

# A comparative study of symbols between *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter*

Yifan QI

The School of Humanities and Social Sciences, North University of China, Taiyuan 030051, China

---

**Abstract:** *A Dream of Red Mansions* has always been regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces of realism in Chinese classical novels, while *The Scarlet Letter* is regarded as the first American symbolist novel, both of which successfully use symbols to express the author's certain feelings and ideas. This paper attempts to make a preliminary parallel comparative study of these two novels with symbols as the starting point of investigation, in order to explore the different symbolic meanings of their similar symbolic ontologies in different historical, religious, philosophical and cultural contexts. The text is divided into four chapters: Chapter one is the introduction, which firstly gives a brief introduction to the two works, *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter*. The second, third and fourth chapters are the main body of the article. Based on the different historical, religious, philosophical and cultural backgrounds of China and the West, this paper provides a comprehensive comparative analysis and interpretation of the similarities and differences in the symbolic meanings of the main characters' chest ornaments, settings and the color red in the two novels. Chapter five is the conclusion, which summarizes the main contents of this paper. It is hoped that the research in this paper will provide some references and suggestions for the study of these two novels and provide some references for the study of the application of symbolism in novels.

**Key words:** *A Dream of Red Mansions*; *The Scarlet Letter*; symbolism; comparative study

---

## 1 Introduction

*A Dream of Red Mansions* is one of the great classical novels in China. The first eighty chapters of this novel is written by Tsao Hsueh-chin. When this novel was introduced into the western world, it has gained a lot of attraction of all kinds of writers and readers. And some people tried to translate this novel. There are two famous translation versions of this novel, one translation version is David Hawkes and his son-in-law, John Minford's; another translation version is Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's. Both were translated into good English words. While the most accepted version is Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's in China.

This novel is a tragic story in the background of the decline of an aristocratic society and family. *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a remarkable classical Chinese novel written two and a half centuries ago, one of the four great classical novels of China, by Cao Xueqin, one of the most famous novelists and poets in the history of Chinese literature, during the Qing dynasty in the mid-18th century. It is considered a masterpiece of Chinese literature and the apogee of Chinese fiction. Redology is the discipline devoted to the study of this novel, and there are many scholars; its appearance represents the pinnacle of classical Chinese novelistic writing, and it has been hailed as an encyclopedic novel for its exceptional artistic

---

achievements. Until its printing and publication in 1791, the novel circulated in manuscript form with different titles. The novel is also often referred to as *The Book of Stones*. The first eighty chapters were written by Cao Xueqin, while the last forty chapters were written by Gao E and his partner in the first and second editions. Since *A Dream of Red Mansions* was introduced to the Western world, nine English versions have been published, but no more than two have been widely accepted, including *The Story of the Stone* by British sinologist and editor David Hawkes and his son-in-law John Minford and the translation version of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. The former is published by Penguin Books Ltd. and the latter by Foreign Languages Press.

Guo Jianzhong notes that Yang Xianyi's version is primarily oriented towards the culture of the source language, while Hawkes' version is oriented towards the culture of the target language. He also analyzes the intention of the translators and concludes that Yang's translation focuses on presenting Chinese culture to the target audience [1].

*The Scarlet Letter* is one of the most famous novels written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the first greatest American fiction writer in the moralistic tradition. The work is set in the 17th-century North American colonies under harsh clerical rule, it tells a story of Hester Prynne, who conceives a daughter through an adulterous affair and struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity of that society. In this novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne applied symbolism to transmit his personal views to the society as well as his hope for it. In this novel, the symbolism is used in many parts, including the name of the characters, the settings, and some other objectives in this novel. Undoubtedly, the symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* has many facets in this novel and thus deserves to be studied.

*The Scarlet Letter* is Nathaniel Hawthorne's first work that uses symbolism. The book was a huge success thanks to its clever use of symbolism. He used symbolism to convey his personal views on society and his hopes for it. In particular, the symbolism used to depict the characters, each of whom carries a particular meaning, is impressive and thought-provoking. In addition to the images analyzed above, other targets in the novel also have symbolic meanings, such as the forest and the priest. In conclusion, Nathaniel Hawthorne successfully uses symbolism to illustrate his ideas.

