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A Comparative Analysis of the Symbolic Meanings in The Scarlet Letter and A Dream of Red Mansions

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Abstract

As representative classics of Chinese and American literature, A Dream of Red Mansions and The Scarlet Letter do not have documented literary influence relations, which renders them suitable objects for the parallel study of comparative literature. From the perspective of thematology, this thesis takes two core motifs character naming motif and red color motif as analytical anchors to explore how identical literary motifs acquire divergent symbolic connotations when embedded within disparate religious, philosophical and socio cultural contexts. Rather than merely listing thematic similarities and differences between the two novels, this comparative analysis attempts to trace how cultural traditions reshape symbolic meaning production. By close reading of textual details and engagement with existing scholarship, this study further reflects on the risks of ethnocentrism in cross cultural interpretation, and seeks to reveal how thematic motifs mediate cultural imagination between China and the West.

Keywords

Comparative Literature; Parallel Study; Thematology; Motif; Symbolism; A Dream of Red Mansions; The Scarlet Letter

1. Introduction

The thesis takes *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* as the objects of study, using symbolism as the starting point for comparative study. The aspects of study include the names of characters in both works and the red imagery in order to explore the different symbolic meanings of the same symbolic entities under different historical, religious, and cultural backgrounds, aiming to discover literary value understanding and comparing the deep cultural connotations.

Symbolism is a powerful literary approach that has been employed by authors across different cultures and time periods to express deeper meanings and explore complex themes. *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin are two classic and eminent works that extensively utilize symbolism. Despite the fact that in totally different historical, religious, and cultural

contexts, the novels offer fascinating insights into how symbolism shapes the narrative and enhances the readers' understanding of the underlying themes.

The Scarlet Letter is a typical example of American Puritan literature. Published in 1850, the novel tells the story of Hester Prynne, a woman who is publicly shamed and ostracized for committing adultery. The symbolism in this work is profound and pervasive, and the scarlet letter "A" is served as the most prominent symbol. It not only represents Hester's sin, but also stands for her strength and resilience. Additionally, it evolves to represent different meanings to different characters, reflecting the complexity of human nature and the societal constraints at that time.

On the other hand, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a masterpiece of Chinese classical literature. This novel is set in the Qing Dynasty and tells the story of the Jia family from rich to poor and unfortunate. In this work, the use of symbolism is also rich and complex, with the word red being a prominent symbol. In Chinese culture, red is not only associated with prosperity, wealth, and power, but symbolizes the fate of the main characters, foreshadowing passion, love, and tragedy as well.

Within comparative-literature scholarship, this research adopts parallel study, which conducts cross-cultural comparison independent of real historical contact or source-influence relationships (Chen, 2004: 123). Although Cao Xueqin and Nathaniel Hawthorne had no access to each other's works, the two texts display strong comparability from the perspective of thematology. Both works rely heavily on symbolic motifs to articulate reflections on fate, morality, love and social order. Two recurrent motifs stand out: the character-naming motif and the red-color motif. According to thematological theories, a motif refers to a reusable elementary literary unit that can circulate across cultural boundaries; yet its symbolic value is never fixed, but constantly reconstructed by local religious traditions, philosophical ideas and social norms (Yuan, 2013: 47). It is exactly this process of reconstruction that this thesis intends to unpack.

Nevertheless, parallel comparison faces inherent methodological risks: researchers may risk forcing homogenized frameworks onto heterogeneous cultural texts. Therefore, this thesis will avoid crude analogies. Instead of simplistically equating symbols across cultures, it will contextualize each motif within its indigenous cultural system to interpret its generated meanings.

The whole thesis is divided into five parts. The first part is mainly a brief introduction to the structure of the thesis elaborating the relevant ideas and concepts. The second part mainly introduces *The Scarlet Letter* (2011) and *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1983) as well as the definition of symbolism, which also makes a brief introduction of the previous research results. The third part compares the symbolism of the characters' names in the two works. While discussing the similarities, it also talks about comparative differences from different cultural and philosophical perspectives. The fourth part analyzes and compares the symbolism of the color red in the two works to explore the different symbolic meanings under

different historical, religious, and cultural backgrounds. The last part makes the conclusion summarizing the whole thesis, and reiterating the main ideas of the thesis.

The thesis demonstrated the symbolic comparison analysis of the two works *The Scarlet Letter* (2011) and *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1983). Except for analyzing the different meanings of the characters' names and the color red, the thesis also explores the profound cultural connotations.

2. An overview of the literature

Before proceeding with the study, it is essential to provide a brief introduction to these two works and to understand basic concept of symbolism with its classifications. Additionally, to study as well as summarize previous studies of symbolism in both works also play significant role in collecting relevant studies.

2.1. Brief introductions of The Scarlet Letter and A Dream of Red Mansions

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was a prominent American novelist and a pioneer in psychological fiction of the 19th century. Born in Salem, Massachusetts, into a family with deep Puritan roots, Hawthorne's works often explored themes of morality, sin, and original sin, whose works deeply influenced by his upbringing.

