this interview ...to be authentic, and not parable." [5] When depicting the letter A in Chapter 12, Hawthorne states, "We impart it...that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter, ---the letter A, ---marked out in lines of dull red light." [5] In Chapter 18, Hawthorne tells how the forest animals befriended Pearl, "A wolf, it is said, ---but here the tale has surely lapsed into the improbable, ---came up and smelt of Pearl's robe and offered his savage head to be patted

by her hand" [5] Also in Chapter 20, Hawthorne notes doubtfully, "...if it were a real incident" to recount Dimmesdale's interview with Mistress Hibbins. Critics may find the most striking use of the multiple choices comes from Chapter 24, where Hawthorne lists various interpretations about Dimmesdale's final actions and the scarlet letter 'A' on his chest. Some observers even assert that there was no letter. [5]

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's description of characters is multi-dimensional. Dimmesdale is the symbol of thought-provoking but hypocritical; Chillingworth is the symbol of the wronged yet demonic; Hester is passionate but the symbol of adulterous sin. The characters Hawthorne writes about in this novel are neither plainly devilish nor angelic. The different perspectives from which they are seen by different critics or readers make the characters more symbolic.

II. HAWTHORNE'S AMBIGUITY TO SYMBOLIC PEARL

Nathaniel Hawthorne comments about Shakespeare's plays as "surface beneath surface, to an immeasurable depth" [8], but it applies equally well to his own masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. [3]

Hawthorne often writes with dual ambiguity, which means he gives readers more than one or two interpretations, that is, different symbols, allowing the readers to make their own conclusions.

The child image Pearl's symbol is more ambiguous than other characters in the novel. In commonplace Pearl is to be understood as a symbol for Hester's sin, the living embodiment of the scarlet letter. Pearl perhaps is Hawthorne's nicest poetical work, and is the very perfection of ideal impishness. Pearl is also the symbol of sun shining in the darkness of the community.

Little Pearl is described by Hawthorne as a gem of the purest water. If perfect truth to childish and human nature can make her a mortal, she is so; and immortal, if the highest creation of genius has any claim to immortality. No matter what light Hawthorne throws at her, from his magical prism, she retains her perfect and vivid human individuality. When he would like readers to call her elvish and imp-like, they persist in seeing only a capricious, roguish, untamed child such as many mothers have looked upon with awe, and the feeling of helpless incapacity. Hawthorne's ambiguity can be achieved by Pearl's different symbols.

III. THE SYMBOLISM OF PEARL IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Hawthorne employs his ambiguous writing skill to create strong symbols and vivid images for the readers throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. One of the most complex symbols in the novel is Pearl. Pearl is Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale's illegal child. After Hester's adultery act, she became pregnant with a baby girl who the mother gave her the name Pearl. Form the first sight we know Pearl in the book, we feel she is strange and unnatural. Pearl behaves very differently from others in Boston in that she appears to be more vibrant. Her dress displays in different fashions, her moods shift frequently. Her behavior is mischievous

occasionally, her liveliness is striking constantly. She is a dynamic symbol, always changing to symbolize many different elements.

A. Pearl as a symbol of truth

Like many tragedies, *The Scarlet Letter* deals with the quest for truth and revelation of secrets. Whose child is Pearl? Chillingworth wants to find out the truth; Dimmesdale wants to conceal the truth; Hester wants to grasp the truth. In this novel, the quest for truth is an effort to know Pearl. As readers recognize, Pearl is the true scarlet letter. No matter where Hester is, she follows her mother. Pearl is the truth of Hester's sin. As the visible embodiment of truth about the particular sin, Pearl becomes by extension the universal truth about the Original sin. Both character and type, both nature and premature, Pearl is in time and outside of the truth. She runs after the little animals, she screams around the seaside, she watches her reflections in the forest brook, what she shows is her true nature, no lies, no fake. We are informed by the author that "the soul beheld its features in the mirror of the passing moment"[5] As a growing child, Pearl serves as an index of the passing time in the novel; as a symbol she indicates that truth cannot be perceived outside its temporal context. [3]

B. Pearl as a symbol of grace

Hawthorne gives the little girl a beautiful face, dark eyes, graceful figure, and flexible body. Every motion, every gesture, every feature, every word, every shout, and every naughty scream and wild laugh makes a striking impression on readers.

