The Function of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*

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ABSTRACT

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl is not only a specific symbolic object, but also the reflection of the author’s thought. It shows the author’s propounding ideas towards love and life. Though in such a rigorous Puritan society, young woman and man struggle for love and survive from it and live for it. So Pearl reflects the author’s romantic love because Pearl is God’s blessing; no one dares to say Pearl is a sin in God’s eyes. This article gives an exploration into the function of the little girl Pearl. She has different meanings to different characters.

KEYWORDS

Pearl, function, blessing

INTRODUCTION

The novel tells a story that happened in Boston in the seventeenth century. During this period, Puritanism dominates people’s thought. The young heroine Hester Prynne, who was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance or a large scale, is discovered of the sin of adultery. She does not reveal the name of her child’s father, because she loves Dimmesdale deeply, at the same time she considers Pearl as her treasure or love fruit between Dimmesdale and her. In accordance with the current Puritan moral law, she is sentenced to an unusual punishment of wearing the scarlet letter “A”, with the birth of Pearl, which stands for adultery on her bosom the rest of her life. So Hester is ridiculed and humiliated by the whole society with the appearance of her beloved Pearl. Pearl is a visible tie that united Hester Prynne, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale closely from the beginning to the end.

A VISIBLE TIE

As described in Chapter two, when Hester Prynne is brought from jail to the town’s public square, all the people, men and women, old and young are talking about her symbol of shame, the scarlet letter and cursing her sin. She probably undergoes an agony from every footstep of those thronged to see her, as if her heart has been flung into the street for them to spurn and trample upon. Then she is punished to stand on the platform of the scaffold for three hours. Can you imagine such a picture, a lonely woman standing on the scaffold, with a symbol of shame of the scarlet letter “A” on her bosom, with spectators all around her, with infant threatens lingering to her ears? Even at that moment, she does not tell who her lover is “I might endure his agony, as well as mine”.

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From then on, Hester Prynne has to keep herself aloof from the society. She moves to a small cottage on the outskirt of the town and lives with her child along. The treatment of Hester reaches a low point. She is tormented with the letter which she endures all the time. The torture comes not only from the outer society, but also from her daughter. Sometimes the infant puts up her little hand grasping at the letter, Hester would grasp for breath, clutched the fatal token, and instinctively endeavors to tear it away, because Pearl’s behavior makes Hester feel suffocated. She can’t get rid of this feeling since the appearance of Pearl. Hester has never felt a moment’s safety except when the child is asleep. When Pearl grows big enough, once she gathers handful of wild flowers to fling them one by one at her mother’s bosom. Flowers invariably hit the mark and covering the mother’s breast with hurts for which she could find no balm in this world, nor know how to seek it in another.

Although Hester Prynne must be accompanied by the scarlet letter “A” and has to endure the suffering all the time, she never yields to the harsh society. She despises the token in her own way. When Pearl was born, Hester embroiders the letter “A” in fine red cloth and surrounds it with gold thread. Her skill at needlework is shown in the scarlet letter, by wearing it as a gorgeous decoration rather than a symbol of shame. She lives simply with the exception that she creates amazing dresses of fine fabrics for Pearl. Hester’s attitude towards the child shows her strong resistance to the Puritan morality and loyalty to genuine love. Hester spends her time working on the projects and taking care of the child, which bring in her income, and devotes the remainder of her work to create garments for the poor. Although she is treated so poorly that preachers often stop in the street and start to deliver a lecture as she walks by, she still appears among them and devotes herself to helping at the poor and the sick. Hester’s nature showed itself warm and rich, a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Hester’s reputation has changed over the seven years since she had Pearl.

To Dimmesdale, Hester’s lover, little Pearl’s father, Pearl stands for his hidden guilt and his shame of not daring to take the responsibility. The young clergyman, because of his fame and position, dares not to declare his relationship with Hester Prynne and Pearl. Instead, he is together with the town’s governor and magistrate to denounce her. According to the viewpoint of the Puritan morality, man must be a loyal believer or an honest penitent. So he doesn’t dare to admit the relationship with Hester. Pearl makes him sink into the deep pit of sin. The sense of guilt tortures him and he can never escape. He is so overwhelmed with shame and remorse that he has started to become famous for his sermons. His ability as a speaker is enhanced by the fact that he feels far more sinful than many in his audience. He has even tried his congregation about the sin he committed with Hester, but always in such a way that they think he is secret. Whenever he sees Pearl, Pearl has an indifferent attitude towards his father, he feels great painful not only as a pastor but also as a father. So he finally gets into the permanent habit of placing his hand over his heart, which makes Pearl always wonder why he does so, maybe it has the same meaning with his mother. This means that the girl tortures him whenever he sees her. Pearl is an awful symbol, which has the effect of the ever-active tooth of remorse. Gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly.

Pearl can also be regarded as the impetus for the clergyman to reveal his guilt and unburden his soul. After he delivers his most eloquent and inspiring speech, he walks to the scaffold where seven years before Hester Prynne had received her sentence. He
calls Hester and Pearl to come to him on the platform, confesses his sin and acknowledges hidden scarlet letter to the public. He dies then in Hester’s arm. His soul and his body of innumerable bruise have eventually sublimated, Dimmesdale has fulfilled his process of saving himself at the cost of his life. Thus, Pearl plays an important part in Dimmesdale’s life.

