

Analysis of the Influence of Clothing on Characterization from Symbolism: Taking *The Scarlet Letter*, *Daisy Miller*, and *Dry September* as Examples

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In the novels, the clothing worn by the characters are symbols made and used by the authors to express the characters' personality and deepen the theme, and grasping their symbolism helps to enter into the interior of the novels and understand their essence. This paper will analyze and interpret the clothing of typical female characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, *Daisy Miller* and *Dry September* from the perspective of symbolism, so as to illustrate how the symbolism of clothing, as a kind of symbols, shapes the image of the main characters.

Keywords: symbolism, clothing, characterization, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Daisy Miller*, *Dry September*

Introduction

The Scarlet Letter is a long novel written by American romantic writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. Despite its publication in 1850, it has never ceased to be studied at home and abroad. As a simple but profound classic, *The Scarlet Letter* has always been interpreted by new theories or new criticism as the times change. Domestic and foreign researches mainly focus on themes such as religion, redemption, feminism, and symbolic techniques. Based on Hawthorne's unique creative method and its derived textual qualities and combined with its story background, Sun Shengzhong finds that *The Scarlet Letter* is a historical novel intertwined with multiple contexts (Sun, 2020, p. 220). Sacvan Bercovitch focuses on the role of the letter in *The Scarlet Letter* and analyzes its political ambiguity (Bercovitch, 1988, p. 629).

Daisy Miller, an early work by Henry James, presents a story of European and American cultural clashes and even confrontations in a fresh and humorous writing style that leaves readers saddened. Many studies have focused on the international themes embodied in *Daisy Miller*, especially the collision and integration of American and European civilizations, as well as the analysis of the personalities of the male and female protagonists. Zhang Qin and Xiong Rongbin focus on the structural features of *Daisy Miller*, exploring it at three levels: point, line, and surface, and discovering the influence of the novel's structure on the formation of meaning (Zhang & Xiong, 1995, p. 71). Based on spatial narrative and visual aesthetics theory, Wang Yuehong and Huang Meina analyze the work from three aspects: the space of textual description, the space of textual representation, and the space of textual meaning metaphor, aiming to study how the spatial structure of the novel generates

events and meaning, and to reveal the close relationship between space and meaning generation in James' writing and the overall visual aesthetic effect it brings (Wang & Huang, 2022, p. 50).

Dry September, one of William Faulkner's classic short stories, tells the story of Will Mayes, a black man who is killed innocently in September for the rumor of raping Minnie Cooper, a white woman. The novel also shows Faulkner's complex feelings about racism and the old traditions of Southern society. Liang Xiaodong focuses on representative metaphors, placing them in historical, deification, and religious contexts, and examining their connotations and roles in terms of semantics, usage, and aesthetics (Liang, 2006, p. 111). Edmond L. Volpe, on the other hand, analyzes the novel's pictorial patterns and metaphors based on the novel's expressions of anger, terror, grief, and sympathy for the human condition (Volpe, 1989, p. 60). While Chen Qing notes that Faulkner uses the technique of strangeness in the narrative structure, breaking the traditional linear narrative structure of novels and carrying out a time-dislocated narrative, so that the whole work is in a spiral state. She analyzes the use of this technique in *Dry September* and its aesthetic significance in terms of storyline and narrative structure (Chen, 2008, p. 93).

In the meantime, the author notes there are relatively little researches on these three novels above, but clothing as a symbol that appears with great frequency and strong period and personal characteristics, plays a very important role in supporting the image of the character. Therefore, this paper will take these three novels as examples and analyze the role of the specific clothing in shaping female characters and deepening the themes of the novels from the perspective of symbolism.

Hester Prynne, a Determined and Unyielding Woman in *The Scarlet Letter*

In the novel, there are changes of colors with the fluctuation of the author's contradictory psychology, the reflection of the author's Calvinist religious thoughts, as well as the author's praise of humanity and sympathy for Hester's misfortune. Besides, the connotation of scarlet letter A is changing from adultery to able and angel, which just shows Hawthorne's ambivalent attitude toward his protagonists. The direct object of this contradiction, the author believes, is mainly reflected in the novel's depiction of the characters' clothing. Therefore, the description of clothing in *The Scarlet Letter* plays a pivotal role in understanding the characters and the author's thoughts and worldview, which will be analyzed and explained in the first part of this paper.

