

Analysis of the Narrative Strategies in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract: Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American psychosocial novelist, also known as the Shakespeare of America, who wrote many classic works during his lifetime. Among them, *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the representatives of romantic novels, and is also his outstanding masterpiece. *The Scarlet Letter* has been interpreted by many people, but rarely in the field of narratology. This paper will interpret *The Scarlet Letter* from the perspective of narrative strategy, discuss the text of the novel with the help of narrative strategy, and try to further interpret the narrative strategy of the novel and its far-reaching influence. This paper will explain from the aspects of narrative focus, narrative space and narrative language. In this process, I hope I can learn Hawthorne's writing skills and provide reference for the vast number of literature lovers.

Keywords: The Scarlet letter, Narrative Strategy, Narrative Focus, Narrative Space, Narrative Language.

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Letter is one of Hawthorne's representative works, as one of the most influential American Romantic writers in the 19th century, he created many classic literary works. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the heroine subverts the traditional image of vulnerability, and instead enlivens the readers with the image of brave, independent and even new women who have paid their lives for love. More than that, what attracts readers more is its unique narrative strategy and thematic features. In terms of narrative focus, *The Scarlet Letter* combines zero focus with external focus, and enhances the quality and depth of the novel through the cooperation and transformation between the two. In the aspect of narrative language, the language of *The Scarlet Letter* adopts the method of polysemy, and through polysemy, it promotes the development of the story plot and arouses people's deep thinking.

2. Narrative Focus

In a study of *The Narrative Theory of British and American Novels*, Shen Dan (2005), a famous Chinese narratologist, holds that focus is the point of view that the narrator uses to observe the world of the story (Shen Dan, 2005). That is, the point of view is concerned with who is observing the story, not who is speaking. There are two types of bearers of perspective: the narrator in the novel, who observes and tells the story, and the characters in the story, who include both the first-person "I" and other third-person characters. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne skillfully employs a combination of narrative techniques to bring the image to life, using zero, external and internal focal lengths, respectively.

2.1. Zero Focus

Zero focus can also be called God's perspective. It is characterized by the fact that there is no fixed point of view, and the "God" like omniscient narrator can tell the story from any angle, in any space and time: he can see the whole picture from above, he can see what is happening in other places at the same time, he knows the past, present, and future of the character so well that he can look inside the character at will. In the first chapter, "A throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments, and grey, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with

women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes". "But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him." (*The Scarlet Letter*, 2008)

2.2. External Focus

The narrator with external focus narrates what he sees and hears with a kind of impersonal indifference. Describing only visible actions without explanation, without intervening in the inner workings of any of the characters in the story. Hawthorne uses his masterful narrative technique to transform the narrative focus, sometimes giving a panoramic view, sometimes watching coldly, from the point of view of the characters. From the perspective of external focus, the narrator narrates the story strictly from the outside and stays away from the characters, but does not tell us the motives, purposes and psychological activities of the characters, which makes the characters full of mystery.

2.3. Internal Focus

With the help of the consciousness perception of a certain character, internal focus narrates the world experienced by a certain character. In this case, the focus of one character can be used all the time, the focus of several characters can be used in turn in the narrative to show the different stages of the event, or multiple focuses can be used, that is, to use the focus of various characters to repeatedly show a certain event. *The Scarlet Letter* also fully reflects Hawthorne's best psychological description, he is good at analyzing the "Heart" of the characters in the novel, skillfully switching the observation point to the internal focus perspective. In an internal focus perspective, everything is presented according to the feelings and consciousness of a particular person, either by the senses of the person, or by the reaction and mental activity of the person to the outside world, or by the inference and guess of the person (Zhang Na, 2012). In the novel, Hester's inner monologue is one of the highlights, "But, under the leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure, she felt,

at moments, as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once.” This wonderful insight allows us to empathize with the protagonist, but also to receive another message from the author. This kind of trial is an evil that runs counter to human nature, there is nothing more heinous than this atrocity. The fate of Hester, the protagonist, shows the persecution and destruction of human nature by Puritanism, and the dark side of human nature is exposed in broad daylight.