Pearl's full significance emerges only when she has some connection with other characters or different environments, but her role of 'native grace' is worth mentioning. [3] In naming her, Hester identifies the child as a pearl of great price, a woman's grace, a woman's reputation. In Christianity, grace is the gift that God gives, not because humans deserve it, but because God wants to give it. Pearl as a gem is a silvery-white of lustrous mass that forms inside the shells of some oysters which suffers from the brush of the sea and of great value. Pearl as an ornament shows Hester's grace. Pearl as a name is the symbol of grace. In addition Pearl's attire, and her very being thus sum up the grace of human existence. Hester is an excellent tailor, she uses her skill supporting the family. The rich people always ask her to their home to tailor the clothes for them. As Hester's apple of love, Pearl has been dressing in fashion. As described in the novel, Pearl has the grace of princess. Her mother uses the scarlet velvet to tailor, to embroider with silver threads. In that gloomy house, Pearl is a graceful spirit, "worthy to have been brought forth in Eden; worthy to have been left there, to be the plaything of angels, after the world's first parents were driven out." Hawthorne writes in chapter 5 Intelligence Office.

C. Pearl as a symbol of liveliness in the New World

At the beginning of the novel, the literary flavor is gloomy and somber like the nasty prison cell. However, beside the door of the prison grew a charming bunch of fragrant wild roses. Hawthorne ambiguously uses them as a symbol for Pearl. She lightens up Hester's grey life and eases the stiff

atmosphere of the novel. Pearl's laughter encourages her mother's humble life, and she also brings vitality and energy to the dark, pale Boston. Hawthorne lived in a time when the American capitalist economy was developing rapidly and the American dream of freedom and independence was being realized. Hawthorne succeeds in realizing a character embodying the authentic American freedom and independence. [1]

Hester is the victim of the Old World. She is eager to be free and independent, but being suppressive. She is the representative of being suppressed in the Old World. Even if Hester wants to embody the New World, her sin is certain. Pearl is the rebirth of Hester. Hawthorne wants Pearl to find and re-establish something new in this world, that is liveliness, something free, something independent.

As a symbol of guilt, Chillingworth is a leech. We are in a position to understand why Hawthorne makes Pearl "the richest heiress in her day, in the new world." Allegorically, the death of Chillingworth would automatically bequeath a massive legacy to Pearl. But the matter is not that simple. In the final pillory scene, Pearl suddenly becomes humanized. As Dimmesdale ascends, she moves down from her allegorical function and into fully temporal existence. She transforms, as it were, from her preternatural in the spiritual realm to the social world, whose basic element is money. Hawthorne returns her to the Old World with the fortune from the New World, giving her a solid social standing which makes Pearl establish a New World. With the foundation of money, Pearl is much easier to get the goal to freedom and independence in the New World.

As Henry James Jr. said, "the thing was absolutely American; it belonged to the soil, to the air; it came out of the very heart of New England." [6]

D. Pearl as a symbol of individuality

Hawthorne is a true artist who lived for nearly 50 years in his own native country and daily hoped to express what American life means. When Hawthorne first saw Europe in his late forties, he couldn't reconcile his state to the superbly unconscious nuditities of the sculptures and paintings. Of all the American literary masters, he is the most indigenous and the least imitative. The circumstances of his social life combined with the sensitiveness to his nature to make his individuality indigenous. He is individual, deeply characterized by the New England that contained his life.

Hawthorne is a native of this new world that has been so starved of antiquity. American literature needs a new and fresh character that represents individuality. Pearl is the only character who represents individuality.

Pearl has her own vigorous individuality. She fears nothing. In Chapter 7, the Puritan children have nothing interesting to play, so they insulate Hester for amusement. Pearl stamps her foot, shakes her hands, and makes a rush to her enemies. In Chapter 10, little Pearl and Hester pass along a footpath that traverses the graveyard enclosure. Pearl skips irreverently from one grave to another, and she began to dance upon it. She is not frightened of the restraints from her mother. Actually, "fear nothing" is a kind of American spirit of individuality, it

encourages Americans to seek for freedom and independence.
[7]

IV. CONCLUSION

Hawthorne himself was “the obscurest man of letters in America.” Hawthorne tactfully creates an atmosphere of ambiguity that causes readers difficulty when interpreting the different symbols in the novel.

Hawthorne is skillful at employing ambiguity to describe his characters. This ambiguity is achieved by symbolism of character Pearl. Emerson complained that Hawthorne invites his readers too much into his study. His ambiguous symbolism in Pearl is obvious to most critics and readers. Hawthorne gives his readers and critics a chance to express their own opinion on what Pearl really stands for. Some readers think she symbolizes evilness, some critics think she symbolizes purity, and some think she symbolizes treasure. In this article, Pearl is the symbol of grace not only because of her clothes but of her behavior; Pearl is the symbol of truth not only because of her origin but of her nature; Pearl is the symbol of liveliness not only because of her rebirth from Hester but of her fortune; Pearl is the symbol of individuality not only because of her native but of her freedom. In conclusion, Hawthorne’s portrayal of Pearl is quite ambiguous; the ambiguity is attained by different symbols. Praise or not, it is no doubt that it is the introspection demanded by Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* which is brought about by using ambiguity and the interpretation of symbolism makes it a masterpiece.

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