

Appeal for a Harmonious Relationship between Man and Nature

-- An Ecocriticism Analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Novels

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Abstract: Nathaniel Hawthorne is an influential novelist in American literature in 19th century. Most of his works are set in New England during the American colonial period, reflecting the social reality at that time. His masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* ensures Hawthorne as the leading American native novelist in literature. Hawthorne exposes in his novels the immense destruction and ecological crisis caused by human civilization. Based on a close reading of his works, this thesis aims to study Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels from the perspective of ecocriticism. In the thesis, the crisis of natural ecology is analyzed. At the same time, the thesis explores the relationship between human beings and nature. Hawthorne suggests that human beings should integrate into nature and maintain a harmonious relationship with nature, which is the primary concern of ecocriticism.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nature, Ecocriticism, *The Scarlet Letter*.

1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the greatest romantic novelists and a master of symbolism in the 19th century. He was born in Salem, Massachusetts, where Puritanism played a crucial role in social life. Some of his ancestors were men of prominence in the Puritan theocracy of 17th century England. In the history of American literature, Hawthorne is the pioneer of psychological analyst and has an unceasing interest in the "interior of the heart" of man's being. He has not only written many classic novels, but also many thought-provoking short stories. His works are mainly set in New England during the American colonial period, reflecting the social realities of the time. Herman Melville once praised him as "American Shakespeare". By reading Hawthorne's short stories extensively, it can be found that Hawthorne writes a lot of short stories to explore the relationship between human and the ecological environment.

Most of his works are philosophic with exquisite writing techniques. Besides four romances, Hawthorne published over 100 short stories as well as essays. With the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, Hawthorne became the best-known and greatest writer in the United States at that time. The story took place in Boston in the 1640s when Puritanism was powerful and almost influenced every aspect of people's life. It mainly tells a triangular love affair in colonial America. It is this work that established him as the leading American native novelist of the 19th century. *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne's another romance was ranked second among his works and was praised by Hawthorne's contemporaries. It is a work which is no less important in comparison with *The Scarlet Letter*. The story, set in the 17th century, starts from the conflicts of the two families and depicts the rise and fall of Pyncheon family. In the novel, Hawthorne conveys his ecological ideas to readers through the fate of the characters. *Rappaccini's Daughter* typically reveals the destruction of human spirit and ecological environment caused by human beings' excessive abuse of science and technology. These novels not only show that Hawthorne attaches importance to human survival and the

natural environment, but also indicate his serious consideration about the relationship between man and nature.

As a distinctive American writer, Hawthorne himself as well as his novels is widely studied by researchers both abroad and at home. Critics and researchers study his works from different perspectives and employ various theories all the time, which provide us with rich connotations and immortal artistic charm. For example, as early as in 1949, Mark Van Doren published his *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Critical Biology*. In 1991, scholars explore *The Scarlet Letter* from the perspective of politics and society, especially focusing on "Hester's return to Boston in the novel's epilogue" (Person, 2008: 119). Compared with the study in the west, critics in China also do some researches concerning the novel. Currently, we can find that in China, Hawthorne's research mainly focuses on *The Scarlet Letter* and in the form of essays. In terms of the theme, those articles about *The Scarlet Letter* mainly focus on discussing femininity, humanity and religious ethic, such as *Between the Human and Puritan Doctrine Inner Contradictions of The Scarlet Letter* by Xue Xiaoyun and Chen Menyue (2009). Zhang Sai (2017) interpreted *The Scarlet Letter* from a feminist perspective. Wu Lanxiang (2006) analyzed *Rappaccini's Daughter* from the perspective of modern scientific concept and argued that the scientists should communicate with the world.

Ecocriticism is a relatively new method of criticism. The concept of ecocriticism can be traced back to 1970s. In nineties of the 20th century, ecocriticism theories applied to analyzing literature emerged in America, which greatly influenced literary classics. As early as in 1996, Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Harold, 1996: 19). Garrard argues that ecocriticism aims to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis (Garrard, 2004: 4). In recent years, ecocriticism has made great achievements in theoretical construction and put forward a large number of meaningful ideas, which are of great significance for literary analysis. From what has been discussed above, it is time for some scholars and critics to

reinterpret Hawthorne's novels from the perspective of ecocriticism. Therefore, this thesis attempts to apply this critical approach to explore Hawthorne's novels which may attract much more attention about his works.