3. Narrative Space

In 1958, Princeton University Professor Joseph Frank first proposed the concept and theory of novel spatial form in his article *The Form of Space in Modern Fiction*. The spatial form is a kind of narrative structure of the novel. The text uses juxtaposition, fragments, montage and multiple plots to obscure and even decentralize time. The traditional linear order is abandoned and the synchronic spatial narrative is adopted instead. In addition, the “Spatialization” of the novel not only points to the visible environment and place, but also includes the invisible psychological space, emotional space, feeling space and so on. At present, the research of spatial narrative also involves many fields, such as story and narrative space, space and characters, space and plot, space and time, space and readers’ perception, space and text form, etc. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne mainly uses the spatial structure and the scene, the character and the reader’s mental space. The analysis of the modern significance of the spatial form provides a new perspective for the interpretation of the novel text.

3.1. Spatial Structure and Scene

The background of action is an important part of the novel of spatial form. Hawthorne’s uses of time was anomalous; he uses it almost as a servant of space. As Hawthorne’s most outstanding novel, *The Scarlet Letter* also pays attention to the spatial form of the novel structure. Hawthorne not only makes the background act as a character and the scene spatially, but also uses metaphor, image and symbol frequently, in order to limit time and story. In the text structure and narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne is less subject to traditional causality and purely chronological order. In the view of modern spatial narratology, the destruction and abandonment of time sequence is the most obvious representation of the spatial form of the novel. From the point of view of narrative structure, the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* breaks the traditional time narrative rules, breaks the linear time flow of the beginning, the development, the climax and the ending of the general love story. And the cause and effect of the plot take the ending of the extramarital love affair as the beginning of the narrative of the novel. The author enlarges the outcome of the extramarital love affair and the inner struggle of the characters.

3.2. Psychological Space of Characters and Readers

As the originator of the American psychoanalytic novel, Hawthorne’s description, exploration and pioneering exploration of the characters’ psychological state not only broadens the boundaries of the characters’ psychological space, moreover, it is of great modern significance to the emergence of stream of consciousness novels and the

maturity of the psychological description of the later writers. In addition to the physical space to reflect the characteristics of space, the three-dimensional display of the characters’ psychology is also one of the elements to reflect the form of the novel space.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, not only is the title of the novel named after a character, but each chapter focuses on one or two characters, a narrative technique that resembles a close-up of a movie, what the reader sees is the mental state of the particular person in the particular space and the particular person in the particular environment. In the process of this magnifying glass, time stands still, and all the reader’s attention is focused on the character’s multiple levels of ambivalence, struggle, and emotional richness. The first 20 chapters focus on Hester, the vicar, the Doctor, Pearl, or Hester and the vicar, Hester and Chillingworth, Hester and Pearl, the depiction of these characters is mainly inward emotion, thought excavation and soul exploration, which shows the inner spiritual space of the characters, and the process of the plot development of the novel is the process of revealing the inner world of the characters. Hawthorne compares the human mind to a sinuous cave, and the writer’s creation to a burrowing in that cave. He “is not good at portraying characters”, “Mainly not to show the social customs and habits, but to depict the psychological, emotional and emotional characters”, especially good at analyzing the inner world of the characters in a particular environment. The analysis of the inner world is not a linear description of the plane, but a three-dimensional and multi-dimensional construction of the psychological world, so that the characterization does not stay on the superficial surface.

4. Narrative Language

Although we say that fiction is the art of fiction, this fiction is presented by language, so the first element of fiction is not structure or story, but language. The existence of novel is the existence of language, which is the reality presented by language. There is no doubt about the charm of language in a good work of literature. The language Hawthorne uses is not too flowery, in the overall language style is more sincere.

4.1. Adultery

The earlier “A” in the novel is presented to the reader as a sign of Adultery, since “A” is the first letter of Adultery. But why is the letter a red and not white, black, or some other color? It turns out that different colors have different symbolic meanings in different cultural contexts. The translation of scarlet letter in *The English-Chinese Dictionary of Cambridge International English* is “Scarlet, bright red”. The dictionary says “Scarlet Woman” means slut. So, red has a specific meaning here. In the novel, the heroine, Hester, is crowned with the scarlet letter, a symbol of shame and punishment, from the moment she first steps onto the scaffold. The symbolic meaning of the a word here is self-evident and extremely vivid (Zhang Peng, 2008). For a woman who had violated the seventh commandment of John Calvin was required to wear the letter A for the rest of her life as a reminder of her crime. Hester dared to pursue a happy life, but was ostracized by society at the time, and was seen by those around her as a slut, exposing her to the shame of the scarlet a for life. The scarlet A, a symbol of fornication and sin, carries with it a heavy burden and a deep imprint on Hester. “A” is also the Bible’s human ancestor Adam initials, which