Liu Huijuan analyzed the symbols in the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, from many perspectives in her master's paper. She thought that the symbols in this novel included many parts and sections. One of the greatest symbols was the symbols of the letter A in the novel, which denoted not only the letter A itself, but represented many meanings in the novel [2].

Zhang Yujuan studied the symbols in the two novels, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *A Dream of Red Mansions*. According to her ideas, the symbols of the ornament and color in the two novels are the major parts that can be compared and studied. In her opinion, the color of red in the two novels are quite different and both symbolize something unusual and reveal some important meanings and themes of the two novels [3].

Over the past two and a half centuries, *A Dream of Red Mansions* has reached the highest level of literature and art. Books and essays devoted to the study of *A Dream of Red Mansions* have been written, and in summary, they can probably be divided into three main schools of thought: the school of critics, the school of indexes and the school of historians. Some are content to study Cao Xueqin's biography and family background, others research the historical events insinuated into *A Dream of the Red Mansions* and still others attempt to explore the relationship between *A Dream of the Red Mansions* and social life, but few are interested in the creative value of the text. Some seek out the historical events to which *A Dream of Red Mansions* alludes, and some attempt to explore the relationship between *A Dream of Red Mansions* and social life, but few are concerned with the value of the text creation.

As one of the great Romantic novelists of the 19th century, *A Scarlet Letter* is clearly a work of original wisdom, using unique symbolism with profound meaning. As one of Hawthorne's masterpieces, *The Scarlet Letter*, whose obvious artistic feature is the creative use of symbolism, is undoubtedly one of the best-known works of the Romantic period, and

has made him famous the world over.

The unique and profound artistic aesthetic features and multiple symbols embodied in the literary techniques of both novels are worthy of study by experts and scholars today, and their artistic aesthetics are both living and current. The literary technique of *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter* is a useful literary technique from an aesthetic point of view, and it is only through objective understanding and thorough familiarity with the literary techniques of *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter* that the value of these two works can be fully understood.

This thesis attempts to conduct a comparative study of similar symbols in the two novels so as to find out the different symbolic meanings in different historical, religious, philosophical and cultural contexts. Through detailed comparative analysis and discussion, this thesis argues that different symbols may have very different meanings in different cultures.

## **2 A comparison of the symbols of ornaments in the two novels**

### 2.1 The similarities of the symbols of ornaments in the two novels

Normally, each hero usually has some ornaments in the novels. In the two novels, both protagonists have an ornament that symbolizes different meanings. Jia Baoyu has a jade called Precious Jade of Spiritual Understanding. While Hester Prynne has a letter A on the bosom. The jade and the letter A appear repeatedly in the two novels respectively. They both have some different meanings and some symbolizations in the two novels.

### 2.2 Different symbolic meanings of the jade and the letter A in the two novels

As early as the Neolithic primitive society in China, jade has become a psychic artifact and is often referred to as a Precious Jade of Spiritual Understanding in culture. And thus, in the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, jade also has many symbolic meanings.

First of all, there are many jade-related symbols throughout the book. A good example is that some important figures in the book are named Baoyu, Daiyu, Miaoyu, and so on, which reflect the strong symbolic meanings of jade in the novel.

The jade appeared many times in the novel, and in this way, it symbolizes the plot meanings and figures' characters in the novel. Baoyu was born with a jade; When Baoyu first met Daiyu, he flung his jade on the ground, tearing off the jades; When Baoyu was paying a visit to Baochai, his Precious Jade of Spiritual Understanding came across Golden Locket; The Prince of Beijing admired the jade: "A Buddhist monk and Taoist priest came up to the stone and sat down to chat about it [4]."

There are many myths and legends about the jade in China, it is conceivable that eating jades come become immortal. Chinese people also have a lot of imaginations of jades, which have a lot of strong symbolic meanings. The unspeakably holy jades could work miracles; thus, everybody stands in awe of them. On the meanwhile they are also considered as the treasures for praying for harvest, happiness, peace, perfection, nobleness, sacredness, tranquility, driving evil and good fortune, and rewarding the right and punishing the wrong. Just as jade is represented in Chinese culture, the jades can also have such symbolic meanings in the novels and stories. As in *The Scarlet Letter*, the Letter A also symbolizes different meanings in this novel.

"A" can stand for "Adultery". As in the novel, Hester adulterized with Dimmesdale when she was in a marriage with Chillingworth. Thus, the letter A here can be a symbolization of "Adultery" in the novel. This is one of the most important meanings in this novel. And that's also why Hester was condemned to wear the letter A.

