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The Semantic Flourish of Symbols in “The Scarlet Letter”

Abstract

Symbolism is one of the most frequently used devices in literature. Hawthorne’s “The scarlet letter” is well known for its multiple and interesting symbols. Many critics have assumed that the whole meaning of the novel is based on the decoding of its symbols. As most of the definitions on symbols and symbolism are based on cognitive theories, we are going to use a cognitive linguistics approach to explore and decode the different meanings of each symbol. The paper will prove that based on a specific context each symbol acquires a specific meaning. They also deteriorate or progress as the subject deteriorates or progresses.

Keywords: symbols, semantics, cognitive linguistics, context, American literature

1-Introduction

“The Scarlet Letter” is a romantic novel by American anti-transcendentalist, Nathaniel Hawthorne. It uses the 17th century Puritan New England under the colonial rule as the background and reveals a love tragedy taking place in Boston. Hester Prynne, the young heroine who thought her husband had died from a sea accident, had a love affair with Dimmesdale, and gave birth to an illegitimate daughter. Nevertheless, her husband, Chillingworth, safely returned to New England and concealed his identity. He found that his wife was forced to wear a scarlet letter “A” on her bosom. This novel’s interpretation is mostly based on the explorations of the multi faceted symbols used by the author. Through providing different theories on symbolism and incorporating a cognitive approach to the interpretation of symbols we will be able to provide a clearer view on the semantic flourish of symbols in this work.

2-Symbolism theories

A symbol is traditionally defined as a sign which has further layers of meaning. However, different scholars share different views on the subject and as a result we encounter multiple definitions of it. Langer states that Symbolization is the essential act of thought...and the symbol-making function is one of man’s major actions, like eating, looking or moving about...it is the fundamental process of his mind, and goes on all the time (Langer). She also made a distinction between symbol and sign; according to her symbol and sign are not the same, the use of symbols as an addition to the use of signs makes humans not only react to their environment but also think about it. Symbols, also allow us to create imagery and ideas not directly related to the real world, so that we can plan, imagine, and communicate abstractions. (Eschholz). For Whitehead, symbolism dominates the men’s thoughts and imagination; he asserts that symbolism is widely connected with the use of pure sense perception in the character of symbols for more innate and primary factors in our experience. Frye assumes that talking about symbolism in ordinary life is thinking of such learned cultural archetypes. According to him the word symbol means any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention (Frye). Saussure provides a more structural point of view on symbols. Concerned with semiotics, he distinguishes the

signified, signifier and object as core elements for constructing and understanding symbols. For Saussure, the signified is the intellectual concept represented by the signifier (verbal or non-verbal); the signifier is the visible form that represents the signified; the object is the observed form that is being represented by the signs (Saussure).

3-The semantic flourish as a result of cognitive processes

As it was previously stated in this article the approach to the definition of symbols is mostly a cognitive one. Equally, a cognitive approach to the explanation of symbols would be very useful. Since symbols are considered as signs (by Saussure) and archetypes (by Frye) they can be easily related to the Prototype theory, which assumes that a concept is represented as the abstraction of characteristic features (Keel). As an important theory of cognitive linguistics, it basically states that a concept or an idea is represented by the best example. This best example is the representative of a category. Readers usually identify each category on the basis of a mental picture which typically represents all that the category stands for, and the best example of this idea is the prototype. Members which bear a strong resemblance to the prototype are called central members. However, the prototypes of cognitive categories are not fixed, but may change when a particular context is introduced. The whole internal structure of a category seems to depend on the context and on our social and cultural knowledge. That is the main the reason why symbols do not bear universal meanings. Thus their meaning may flourish during the development of the subject. It may evolve or deteriorate, according to the context. The semantic flourish of the symbols in “The scarlet letter” is influenced by the surroundings around the characters. In different social situations, people’s cognitive models towards them are different, thus the prototype of each symbol is different in accordance with the change of context.

