

Confront or Evade—An Elementary Analysis on the Choices of “A” in The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work *The Scarlet Letter* is a world’s literary masterpiece. Based on the theory of spiritual ecocriticism, this paper analyzes the different choices of the three protagonists from the perspective of the theme of sin, and explores how they finally achieve the spiritual ecological balance.

Keywords: The scarlet letter “A”; Sin; Salvation; Spiritual ecocriticism

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the most influential romantic writers in the history of American literature. *The Scarlet Letter* is Hawthorne’s first novel. He makes good use of psychological description and symbolism, portrays the protagonists with distinctive characteristics, and gives the work rich connotation. It tells a love tragedy that happened in Boston during the North American colonial period. Readers have never stopped studying the work, and the diversified perspectives and interpretations all reflect the diverse themes, rich connotations, and far-reaching influence of the work. There are already a lot of research achievements on this work. However, although the theme of sin has been involved, there is still room for further research based on the theory of spiritual ecocriticism. One of the great treasures of *The Scarlet Letter* for later generations is that, by portraying the bravery or cowardice of the protagonists and the different mental journeys on their road to salvation since then, telling us the importance of spiritual ecological balance, and giving us some enlightenment on how we can overcome the inevitable weaknesses of human nature, promote the growing and perfecting of moral-self, as well as how we should face sin, which both belongs to ourselves and others.

1. “A” in The Scarlet Letter

1.1 Hester’s Sin: Tangible “A”

The scarlet “A” of Hester is tangible. It appears in front of everyone for the first time on the day she is punished. The beginning of the story vividly describes the hideous and gloomy prison, which is in a murky grey keynote and shows the situation of the ecological environment. When a large group of Boston citizens crowds in front of the prison cell, the protagonist Hester Prynne comes out of the prison. What is striking is not only the child she holds tightly in her arms, but also the exquisite embroidery on her gorgeous clothes, the scarlet letter “A”. It is undeniable that from this moment on, her crimes are exposed to everyone without reservation. This crime is exactly the crime of adultery beginning with the letter “A”.

It is obvious that mental torture is more painful than physical punishment. This eye-catching and dazzling “A” quickly brings misfortune to her. The spectators in Hawthorne’s work, whether they are acquaintances in the past or those residents who have never known the woman, draw a clear distinction from the bottom of their hearts with Hester. As she walks slowly towards the scaffold, women’s unbearable and inexplicable hatred for her, and almost everyone’s contempt and condemnation gaze all reflect how serious her crime is in the harsh Puritan doctrine.

In addition, her daughter is another form of the letter “A” for her. Little Pearl is not only a testimony of her love but also a product of her sin. This small life is her only support that can comfort her soul after being punished and squeezed out by society.

In general, the scarlet letter “A” on her clothes, as well as her little Pearl makes her have to face the criticism and contempt of the world. This letter runs through the whole story. From the perspective of religion, it defends the strict religious etiquette, but for her, it

intensifies her rebellion. Undoubtedly, she is forced to face all this, facing endless loneliness. In reality, she is isolated from the outside world, including her husband, her lover, and the community.

1.2 Dimmesdale's Sin: "A" in the Mind

Dimmesdale is the man who commits adultery with Hester. However, his scarlet "A" is not known to the world and is invisible.

The cause of everything is that there is no news about Hester's husband, and his life or death is uncertain. She then falls in love with this noble priest. As a priest, he knows all the dogma, but he is still emotionally impulsive. Regardless, their adultery is a great and unforgivable sin in that era. And this also happens to reflect Hawthorne's disclosure of the cruel Puritan repressive humanity at the time. Indeed, his conflicts are the conflicts between self and community, between personal will and moral law.

Because of Hester's insistence, his scarlet "A" is hidden. She loves him so deeply that she would rather suffer the pain alone than release his identity. But the reason why this letter "A" becomes invisible is not only because of the help of his lover, but also because of his cowardice. His religious faith stresses the importance of honest confession of sin. Confession would mean healing himself at the cost of trust and respect from his community. He is caught in a dilemma. And then, he chooses to remain silent for a long time without spontaneous acknowledgment. In fact, there is an irreconcilable conflict of values between him and Hester. Hester remains steadfast in her true feelings even if she violated religion. And while he loved Hester, he has to maintain the dignity of his religion.