"A" stands for "Adam". The theme of *The Scarlet Letter* should be the moral, emotional and psychological effects of the sin on people. Hester adulterized with Dimmesdale, whose story can remind people of the story of Adam and Eve as, in both cases, sin results in expulsion and suffering. Thus, the letter A can be a symbolization of "Adam" in the novel.

"A" stands for "Avenge". Hester's ex-husband returns to witness Hester's disgrace. Chillingworth eventually identifies

Dimmesdale as the father of Hester's daughter, Pearl. He hatches an elaborate plot to avenge what he believes to be a mistake made by Dimmesdale. Hester discovers Chillingworth's plan and realizes that Chillingworth tortures Dimmesdale on a daily basis. The revenge plan has seriously affected Dimmesdale's health. Therefore, Hester must break the promise she made years ago to never reveal Chillingworth's identity in order to save Dimmesdale's life. She reveals Chillingworth's true identity to Dimmesdale and begs for his forgiveness. She expresses her desire for Dimmesdale to leave the country for his own safety, but Dimmesdale does not want to be alone. Hester offers to leave with him, and they plan to take a ship to Europe in three days. The day before the ship sails, the town gathers to celebrate the election, and Dimmesdale delivers the most eloquent sermon he has ever preached. Meanwhile, Hester has learned that Chillingworth knows of their plan and has booked a ticket on the same boat. Dimmesdale, leaving the church after his sermon, spots Hester and Pearl in front of the town scaffold. He impulsively climbs the scaffold with his lover and daughter, and confesses publicly, exposing the mark supposedly carved into the flesh of his chest. So, in conclusion, when Chillingworth knows the existence of Dimmesdale and that Dimmesdale is Pearl's father, he begins to laugh, and he finds himself in a situation of happiness. He comes up the ideas of avenging, and he wants to continuously hurt Dimmesdale in his way. He never gives up his actions of revenge. Even when Hester wants to take Dimmesdale to escape the limitation of Puritanism, Chillingworth still follows them and hurts Dimmesdale.

"A" stands for "Admirable". It is admirable for Hester to make her own choices, and she broke free from the shackles of social decency and propriety. When facing the true love, she was faithful to his beloved people and bravely stood up alone to bear all the pain. Hester's strong and brave virtues won the other's respect and admiration, thus endowed the Scarlet Letter sacred meaning.

"A" stands for "Angel". The letter "A", which Hester wears on her chest, has always inspired her to repent soon and save her sinful soul. As soon as she saw the letter "A", she remembered her sins and indecent behavior, and envisioned her future and her quest for true love. In order to take care of Pearl, she had to seek many material means. She always devoted herself to embroidery. Whether rich or poor, she used her wisdom to do some needlework to earn a little pure and noble money so that she and her daughter could maintain a relatively stable and primitive life. Her embroidery was so exquisite that some say "A" was a symbol of art. She was kind and virtuous, helpful and hardworking. Although she was also poor, she still made every effort to help the poor and care for the sick and children. Because Hester and Pearl are all kind and warm-hearted to some extent, and thus, the Letter "A" can be also seen as a symbol of angel, which denotes the warm hearts of Hester and Pearl in the novel.

### **3 The comparison of the setting symbols in the two novels**

#### 3.1 The similarities of the symbols of setting in the two novels

There are many settings in the two novels. Some of them are from myths, and some are closely linked with religions. Authors in the two novels both use plenty of settings to symbolize different meanings in the two novels. And these settings all have many significances in the two novels.

#### 3.2 The differences of the symbols of settings in the two novels

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, there are many settings that symbolize different meanings. First of all, some settings and backgrounds symbolize mysterious world. Great Waste Mountain, Baseless Cliff, Bule Ridge Peak and the Land of Illusion symbolize the mysterious world in the novel. And the mysterious world also stand for the human consciousness, emotion and spiritual world in the novel. Specifically, this fantasy world with unparalleled strength towers over the material world, including the end-result of people's speech acts and people's ideas and fates.

In addition, another symbolization is the Grand View Garden in this novel. The Grand View Garden stands for the

real world in the novel, in contrast to the mysterious world. The Grand View Garden is the symbol of an independent kingdom, and the typical feudal fortified castles. The Grand View Grand is actually a mirror of the feudal society and that's why it stands for the real world.