Although Pearl is a complex character, her main function within the novel is as a symbol. Pearl is a sort of living version of her mother’s scarlet letter. She is the physical consequence of sexual sin and the indicator of a transgression. Yet, even as a reminder of Hester’s “sin”, Pearl is more than a mere punishment to her mother: she is also a blessing. She represents not only “sin” but also the vital spirit and passion that engendered that sin. Thus, Pearl’s existence gives her mother reason to live, bolstering her spirits up when she is tempted to give up. It is only after Dimmesdale is revealed to be Pearl's father that Pearl can become fully recognized. Until then, she has the function in a symbolic capacity as the reminder of an unsolved mystery.

Hester Prynne, we know very little about Hester’s prior affairs with Dimmesdale and her resultant public shaming. The book begins with the birth of Pearl. Readers are told that Hester got married Chillingworth, although she did not love him, but we never fully understand why. The early chapters of the book suggest that, prior to her marriage, Hester is a strong-willed and impetuous young woman—she remembers her parents as loving guides who frequently had to restrain her incautious behavior. The fact that she has an affair also suggests that she once had an extremely passionate nature.

A LIVING SCARLET LETTER

The scarlet letter “A”, worn by Hester Prynne, is a punishment for the sin of adultery that she had committed. Following Hester’s act of adultery, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby girl whom she named Pearl. So the baby girl is “a child of sin”. From the first moment that we are introduced to Pearl in the novel, we get the sense that there is some connection between the baby and the scarlet letter “A”. Actually Pearl was the animate letter “A”, she is the living representative of the scarlet letter, the living embodiment of the scarlet letter, because if Pearl had never been born, Hester would have never been found guilty of adultery, and thus would never have had to wear the burden upon her chest. So Pearl symbolizes the living scarlet letter. She acts more differently than other people in Boston in that she seems to be much more vibrant than the others. We see this displayed in various forms like her dress, her mood swings, her mischievous behaviors, and her constant liveliness. Throughout the novel, Pearl is used by Hawthorne to symbolize many different things, as we will see in the following points.

Little Pearl is the animate letter “A”, she is the living representative of the scarlet letter, the living embodiment of her mother’s sin, and she is also the direct consequence of the scarlet letter. Pearl is not only a symbol, but also the connecting link among Hester Prynne, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. Pearl always contemplates the letter with a kind of strange interest. And the scarlet letter is her curious object. Soon after she is born, Pearl has already shown special emotion to the letter. Her first sight is not mother’s smile but the scarlet letter on the bosom of her mother’s dress. She often puts up her little hand grasping at it, which causes her
mother intense agony and shame it generated in her. She has been mesmerized by the scarlet letter on her mother’s bosom, and enjoys playing with the letter. Once, little Pearl takes a large piece of eelgrass imitating her mother’s letter “A” on her own bosom. The freshly green letter makes a striking contrast with the scarlet letter. Another time, Pearl plays a game where she throws flowers at her mother and jumps around in glee every time she hit the scarlet letter.

HAWTHORNE’S VIEW ON LOVE

The love between Hester and Dimmesdale ends in tragedy, but Pearl’s future ends in a happy atmosphere. The author puts love and marriage on this young girl, Pearl. It is not exaggerated to say Pearl is Hawthorne’s view on love, just as Hawthorne’s friend, Melville said: “the invisible is more grateful than visible, the visible is just as direction of invisible”. The same as Pearl’s image, there are lots invisible signs in the story, the most meaningful one is Pearl. Pearl testified her parents’ sin since her birth and she lived a miserable childhood. But when she grows up, she immigrates to the other place to live a happy life. The whole story goes from comedy to tragedy, but Pearl’s life is from tragedy to comedy. Hawthorne arranges Pearl’s life in this way to express his idea of love. Love is beautiful and great; it is the basic foundation of marriage. Love must ignore the bondage of custom, liberated from those bonds to a free kingdom. This is his idea as well as hope towards love, and all his ideas set on the little pearl’s life, in his mind, Pearl is a natural production as well as God’s blessing. Love should follow the natural principle instead of restricted by social rules that can kill love permanently.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of the function of Pearl, we can see Pearl is the best vehicle to express Puritanism and reflects Hawthorne’s idea towards love and morality. Pearl is the perfect and full-developed masterpiece by nature. Among all protagonists, Pearl is most purified and with high morality as well as kind by nature. Pearl’s kindness developed moral regeneration that advocated by Hawthorne. Therefore, Pearl is one of the most complex and misunderstood symbols in the book. Pearl, throughout the story, develops into a dynamic symbol - one that is always changing. In a word, she is the masterpiece of Hawthorne, as an individual who performs as a token of sin as well as hope, a testimony of love, a laborious burden as well as an important impetus, a desperation as well as hope. Pearl is the high theme in the novel, which represents Hawthorne’s romantic love, embodies Hawthorne’s hope towards love and happy marriage.

REFERENCES