2. Ecological ideas in *The Scarlet Letter*

The ideas of ecological literature have a long history. Ecological idea dates back to the romanticism of the 18th or 19th centuries. A large number of writers and theories have contributed to the development of ecological thought over the centuries. Through careful analysis and research, we can find that all these ideas emphasize the significance of harmony between human beings and nature. American Romantic writers have expressed their love and admiration for nature in their works, especially the transcendentalism school. Likewise, influenced by transcendentalism, Hawthorne also showed his great concern about nature. As a matter of fact, we can find that Hawthorne strongly criticized human beings' excessive destruction on nature and expressed his sincere attention about the relationship between man and nature, which reflected his wishes to reach a harmonious society. Nathaniel Hawthorne's magnum opus, *The Scarlet Letter*, while primarily known for its exploration of sin, guilt, and redemption in Puritan New England, also contains subtle ecological themes that resonate with the novel's broader moral and societal commentary. Set against the backdrop of a nascent colonial settlement bordering the vast, untamed wilderness of America, the novel uses the natural environment as a metaphorical canvas to reflect the psychological states of its characters and the evolving relationship between humanity and the natural world.

The Scarlet Letter was published in 1850 and quickly became a masterpiece of American romantic novels. The book was a great success and had been a classic literature book with great value in research. Generally speaking, the novel adopting Puritan New England in the 17th century as its setting tells a story about three main characters, Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. The way Hawthorne wrote this work suggests that American Romanticism adapted itself to American puritan moralism. On the one hand, Hawthorne vigorously exposed the church's oppression of women. On the other hand, he aimed to show the great destruction of nature made by modern human civilization. In addition, Hawthorne also expressed his relentless pursuit of living in harmony with nature in *The Scarlet Letter*. He emphasized the importance of nature, arguing that nature should have intrinsic values. Nature has endowed Hawthorne with passion and inspiration for literary creation. For him, nature was a paradise where he could comfort himself and gain liberation. Therefore, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne depicted the forest as a refuge for the oppressed people in Puritan society.

One of the key ecological ideas in the novel is the juxtaposition of the cultivated town versus the surrounding wilderness. The Puritans' settlement represents an attempt to impose order and morality onto the chaotic wilderness, mirroring their efforts to control and regulate human behavior. The forest, on the other hand, symbolizes freedom, wildness, and the hidden truth that lies beyond societal norms. Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale's secret meetings in the woods illustrate how nature becomes a refuge for those who seek escape from the oppressive strictures of society, highlighting the dichotomy between the constructed and the

natural. Hester Prynne is a case in point. As the tragic fate of the novel's central character, Hester Prynne is unforgettable. In *The Scarlet Letter*, an aging English scholar sent his beautiful young wife, Hester Prynne by name, to make their new home in New England. When he came over two years later, he was bewildered to see his wife in pillory, wearing a scarlet letter A on her breast, holding her illicit child in her arms. She violated the doctrine of Puritanism and committed adultery. In the eyes of the Puritans, her actions should be blamed and severely punished. However, Hester Prynne's response to scarlet letter A was a positive one. Though living on the fringe of community, she tried her best to reestablish her fellowship with her neighbors on a new, honest basis and finally she won her love and admiration. After Hester was released, she lived in a small cottage on the edge of the forest near the outskirts of the town. The cottage "stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, towards the west" (Hawthorne, 2005: 90). She lived there calmly and freed herself from all worldly troubles, feeling unprecedented relaxation. Only in forest could Hester Prynne gain rebirth and strength.

The novel's climax, which takes place in the forest during the climactic scene between Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, underscores the transformative power of nature. Here, Dimmesdale's confession under the open sky reveals nature's capacity to facilitate truth and healing, contrasting the stifling atmosphere of the town. This moment encapsulates the idea that true redemption and self-discovery often lie beyond societal constructs, in harmony with the natural order. According to Hawthorne, nature may have magical powers to help people soothe emotions. Although Hester was confined to the jail, she still found some ways to make some decent arrangement for herself, indicating the heroine's dignity and self-esteem. It can be said that Hester has found the balance of natural ecology and reached a state of self-realization. *The Scarlet Letter* incorporates ecological ideas through its portrayal of the struggle between civilization and wilderness, the lasting impact of human actions, and the redemptive qualities of nature. The novel's exploration of these themes not only enriches its moral narrative but also speaks to the timeless relevance of understanding our place within and responsibility towards the natural world.