However, does his sin also disappear as a result? On the contrary, from the moment that Hester is punished and he does not come forward bravely, his guilt, his fear, and other tangled emotions fill his heart. As a clergyman, even daily enlightening his parishioners cannot alleviate his self-accusation. His sin begins to be amplified slowly. Therefore, the scarlet "A" on Hester's clothes also symbolizes his pain and loneliness.

In fact, no one criticizes his sin. His mental loneliness is spontaneous, forming a psychological barrier that does not trust anyone and stops being honest with the world.

1.3 Chillingworth's Sin: Continuously Deepened "A"

It seems that Chillingworth is originally not related to the letter "A". But when he watches Hester standing on the scaffolding, looking at the scarlet letter representing betrayal, his anger, and hatred for her and the man sprouts. The letter becomes an excuse for him to vent about his personal discontent.

Although he has nothing to do with "A", which represents adultery, he is guilty from the very beginning. Or in other words, he is the root of all evil. He tricks Hester into marrying him when she doesn't understand what love is and what marriage means. Not only does he not repent of his previous deceptions and the troubles and pains he has caused her in the past two years when he disappears, but he is also not kind and tolerant. Eventually, he goes on a crazy road of revenge, and because of this, he commits an increasingly unforgivable crime.

He is immersed in revenge and feels the satisfaction and pleasure of destroying the will of others. As a doctor, it is his job to treat patients. He is originally kind, but in the process of revenge on Dimmesdale, it is his own spirit that is destroyed at the same time.

Obviously, his hatred makes him as lonely as Hester and Dimmesdale. What's more, like Dimmesdale, his loneliness is spontaneously endured. Since then, apart from hatred, his soul has nothing else to rely on.

2. The Theory of Spiritual Ecocriticism

2.1 A Brief Introduction to the Origin of the Theory

In the early 21st century, spiritual ecocriticism was presented by the Chinese professor Lu Shuyuan. In his work *Ecological Literature and Art*, he points out that man is not only a biological existence, but also a social existence, and at the same time, a spiritual existence. This theory is novel and interdisciplinary, and has become a rising star in literary research. It is divided into two main aspects. On the one hand, it criticizes the relationship between internal factors of the individual spirit, including beliefs, desires, motivations, emotions, outlook on life, and so on. On the other hand, it also criticizes the related external factors, for example, other people and society. Therefore, in order to judge whether the individual's spiritual ecology is in a balanced state, we should first analyze whether the individual has reached a state of peace inside, and then analyze whether the spirit and external factors coexist harmoniously.

2.2 Application of the Theory

Nowadays, spiritual ecocriticism has become a common word in both daily discourse and academic circles. People no longer

exclude themselves from the ecology, but meditate on their connection to themselves and to all other beings as a member of living things.

Spiritual ecological balance is suffering great destruction under people's desire and has a corresponding impact on almost all aspects of human life, which has reached the point of having to pay attention.

In order to deal with the increasingly prominent spiritual crisis, people in different fields have made various efforts, including architecture, aesthetics, philosophy, and so on. In addition, the literary application is also a necessary component. As the saying goes, the value of classic masterpieces lies in the edification of exemplary language, in the nourishment of the mind, and also in the ultimate concern for the human spirit.

Based on spiritual ecocriticism, readers can find out the spiritual ecological crisis of people under the corresponding social and historical background. After analyzing the causes and exploring the various hazards of ecological imbalance, people will reflect on real life. That is to say, literary works come from life and service life.

2.3 The Spiritual Ecological Crisis in the Scarlet Letter

In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is obvious that all three protagonists are in an imbalanced state because of the sin. As mentioned in Chapter one, Hester is forced to face loneliness after being punished. Besides, aiming at concealing his sin, Dimmesdale lives spontaneously in spiritual loneliness and fear. And Chillingworth is also spontaneous. In order to retaliate against them, his psychology is distorted and his spiritual ecology is out of balance as well.

The three main manifestations of imbalance are alienation, nihilism, and materialism. And in this work, the first two are concerned. In the process of losing themselves or finding themselves, their spiritual ecology also changes in response. At the same time, effects between organisms, such as the state of nature as well as the spirit of others, and public opinion also play a role that cannot be ignored.

Hawthorne's works are good at exploring evil in human nature. Meantime, his works also reflect his ambivalent attitude towards Puritanism. Because he thinks that Puritanism suppresses and persecutes human nature, but at the same time, he is deeply influenced by Puritan ideas of original sin, believing that sin is an inherent part of everyone.