From the description of Hester's clothes, we can learn not only about Hester's personal character traits, but also about the context in which the story takes place. At the beginning of the novel, it is the day when Hester is taken from the prison to the scaffold for public display, in order to make her confess her adulterer. In addition to describing her beautiful appearance and her firmness in not giving in to outside pressure, there is also a wonderful description of the scarlet letter A: "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore; and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony" (Hawthorne, 1991, p. 57). Hester is surrounded by a bunch of stern men and mean women, and is subjected to their worldly moral judgments, and she is tormented. In such a situation, she cannot and is not allowed to refute the world. But her clothes fully reveal her strength of character, as she wears a gorgeous robe with the scarlet letter A embroidered on her chest, which shows her silent

protest and anger, and shows her stubborn character. Hester stands before the scaffold with her child in her arms, with a natural dignity and nobility, facing the crowd of onlookers, her mouth smiles contemptuously, which reminds people of image of the Madonna. This scene can be described as ingenious, showing the readers the complex connotation of the scarlet letter A. It is not only a symbol of Hester's disgrace, but also a symbol of her personal character. "Her attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for the occasion, in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, occasion, in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity" (Hawthorne, 1991, p. 57). Here, Hawthorne's love and hatred naturally flow out. We seem to feel that Hester is proud despite her humiliation, and the stubbornness in her is well highlighted, and the readers' sympathy for her is aroused.

In her daily life, Hester's main task is to repent and atone for her sins. As a person who is rejected and marginalized by the society, her only connection with the society is her excellent embroidery skills, but her dressing is very different from before her release from prison. "Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most sombre hue; with only that one ornament,—the scarlet letter, which it was her doom to wear." (Hawthorne, 1991, p. 77). Here we can see that Hester's costume is gray and plain. Hawthorne deals with her clothing in an understated way, which is a symbol of Hester's compromise with the world. This also reveals to some extent Hawthorne's religious thoughts and the social environment of the time. It was the 17th century and New England was a barren, uncultivated and savage land, which shows the harshness of the environment that Hester faces. "But now, with this unattended walk from her prison-door, began the daily custom, and she must either sustain and carry it forward by the ordinary resources of her nature, or sink beneath it" (Hawthorne, 1991, p. 74). In that penitential period, as the exiled Hester who has committed adultery is deprived of the right to love beauty and dress herself, she should be punished. Her dress could only be drab, not bright and flamboyant.

Daisy Miller, a Naive American Girl in *Daisy Miller*

Henry James fully restores the European sophistication and American innocence with the means of realism, and the main character Daisy Miller is a representative character influenced by the difference between these two cultures, and she experiences the intersection and collision of the two cultures in Europe and America. In the second part of this paper, the author would like to analyze Daisy Miller's clothing and explore her character traits, values, and deep cultural themes in *Daisy Miller*.

Daisy Miller's debut in the novel comes with a detailed description of her appearance and her dress: "Meanwhile, the young lady had approached. She wore a white muslin, with a hundred folds and flounces, and a pale ribbon knot. She was bare-headed; but she held in her hand a large parasol with a deeply embroidered border; she was very striking and admirably beautiful" (James, 2009, p. 7). This establishes Winterbourne's first impression of Daisy, who, as her name implies, is a product of nature, overflowing with a fresh aura and exuding vitality.

In contrast, the novel is written in a context in which the emerging United States, despite its rapid economic development since gaining independence, has surpassed European countries in economy by the second half of the 19th century and becomes the most powerful country in Western capitalism. However, due to its short history and its long history of following and accepting the culture of Britain and other European countries, the United States still appears to be shallow in terms of spiritual culture and has little to offer. The aesthetics, art, personal