3. Ecological Ideas in *The House of the Seven Gables*

The House of the Seven Gables is Hawthorne's another full-length great masterpiece. It is a classic of American literature with great value in research. Hawthorne himself considers this book to be his best work because it embodies one characteristic of his thought. Although *The Scarlet Letter* is considered the most successful by critics, *The House of the Seven Gables* also has its own academic value and is worth exploring. *The House of the Seven Gables* weaves ecological motifs into its narrative fabric, subtly addressing themes of inheritance, decay, and the interconnectedness of human life with the natural world. Set against the backdrop of an aging mansion burdened by generations of secrets and curses, the novel presents a microcosm of ecological thought, illustrating how human actions echo through time and impact the environment around them. The novel mainly describes the story of the Pyncheon family's retribution for their descendants for their ancestors' murder and discusses the rise and fall of Pyncheon family. The story began with a property

conflict disguised as a crime of witchcraft in the 17th century, lasting about 150 years. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne placed much attention on man's consciousness of sin, which was a constant theme in many of his novels and tales. In this novel, sin influenced from the past to the successive generation. Every member in the family lived in the dreary and gloomy atmosphere in the cursed house. In addition, through the shaping of the personalities and destinies of different characters, the novel contains Hawthorne's reflections and explorations on the relationship between human beings and nature, as well as many social issues.

One prominent ecological idea in the novel is the concept of generational legacy and its environmental implications. The Pyncheon family's ancestral home, with its seven gables, symbolizes not just their material inheritance but also the accumulated consequences of their ancestors' greed and exploitation of natural resources. The decaying mansion, infested with secret passageways and haunted by the past, mirrors the degradation of the surrounding land, once fertile but now depleted due to years of unchecked exploitation. This decay serves as a metaphor for the long-term ecological consequences of human greed and disregard for sustainability. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne also expresses his ecological ideas in the natural garden life. Hawthorne also employs the motif of the garden as a reflection of the family's moral and spiritual condition. The overgrown and neglected garden adjacent to the house embodies the family's decline, suggesting that just as neglecting the land leads to its degradation, so too does moral decay infect the family's legacy. Conversely, the potential rejuvenation of the garden hints at the possibility of redemption and the restoration of balance, hinting at an ecological philosophy of renewal and the healing power of nature when nurtured. The Pyncheon garden is not only a microcosm of the country and nature, but also the only place in this New England town that can preserve nature. When the whole Salem town is conquered by modern technology and industrialization, the garden remains its natural scenery. In addition, Phoebe is a typical example of achieving self-realization. Phoebe is an innocent and kind country girl, the daughter of Hepzibah's cousin Arthur. She is a young, energetic and confident woman. Phoebe as the embodiment of an angel, is the only person in the house of the seven gables who has the ability to love herself and others through Hawthorne's description. Her love of work inspired Hepzibah's passion for self-reliance and a true understanding of toil and suffering among people around her. Phoebe can be regarded as a symbol of light and beauty, because her body embodies harmony with her surroundings.

Moreover, the novel explores the psychological effects of living in an environment shaped by past injustices. The oppressive atmosphere of the house, weighed down by the ghosts of the past, affects the inhabitants' mental and emotional well-being, echoing contemporary understandings of how our built environment influences our psyche. Hawthorne implies that the health of the land and the structures we inhabit are intertwined with our own well-being, underscoring the importance of fostering healthy ecosystems for a balanced society. What's more, Hawthorne expresses the idea of pastoralism in the process of returning to nature, which is manifested in the portrayal of Phoebe. She comes from the countryside and her image has a strong connection to ecological environment. After living in the house of the seven gables for a period of time, Phoebe rationally chose to

return to his hometown for a few days to recuperate and regain energy, rather than persistently staying in the old mansion and confronting the environment. Hawthorne expressed a deep ecological view of nature through the characterization of Phoebe. Only by maintaining a humble and respectful attitude towards nature and not imposing willpower on other organisms in the ecosystem can one achieve maximum self-realization. *The House of the Seven Gables* presents a nuanced exploration of ecological ideas, demonstrating how the past actions of individuals and families can shape the physical and emotional landscapes they inhabit. Through its portrayal of generational curses, decaying structures, and the potential for renewal, Hawthorne's novel offers a compelling commentary on the interconnectedness of human societies with the natural world and the urgent need for reconciliation and sustainability.