On this subject, *The Scarlet Letter* leaves the reader with a question that must be answered: What is the choice to make in the face of sin?

3. Different Choices and Salvation

3.1 Hester: Confront and Reborn

3.1.1 Hester's Confront

There are a lot of forms of spiritual imbalance, and one of them is alienation. At the beginning of the story, when Hester walks out of the cell, her interpersonal relationship has a tension distortion. She is despised for violating the seventh sin of adultery. Because in the 17th century Puritan colonial North America, the doctrine was very strict about sex and marriage. The alienation is not only reflected in her humiliation of being glared at by the public, but also reflected in people's incomprehension and rejection of her.

Secular laws and false religious beliefs do not convince Hester. There is a number of episodes in the story that can prove this. First of all, even when publicly humiliated, she always staunchly defends love and protects the man she loved. She knows she is not strong enough to sway mundane notions. Thus, she has pleaded no contest. But when she negotiates with Chillingworth, she condemns him for deceiving her sentiment. A marriage without love, with a missing person, is too much for her.

Besides, the letter on her chest is exquisitely embroidered by her. It even adds a finishing touch to her outfit, according to the book. She does not hide this symbol of punishment, but seems to make it wonderful with pride. When she lives alone with her daughter, she is socially isolated. The suppression of society and religion forces her to restrain her rebellious spirit. She hides her beautiful hair and figure and dresses plainly like ordinary people. But no matter how hidden, a person's true inner thoughts are always revealed inadvertently. Her little Pearl is an embodiment. Her personality is not constrained by secularism, just like her. And the clothes she makes for Pearl, which are distinguished by fantastic ingenuity, are also supernatural. In some sense, Pearl is the little incarnation of her.

In fact, she can leave this place and take off the clothes with the scarlet "A", however, she finally chooses to confront it bravely. She says to herself that this is the place where she commits the crime, and this should also be the place where she is punished. At the same time, she is there to reassure her lover. A man who is firm in his love will not doubt his choice because of the evaluation of others, thus making the love relationship between him and his lover more stable.

Simultaneously, she is constantly suppressing her own contradictory psychology. That's because social rejection made her unsure

of herself. In addition to the usual contempt she endured, her spirit was tortured by the oppression of the town's respectable people. On the one hand, she lives with humiliation every day, hoping that one day her soul will be forgiven. On the other hand, deep down in her heart, she sometimes believes that the love between her and her lover will eventually be fulfilled, even on the scaffolding of the final judgment.

The imbalance of her spiritual ecology also has serious consequences for her lover. Under the oppression of society and the suppression of her own nature, she seems to think that she should be responsible for everything solely. Therefore, in the face of her vicious husband, she stubbornly believes that it is the best choice to agree to his conditions, not to tell Dimmesdale his true identity to protect him. On the contrary, it makes him suffer even more psychological persecution without his knowledge. As a mother, she is supposed to be protected by her lover and shoulder the responsibilities of parenthood with him, but she seems incredibly strong. This is also because of her husband's disappearance, which makes her have to deal with everything by herself in the long term, forming a psychological reluctance to show her vulnerability and fear of being discovered.

For the people of the town, alienation manifests itself in the absence of emotion between them. Under the Puritan rule, they are indoctrinated with a lot of stereotypes, which makes them difficult to trust others and just follow all the rules without inward reflection. They focus on the need to punish the crime, and no one focuses on why it happened. Their minds become single and empty. The attitudes, acquaintances and strangers alike, do Hester untold harm.

But beyond that, some of them even have no sense of gratitude. Hester is kind to almost everyone, and even though she is living in straitened circumstances, she would give the money she has earned to help the poor. Nevertheless, some people in the town accept her kindness, taking it for granted, and even humiliating her. And this shows the unusual indifference of human nature.

3.1.2 Hester's Reborn

Although Hester's heart is still rebellious, this does not conflict with atonement. She slowly returns to balance, walking on the correct road of salvation. As mentioned before, without complaint, she endures people's ostracism and bad language. And she relies on her own labor to obtain financial resources. In addition, she often helps the poor, and even if she is insulted in return, she still retains her kindness, bringing a little warmth to this town.