cultivation of European culture, which have been accumulated for thousands of years, are beyond the reach of the United States and deeply desired by the Americans. "Whenever she put on a Paris dress she felt as if she were in Europe... 'it always made me wish I was here. Whenever she put on a Paris dress she felt as if she were in Europe...' it always made me wish I was here" (James, 2009, p. 13). Daisy's dress is just in line with the fashion trends that are popular in Europe at that time, which also reflects that European culture influences American life in every aspect. It is out of appreciation for the ancient civilizations of Europe that she, her mother and her brother embark on a trip to Europe together. Although Daisy's freedom of behavior as an innocent American girl is not compatible with European society, she is subconsciously restricted by the strict hierarchy and codes of conduct in Europe, and in her conversation with Winterbourne, she always maintains a lady's manners. "She sat there with her extremely pretty hands, ornamented with very brilliant rings, folded in her lap" (James, 2009, p. 12). "The young lady inspected her flounces and smoothed her ribbons again" (James, 2009, p. 9). From Daisy's dress to her daily life style, it is not difficult to find the traces of European society and culture. It can be said that Daisy is a victim of the clash of two cultures, which predestines her to tragedy.

Minnie Cooper, the Fallen Southern Lady in *Dry September*

Miss Minnie Cooper appears in the second chapter of the novel. The novel does not directly describe her in the specific events of the conflict, but shows the whole life she has experienced in the past in a retrospective manner. This chapter is very short, but Miss Minnie Cooper is full of distinctive features. Faulkner uses many descriptions to highlight Miss Minnie's character and fate. Faulkner brings to life the southern lady image of Miss Minnie, a spinster who once had a glorious past, unwilling to be forgotten and neglected, trying to seize the lost youth and the efforts made by the past scenery. Among them, the symbolic meaning of the dress worn by Miss Minnie, as a symbol that appears more frequently, is also obvious and will be elaborated in the third part of this paper.

Once young and beautiful, as the center of attention of the town's people, Miss Minnie is losing ground, her life is leisurely, idle and a void. However, she still likes to wear bright clothes. "Each morning between ten and eleven, she would appear on the porch in a lace-trimmed boudoir cap, to sit swinging in the porch swing until noon" (Faulkner, 2012, p. 84). The boudoir cap and swing exactly show Miss Minnie's repressed desire for sex, and she has no one to talk to about this desire. "Then, in one of the three or four new voile dresses which she had each summer, she would go downtown to spend the afternoon in the stores with the other ladies" (Faulkner, 2012, p. 85). These gorgeous voile dresses then symbolize the elegant aristocratic life of the traditional South. Her serious attitude is as if she is performing a ritual to gain the attention of the crowd. Since she cannot keep the fading time, Miss Minnie intends to retain the illusion of youth through bright clothes. The bright colors of the dresses contrast with Miss Minnie's aging and haggard face. "She was still on the slender side of ordinary looking, with a bright, faintly haggard manner and dress" (Faulkner, 2012, p. 85).

Such is the repression that Miss Minnie finally chooses to rely on a gossip to regain public attention for herself. She even "donned her sheerest underthings and stockings and a new voile dress" and goes to the movies with her female companions on the Saturday night that a group of white men, including McLendon, have executed the black man Will Mayes on a trumped-up rape charge of her own imagination (Faulkner, 2012, p. 90). As they walk into the square, she again feels the attention she had once received. The imagined rape once again

puts her in the limelight. And she seems to enjoy the attention very much. Miss Minnie's bright clothes are like that old Southern lady myth. Miss Minnie is shrouded in the mystery of purity and perfection because of her whiteness. Just as Miss Minnie refuses to accept that she is no longer glamorous, all white Southerners refuse to believe that their glory is a reality of the past and that the South is on the decline.

Conclusion

In novels, the clothing worn by the characters can reflect characters' social status, mental outlook, aesthetic taste, cultural quality, and characteristics of the times, which are symbols created and used by the authors to deepen the themes, and grasping the symbolic meanings helps to enter the interior of the novels and understand their essence. This paper analyzes and interprets the clothing of typical female characters in *The Scarlet Letter*, *Daisy Miller* and *Dry September* from the perspective of symbolism, thus illustrating that clothing as a symbol plays an important role in highlighting and shaping the image of the main characters. In addition, clothing as a part of culture is also crucial in complementing the understanding of the context in which the novels are written and in comprehending the emotions revealed by the writers.

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