4-Symbols in “The Scarlet letter”

In this novel, Hawthorne relies mostly on symbols to show his stylistic mastery. The title itself bears the most striking and multiple meaningful symbol of all romantic literature. The scarlet letter “A” is embroi-

dered in Hester's bosom when she commits adultery and gives birth to her illegitimate daughter, Pearl. Considering the whole novel the symbolic meanings of "A" develop from Adultery to Alone, Art, Able, Admiration (Chen). We notice three categories of meaning here. First, the derogatory category, where "Adultery" belongs which opposes with "Art, Able and Admiration", where the meaning of "A" is in its more evolved state. There is also a transitional category which consists of "Alone". Based on the above mentioned cognitive approach each symbolic meaning can be a prototype. In different surroundings and contexts the letter "A" shows different attributes to Hester's behavior, thus changing the prototype and the category. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, she is accused of "Adultery" which at this phase, stands for the prototype of "A".

"Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment." (Hawthorne 68)

"For the remainder for her natural life to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom." (Hawthorne 53)

Here the scarlet letter symbolizes guilt and shame. Disloyalty and shame are both attributes of the prototype "Adultery". With the development of the novel, new characteristics start to be attributed to Hester, thus changing the meaning of the letter "A". She moves on the outskirts of town with her daughter, until Pearl is seven years old. During this time they lead a life of isolation and nobody visits them.

"Lonely as was Hester's situation, and without a friend on earth who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred no risk of want" (Hawthorne 69)

"Alone" becomes the new prototypes of "A". Loneliness is the attribute of the prototype here. However we notice that there is a shift from the derogatory category to a more transitional one. The last part of the sentence, especially, suggests that good attributes are being added to the symbol due to the change of context. In order to make a living, Hester takes up a new skill, embroidery and her reputation among the townspeople changes.

"Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge?' They would say to strangers. 'It is our Hester—the town's own Hester—who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!"

(Hawthorne 138)

“The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her—so much power to do, and power to sympathize— that many people refused to interpret the scarlet “A” by its original signification. They said that it meant “Able”, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (Hawthorne 137)

The new prototypes of “A” thus are Art, Able and Admirable. The new attributes of the prototype are the words Kind, Helpful, Comfortable, Powerful, Strong. These are all commendatory attributes and at this point all the derogatory ones disappear.

The forest is another important symbol in the novel. It is very meaningful to the reader since it is the place where Hester and Dimmesdale meet, in order to be alone and far from the eyes of people. According to the puritan community, the forest is a place of darkness and evil. (Kirk)

“Wilt thou go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I well-nigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one ...had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest ,and signed my name in the Black Man’s book too ,and that with mine own blood” (Hawthorne 98)

The passage suggests that the attributes given to “the forest” are all derogatory ones. Here it symbolizes darkness, gloom and evil. However, moving on with the story a new meaning is acquired for this symbol. Being a place of darkness it hides all sins and secrets, keeping them away from the curious eyes. The semantic attribute of the symbol in this case becomes “freedom”, since it allows the expression of the deepest feelings of the characters.

“Hester Prynne made a step or two towards the track that led through the forest, but still remained under the deep shadow of the trees. She beheld the minister advancing along the path, entirely alone, and leaning on a staff which he had cut by the wayside.” (Hawthorne 160)

It is also considered as a shelter for all the society members who tend to escape their everyday reality.

The meteor is another symbol whose meaning can be traced in the puritan culture and tradition. Leaders and religious men would inter-

pret these meteors to be messages from God to give them warning about bad things or offences affecting the community. (Kirk)

“Dimmesdale had done speaking, a light gleamed for and wide over all the muffled sky. It was doubtless caused by one of those meteors, which the night-watcher may so often observe burning out to waste, in the vacant regions of the atmosphere.” (Hawthorne 130)

In this novel, however, the symbol is used to represent the inner feelings of one character, Arthur Dimmesdale. It represents his sin and adultery, embroidering him with the same mark of shame as Hester.

“...therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart 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 .not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning 38 duskily through a veil of cloud, but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it, or, at least, with so little definiteness, that another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it.” (Hawthorne 132)

5-Conclusions

To conclude, this paper reveals the semantic flourish of symbols in “The scarlet letter” in different contexts from the perspective of the cognitive linguistics, as a result of which, readers will have an insight into the psychological mechanism behind them. The evolution of those symbolic meanings is also the evolution of the characters. The paper also suggests that symbols acquire different meanings inside the text, based on the context and circumstances surrounding the characters.

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