There is no doubt that the imbalance of spiritual ecology can be restored. Her kindness is influencing everyone around her, which also plays a positive role in herself at the same time. She never cares about personal interests, then eventually people accept her again. She is reborn, with awe-inspiring compliments. While being forgiven, it also meant that her soul was finally free. The scarlet letter on her clothes no longer represents "adultery", but is considered as "capable and angel". It can be said that the imbalance of her spiritual ecology is for self-search, and the final restoration is because she has completed self-creation.

Changing people's ingrained impressions is something that requires an unimaginable amount of effort. But she does it exactly, admirably. Therefore, it is extremely valuable to face everything bravely. Because this is the prerequisite for the road to atonement.

3.2 Dimmesdale: Evade and Ruin

3.2.1 Dimmesdale's Evade

Another major manifestation of the imbalance of spiritual ecology is spiritual nihilism, which refers to inner emptiness and numbness without spiritual support.

The imbalance of Dimmesdale's spiritual ecology begins at the moment he is afraid of being identified by Hester. His escape prevents him from having public salvation. His path of salvation is painful as well, or, more painful than hers. Because of cowardice, he decides to evade his sin. Unlike Hester, his scarlet letter is not embroidery, but a mark left on his chest like fire from hell, which ruins himself.

The indirect description in the work highlights the town's heartfelt admiration. Before the public, he is a respected priest, a sacred and miraculous figure. However, this makes him more tortured. Because what always scares people more is not has no access to what they want, but being asked to let go of all the fame, status, and power they've earned. It is also a demonstration of the power of the world, whose vision can either make people brilliant or destroy them. When he knows that everything he has now is going to be lost, he couldn't tell whether he is more afraid of losing or more afraid because of the responsibility of his job. He says to himself that he wants to tell people countless times that he is actually a downright degenerate and a liar. But every time he is on the verge of confession, he can only say it in an ambiguous way. The act of concealing this is actually self-preservation, but he is also punishing himself, paradoxically. He tries to relieve his spiritual discomfort by increasing his physical pain. He whips himself, goes on a hunger strike, and keeps vigils in the meantime, hoping that these severe penances can serve as reflections, which are just in vain actually. It is not so much that he is afraid to face his sin as he is afraid to face

his fears.

In addition to his fear, he is always guilty of his sin. As the man of the cloth who should have known all the dogma, he ignores the dogma and commits the sin of adultery. It makes him distrust himself and also anyone else. Every day, while fulfilling his responsibilities and relieving people, he is terrified and worries about being discovered. He has to make sure that every word he says does not reveal a flaw, and keep his mind on edge. At this point, his belief becomes not only a guide on his behavior, but also a burden to him, and this strength of the spiritual value he used to live on has been consumed by himself. Thus, the imbalance of his spiritual ecology becomes more and more serious. Originally, he commits only one crime, but in order to cover up it, he has to keep lying. This leads him further away from doctrine. He gradually turns into a hypocrite, the kind of person who most needs to be converted.

What's more, because of his nominal friend, Chillingworth's presence, he suffers more pain. His instinct tells himself that someone is watching him, but he doesn't know who it is, which forces him to be highly sensitive. Meanwhile, the doctor's treatment is actually deepening his awareness of his own crime level, and his soul is slowly being eroded. Not only that, the young pastor's body deteriorates differently from ordinary people's because of his spiritual imbalance. Thus, it can be seen that bad mental ecology has a great influence on the human body's state.

3.2.2 Dimmesdale's Ruin

He also has brief moments of peace, because the relationship with nature also affects the spiritual ecology of human beings. When he and Hester meet in the forest, both of them are anxious, the tranquility of nature gives them tolerance. At this time, his heart is gradually calm.

However, this temporary quiet is not enough for him to offset the long-term spiritual stress. The nihilism of his spirit makes his life meaningless and also makes him lose the will to survive. In the end, he can no longer sustain the double pressure of mind and body. At the last moment of his life, on the same scaffolding, he reveals the truth to the people. The doctor says, you have escaped my clutches now. Besides, little Pearl calls his father and sheds tears sadly. Thus, he arrives in a balanced state of spiritual ecology, is no longer reluctant to leave his reputation and status, and dies in peace.

In fact, his salvation, the same as Hester, also begins with confession, that is to say, confronting the sin. Life is limited, and hesitation is a waste of time. It is better to face it as soon as possible than to make things worse. Don't be afraid of taking on responsibility, because it is where you find what sustains you in your life.