4. Ecological ideas in Rappaccini's Daughter

Rappaccini's Daughter is a short story written by Nathaniel Hawthorne published in the collection *Mosses from an Old Manse*. The novel has always been considered one of his best short stories. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's haunting tale *Rappaccini's Daughter*, ecological ideas permeate the narrative, serving as both a metaphorical backdrop and a critical lens through which to examine the intricate relationship between humanity, nature, and morality. Set in the lush yet ominous gardens of Padua, the story intertwines themes of environmental manipulation, the consequences of scientific experimentation on nature, and the blurred lines between human nature and the natural world. In the *Rappaccini's Daughter*, Hawthorne transplants the God of Garden into Rappaccini's garden in order to try to solve the medical disputes in Massachusetts in 1840s. The story is about Doctor Rappaccini, a medical researcher in medieval Padua who cultivates a lot of poisonous plants in his garden. The protagonists' ideology is created by a series of imaginary ideological relations. Doctor Rappaccini who is the oppressor, plays the role of God to manipulate her daughter's fate. His attitude towards nature is to change nature recklessly. In his opinion, all medicinal virtues are comprised within those substances which are termed vegetable. In the novel, Rappaccini's garden is full of beautiful and bright flowers. Hawthorne takes the garden as the protagonist, interpreting the relationship between human beings and nature, and revealing the deep social problems behind ecological problems. However, instead of happiness or relaxation, these flowers bring the reader a terrible and unnatural feeling. These beautiful flowers began to threaten human life, which indicated that the behavior of changing nature without following the laws of nature can have terrifying consequences. Hawthorne employs the garden as a metaphor for the interconnectedness and interdependence of life forms within ecosystems. The toxic plants mirror Rappaccini's corrupted soul, suggesting that just as the health of an ecosystem depends on the balance of its constituents, so too does human morality rest on our respectful coexistence with nature. The tragic love story between Beatrice and Giovanni underscores this idea, as their union, hindered by the toxic influence of Rappaccini's experiments, embodies the destructive potential of disrupting nature's delicate harmony.

In the historical research reviews of *Rappaccini's Daughter*, some scholars have seen a false God in Doctor Rappaccini, whose arrogance prompted him to create a fallen Garden of

Eden on Earth (Liu Yiqing, 1993). For example, when Doctor Rappaccini personally took care of his garden, he must wear a pair of gloves and a mask to protect himself. And in order to avoid the poisonous plants, Rappaccini brought up his daughter to take care of them. However, the effects of these plants on his daughter were catastrophic. While caring for these poisonous flowers, her body became infected with poison, which was fatal to her. Rappaccini is an image of a terrible father, and he represents a terrible force which people can't resist (Wu Lanxiang, 2006). To be honest, Rappaccini violated the discipline of following the laws of nature by making her daughter stronger during treatment. We can find that Rappaccini's creation broke the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. He cultivated various poisonous plants in his garden, which were more horribly deleterious than nature (Dan Bing & Qing Ren, 2012). As a scientist, Rappaccini committed the crime of intellectual pride, which led to disharmony with nature. If the garden cultivated by Doctor Rappaccini were not poisonous, then it could be a great example of harmonious relationship between man and nature. In other words, it was Rappaccini's experiment that indirectly led to the death of his beloved daughter. From this point of view, the failure of Rappaccini's experiment is inevitable.