naturally implies that Hester and Arthur committed the “Original Sin”, is the sin of Adam and Eva. In chapter 6, describing the beauty and dexterity of the Pearl, the author describes her as “A plaything that grew up in the Garden of Eden and was left there for the amusement of the angels after man’s first parents cast him out”. This description no doubt re-emphasizes that A stands for Adam and implies “Original sin”. But what sin is “Original Sin”? It was thanks to that sin that the human race was born in circle of life. No wonder, in the author’s pen, that this symbol of “Sin” is so beautifully embroidered that it is admirable. No wonder that Hester is depicted as beautiful and noble as the Virgin, without the appearance of a lascivious woman. In fact, this is the author’s negation of the secular crime of adultery, the subtle affirmation and praise of Hester’s pursuit of free love, her advocacy of individual liberation, and her struggle for women’s rights.

4.2. Capabilities

The protagonist, Hester Prynne, is condemned to live a lonely, poor life, with only her little daughter and her loneliness. To make a living and to raise Pearl, to atone for her sins, she continued to embroider for others. Because she had no higher need than to make a living. She gave the greater part of the money she had earned from her youth, passion, and talent to the less fortunate than herself. In spite of her generosity, Prynne was still suffering from mental anguish and the suffering imposed on her by the world. Instead of being depressed, she became strong and mature. Time is always the best impartial verifier, slowly the scarlet “A” she wore took on a different meaning in the hearts of the people, “No one could be so generous, so fond of giving to the poor,” the embroidered scarlet letter shone with extraordinary light and comfort. It’s a symbol of sin in other places, but a candle in a hospital room. At this point, the scarlet “A” stands for Able.

4.3. Angels

The hero is a good person by nature, and always spares no effort to help those in need. Her compassion and dedication generate great strength, and she is always there, wherever there is sickness or hardship, wherever there is need for help. As time went on, day after day, year after year, Prynne’s dedication, self-sacrifice, and caring for others made the scarlet “A” no longer a mark of shame to be scorned and ridiculed. On the contrary, people gradually began to appreciate the scarlet letter “A” on her chest, that it reflects her exquisite workmanship, is a rare pure beauty. And her scarlet letter “A” heart is also enviable, because wearing it, Bai Lan appears more noble and elegant. She won people’s respect and respect for her virtue. Her endless compassion and dedication to the spirit of the tremendous power to make her become a source of strength, constantly pouring out a variety of relief. In the eyes of all, the scarlet letter “A” slowly took on the connotation of an angel -- purity, beauty, kindness, fraternity. The scarlet “A” exuded a charming and noble fragrance that seemed to extol Prynne’s warm, kind, strong, courageous nature. At this time, the scarlet letter “A”

symbolizes the angel. Hawthorne, a novelist who looks at society through the lens of Calvinism, argues that there is evil in every human being and that evil is everywhere. Only by facing it honestly and exposing the ugliest things can people get rid of the evil and be reborn. Brane wears the scarlet letter “A”, exposes the ugliest thing, is far away from the society, far away from the crowd, suffers the humiliation the situation, calmly accepts finally obtains the soul rebirth.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the reason why Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* stands tall and occupies an important position in the long river of literature is that its rich connotation, profound thoughts and ingenious narration are all important components. With the development of time, narratology has attracted more and more attention, and many classic literary works will be interpreted from a new perspective, especially Hawthorne’s classic analysis of human nature. Hawthorne uses various techniques to flexibly apply narrative strategies in his novels. Both narrative language, space and perspective are strongly representative and symbolic. On the basis of *The Scarlet Letter*, this paper analyzes and explains the narrative strategies. The first chapter analyzes the text and characters of the novel from various perspectives of internal and external focus of narrative focus, so as to increase the thickness of the novel and make the characters more plump and vividly present to the readers. The second chapter analyzes from the perspective of narrative space. Hawthorne is a writer with a strong sense of space. He uses space to promote the development of the plot and structure of the novel, so that readers pay attention to the depth and breadth of the development of the story, rather than the issue of time. It has laid the foundation and reference for the development of later novels. The third chapter analyzes the text from the narrative language, and analyzes the symbolic meaning of A. With the development of the story plot, A is endowed with different meanings, which corresponds to the psychological changes of the heroine. Hawthorne’s works reveal all the hidden secrets of human nature, reveal the complexity and contradictions of human nature, and show us that human is a mixture of good and evil. He inspires us and resonates with his readers with his unique writing skills. There are still other narrative strategies in *The Scarlet Letter* for us to learn and study, which need us to continue to excavate and explore.

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