3.3 Chillingworth: Revenge and Lose

3.3.1 Chillingworth's Revenge

The imbalance of his spiritual ecology is manifested as both alienation and nihilism.

Faced with the sins of others, Chillingworth does not forgive them, but chooses to deepen their scarlet "A" and give them more terrible punishment. From this moment on, he turns into a poisonous snake and begins his deeds.

First of all, he knows of Chillingworth's crime but does not expose him. He pretends to be his friend and launches a long-term mental destruction. Then, as mentioned earlier, he does not confess his deception to Hester, but continues to threaten her not to tell others his identity, so that his actions will not be hindered. As a result, he becomes anonymous and abandons normal social connections. He should have belonged to the town, but he lives as an outsider. The same as Chillingworth, he must disguise himself in order to cover up his actions, which naturally creates a psychological barrier of distrust toward others.

Regarding his wife, he also chose to make her suffer. Instead of dismissing his wife's accusation of cheating, he insisted that none of the faults is his own. This act of self-deception is out of his own protection. Remembering the betrayal, he refuses to admit the true cause of the event, putting himself in a position to be pitied. In fact, he does it to cover up his nonconfidence and satisfy his desire to vent. He chose to marry his wife, whom he should have loved very much, but in the process, he deviated from his original intention and became not worthy of love and ugly.

Meanwhile, Chillingworth is eroded by hatred. He is also alienated from whom he used to be. And he is seriously out of touch with normal life as a doctor. His profession is supposed to be a venerable and sacred one, providing timely and effective medical help to his patients. But revenge made him paranoid, peering into the priest's life every day, trying everything possible to test him and make him scared. He tries to master the parts of life that cannot be mastered in a surly observant manner. He hopes that he can intervene in the real life of others with the mentality of an onlooker and a leader. The thing he is the proudest of in this act is that he has the perspective of God and enjoys the superiority that "everything that is happening now is under my observation, and you do not know, do not need to know, and will not know".

Obviously, he is no longer a do-gooder. He uses all means to achieve his goal, becoming very hypocritical and terrifying, losing himself. As mentioned before, the spirit has an effect on the human body. In the same way, he is attacked by his own spiritual imbalance. Because he has had unnormal behavior for a long time, all about is just revenge, his life seems to have lost the meaning of continuing existence. In the end, after Dimmesdale's death, his spirit collapses, and his body is rapidly failing.

3.3.2 Chillingworth's Lose

In the beginning, he wants to find the person who hurts him with his wife, out of respect for himself. But he is so obsessive, he ends up being dominated by the desire for control. As the saying goes, because one is willing to indulge, even death also does not need to be saved. His kindness is defeated by desire and becomes mind-twisted. His negative concept keeps him from letting go of his hatred because he has been treated unfairly, so he must let the other side's interests suffer as well. Chillingworth implements his revenge against his rival, who is finally "treated" by the hypocritical doctor to ruin. He hates the deception of others, but he also finally becomes this kind of person he hates, what a satire. And this destroys both Dimmesdale and himself. He is the devil that causes this love tragedy.

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that he gives all the inheritance to Pearl, the living letter "A". Perhaps at the end of his life, he finally has the courage to admit what Hester accuses him of, realizing that the crime he has committed is no less than the crime of "A". This last good deed and his death may be a way of self-redemption. In addition to revenge, he finds another spiritual sustenance. It can be seen that when he knows that he was going to die, he put down the narrowness, hatred, and other bad psychology, hoping that all the wicked ideas could be resolved before leaving. At this time, his mind is suddenly, and he returns to a state of peace with himself and the outside.

The *Scarlet Letter* has always been called "the romance of the mind" for its commendable psychological depiction of the characters and the disclosure of human nature. In this book, the three protagonists' different choices in the face of sin lead to their different life paths and endings. When sin has already occurred, we should not focus too much on the sin itself, but confront it bravely. Because in front of it, we have nowhere to hide. Only true confession can allow us to be forgiven and have peace of mind. In other words, the realization of self depends on man's own spiritual harmony and harmony with all other things. People's spiritual crisis urgently needs to be properly addressed. Because individual spiritual imbalance will not only destroy their own will, affect normal socializing and life, but also bring harm to external factors, and even cause tragedy. There is no doubt that Hawthorne's work has left us with valuable enlightenment.

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