As for *The Scarlet Letter*, there are also many settings symbolizing different meanings. First of all, this sentence conveys the symbolic meanings of the prison, "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison [5]". The prison and cemetery are the symbols of the hotbeds of vice. This novel conveys the idea that there is more or less evil in each heart and also shows the obscurity of mysticism of people. Thus, the settings of the prison and cemetery can be a symbol of hotbeds of vice. Another symbol is what the scaffold stands for. The scaffold in the novel represents crime and punishment. The scaffold is not only a place of punishment of sin, but also of the atonement. And that place is thus a symbol of crime and punishment.

#### **4 The comparison of the symbols of color red in the two novels**

##### 4.1 The similarities of the symbols of color red in the two novels

On the one hand, both *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter* have the same color in the titles. And in addition, the symbols of the color red in the two novels are both based on the political rules, which means that the formation of them has strong political and mystical tendencies.

##### 4.2 The differences of the symbols of color red in the two novels

In the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the symbols of the color red stands for Jia Baoyu's life and some other meanings.

As for Jia Baoyu, the color red stands for many meanings and experiences a process of transformation all through his life. At the beginning, red is a symbol of status and privilege. During the late Sui Dynasty, people would replace the plain clothes with red to show the symbols of noble.

And in the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, red has many symbolic meanings. Usually, red is considered to be an inspiring color as it informs us of something such as fire and blood. In the novel, red represents the color of hell and the devil, just as the danger and anger. The color red has some different meanings in Hester, such as passion, desire and shame, and the meaning of the red changed with the development of the story.

In addition, red also symbolizes blood and fire, reckless passion and warm lust. In the novel, Hester is young and beautiful, but she married the old and ugly man, Chillingworth. So the reckless marriage seems to be the beginning of her tragedy. What's more, red also stands for the sun. When Hester stood on the scaffold, the sun appeared and it stressed Hester's sins. Hester was a kind girl and showed kindness in a life of scarcity, which means she is generous, and obliging.

#### **5 Conclusion**

Based on comparative study of the symbols from Chapter one to Chapter three, this part firstly draws a conclusion on the comparative study of the symbols, then points out limitations of this thesis and finally makes some suggestions for further study.

On the one hand, this thesis analyzes the similarities of the symbols: the two novelists both adopt the ornaments, settings and the color red as the symbols of their works and all of them have their own symbolic meanings. They both have the symbolic meanings in the two novels and can be regarded as the expressions of the novels' main ideas and themes.

On the other hand, this thesis pays special attention to the similarities and differences in the symbolic meanings of the same three categories of symbols, namely, decoration, setting and color, and summarizes the similarities and differences in the two novels: different symbols may have very different meanings in different cultures. The formation of various

symbolic meanings of symbols is an eternal cultural phenomenon of social development and historical accumulation. Differences in symbolic symbols are a reflection of cultural differences between the East and the West. In particular, readers' cultural and linguistic knowledge plays an important role in understanding multicultural literature. It is also necessary for cross-cultural communication and language learners should pay enough attention to it.

However, there are some shortcomings of this paper. One of them is the lack of research on the cultures between China and Western world. As in different cultures, different symbols may denote different meanings and express different social time. The background of the cultures can reveal different symbolism in the novel. Another is that the study of the symbols may not be so conclusive. The study of the symbols may be less conclusive. In addition, the symbols mentioned in the thesis may be less comprehensive.

From an aesthetic point of view, this is a useful literary technique. The value of the two novels can be thoroughly understood only with an objective knowledge and full understanding of their literary techniques, but the significance of their cultural exchange is immeasurable. The unique and profound artistic and aesthetic features embodied in the literary techniques with multiple symbolic meanings in the two novels are worthy of further study by current experts and scholars.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### **References**

- [1] Guo JZ. 1998. Cultural factors in translation: alienation and naturalization. *Foreign Languages*, 2: 12-18.
- [2] Liu HJ. 2013. *On the Symbolism in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*. Shandong: Shandong University.
- [3] Zhang YJ. 2018. A comparison of symbolism in Chinese and American literary works---taking *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter* as an example. *Journal of Culture*, 12: 62-64.
- [4] Cao XQ. 2019. *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- [5] Nathaniel Hawthorne. 2019. *The Scarlet Letter*. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House.