At its core, the tale presents a stark warning against human arrogance and the dangerous pursuit of control over nature. Rappaccini, a brilliant but obsessive scientist, epitomizes this hubris. His garden, a microcosm of his scientific dominion, is not a harmonious ecosystem but a manipulated paradise where plants are imbued with deadly poisons. This artificial paradise symbolizes humanity's misguided attempts to dominate and alter nature for personal ambition, reflecting broader ecological concerns about the long-term impacts of such interventions. Beatrice, Rappaccini's daughter, personifies the tragic outcome of these experiments. Born and raised amidst toxic flora, she becomes a living embodiment of her father's tampered creations, her own body infused with poison. Her existence questions the ethical boundaries of science and raises ecological concerns about the unintended consequences of disrupting natural balances. Her daughter's isolation and her ultimate fate highlight the alienation that can result from human disconnection with unadulterated nature. The story also touches upon the concept of nature's resilience and potential for redemption. Despite the garden's corrupted state, Hawthorne hints at the possibility of restoration and balance, albeit through the tragic sacrifice of Beatrice. Her death can be seen as a purification ritual, clearing the way for a return to a more natural order, reminding readers of nature's capacity for self-healing when freed from human interference.

It is not the first time Hawthorne has portrayed his scientists as false god. For example, in *The Birthmark*, Aylmer has also committed the unforgivable sin of experimenting on other people. The results of Rappaccini's experiment infected his daughter with this deadly poison. Hawthorne tells us some tragic stories about greedy scientists, who pursue scientific achievements endlessly, and finally human nature is destroyed by scientific rationality. As a matter of fact, the flowers in Rappaccini's garden are also victims of scientific experiments. Human beings apply too much science and technology to control nature, and even make flowers lose contact with nature. In the 19th century, human beings began to use science and technology to exploit nature in order to pursue more interests. At that time, people's scientific research was not for the rational understanding and use of

nature. Rather, in many cases, human beings violated the laws of nature, disrupted the balance between nature and ecology, and even depleted natural resources. Due to the failure of scientific experiments, they all lost their lovely personalities. Although nature can benefit human beings, it also has the power to punish irrational behavior. The consequence of the excessive development of science and technology is that it has led to a huge destruction to natural ecology and the deterioration of the ecological environment. Therefore, it is a satire on man's desire to conquer nature to some extent. In conclusion, *Rappaccini's Daughter* is a profound exploration of ecological themes, cautioning against the perils of unchecked scientific manipulation of nature and emphasizing the importance of respecting natural balances. Through its vivid imagery and tragic narrative, Hawthorne urges us to consider the ethical implications of our actions towards the environment and to recognize that our own wellbeing is inherently intertwined with the health of the natural world. The tale stands as a timeless reminder of the delicate dance between humanity and nature, and the dire consequences when that balance is disturbed.

5. Conclusion

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a distinguished novelist of romanticism in the 19th Century of the United States. As a distinctive American writer, Hawthorne aroused the attention of many a literary critic and reader. Previous critics have paid great attention to the symbolism, or feminism and so on revealed in Hawthorne's works. Few critics have focused on analyzing them through ecocriticism. However, Hawthorne's ecological ideas still provide insight into the current global ecological crisis. During his twelve solitary years, Hawthorne showed a deep love for nature, especially the plants and trees of his hometown. He strongly opposed the wanton exploitation and destruction of nature by individuals and the destruction of ecological balance. Thus, this thesis is an attempt to apply the theory of Ecocriticism to analyze these three novels. This thesis is also attempted to reveal the relationship between human beings and nature.

Through analyzing Hawthorne's three novels from the perspective of ecocriticism, our findings can be summarized in the following two aspects. First and foremost, Hawthorne's focus is mainly on the relationship between man and nature. In *The Scarlet Letter*, it can be seen that Hawthorne exposes the ecological crisis of nature. And Hawthorne extends his concern to human society and human spirit through the concern for natural ecology. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne also reveals the relationship between man and nature through the shaping of characters. In *Rappaccini's Daughter*, he proposes a viewpoint that science destroys natural ecology by proving that scientists use technology to change plants in nature.

In Hawthorne's opinion, nature is sacred and inviolable. No matter how powerful human beings are, individuals must respect nature and its laws. If individuals blindly plunder and destroy natural resources, they will be punished with tragic consequences. In addition, Hawthorne has shown us the necessity of building a harmonious world. We should also pay more attention to the sustainable development model of nature. Hawthorne aims to warn us that individuals should return to nature and protect the ecological environment. We need to construct a society of harmony and equality between man and nature. There is no way out of the excessive exploitation of nature, and establishing the new relation is the

only way for human beings to survive.

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