Hawthorne' s early works include the short story collection *Twice-Told Tales* (2001) and *The Scarlet Letter*, which is his most famous work and a classic in American literature. *The Scarlet Letter* tells a story of love that defies the moral norms of 17th-century New England Puritan society and the tragedy that ensues. This work not only demonstrates Hawthorne's profound insight into human nature but also reflects his complex attitude towards the Puritan legacy.

The Scarlet Letter is an 1850 romantic work of fiction in a historical setting, which is written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is considered to be his magnum opus. Set in 17th-century Puritan Boston, Massachusetts during the years 1642 to 1649, it tells the story of Hester Prynne. She conceives a daughter through an adulterous affair and struggles to create a new life of repentance and dignity. Hawthorne explores themes of legalism, sin, and guilt through the book. It is Nathaniel's first work to employ symbolism. It is a great success because of the skillful use of symbolism. He applies symbolism to transmit his personal views towards the society as well as his hope for it. (Tong 3)

Hawthorne's writing style is delicate and rich in symbolism, with a particular skill in portraying the psychological state of his characters and the influence of their social environment. His works often carry a dark, mysterious atmosphere, style later termed as Gothic Revival (2002). Through symbolism, Hawthorne adds depth and complexity to the story, making readers interpret the moral and religious issues in *The Scarlet Letter* from different angles. The use of symbolism also reflects

Hawthorne's deep understanding of human nature and his critical attitude toward societal norms and expectations.

A Dream of Red Mansions, an ancient Chinese chapter novel, also known as *Stone Records*, is listed as the first of the Four Great Classical Novels of China (1982), and is generally considered to be written by Cao Xueqin, a writer of the Qing Dynasty.

Cao Xueqin was born into an official family, and his ancestors were prominent figures in the early Qing Dynasty. However, by the time of his father's generation, the family fortune had declined. It is said that Cao Xueqin' s youth was marked by the rise and fall of his family, which provided rich material for his later creation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

Cao Xueqin' s life was quite tumultuous. He lived in poverty in his later years and had to rely on selling paintings and the support of friends to make a living. Despite these hardships, Cao persevered in his writing, leaving behind the manuscript for the first eighty chapters of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. According to the research of the scholars, Cao did not complete the entire novel during his lifetime, and the latter forty chapters are believed to have been written by another author, Gao E.

A Dream of Red Mansions is a long novel set in the rise and fall of the four families of Jia, Shi, Wang and Xue. From the perspective of the main character, Jia Baoyu, it describes the life of a group of boudoir ladies, showing the real beauty of humanity and tragedy. It can be said to be an epic showing female beauty from various aspects. What's more, it is a novel of interpersonal relations that has a far influence on the world, and is recognized as the pinnacle of Chinese classical novels, an encyclopedia of Chinese feudal society, and the epitome of traditional culture.

2.2. Definition of symbolism

It is critical to draw a distinction between symbol as a general literary device and the European Symbolist Movement of the late 19th century. The latter is a specific artistic and literary trend originating in France, which pursues indirect suggestion against realistic representation. However, the symbolic writing practiced by Hawthorne and Cao Xueqin does not belong to this movement. Instead, they deploy symbol as a literary device, and concrete objects, names, colors and images that carry abstract ideological and emotional implications within textual contexts.

From the perspective of comparative literature thematology, symbols in literary texts can be understood as the concrete realization of cultural motifs. A motif provides the basic material, while specific cultural contexts endow it with multi-layered symbolic meanings. A motif may retain partial similarities across cultures, yet its core connotation can diverge sharply (Yuan, 2013: 52). This theoretical perspective underpins the whole comparative analysis in the following chapters.

2.3. Previous studies on The Scarlet Letter and A Dream of Red Mansions

Zhu (181) thinks that the characters in *The Scarlet Letter* have their own different symbolic meanings. There are three main characters, Hester, Dimmesdale and Roger. In the novel, Hester represents repentant sinners, and Dimmesdale represents half-repentant sinners. Roger represents the true sinners. Hester frankly admitted her guilt, wearing a scarlet letter A on her chest forever as a symbol of evil, but she was helpful, thrifty, and finally detached. Her image represents Hawthorne's view on sin that one must be honest and "lay bare your worst aspects" (Dong 92). Therefore, Hester Prynne represents the penitent sinner, whereas Arthur Dimmesdale is different. He lacks the courage to admit his guilt, but his internal sense of sin tortures him and brings him much suffering. In the end, he takes Hester's and Pearl's hands and walks onto the scaffold, exposing the scarlet letter on his chest and gets into death. Dimmesdale undergoes a process from hiding his sin to admitting his guilt, ultimately attaining spiritual release. However, another character Roger, former husband of Hester, represents the true sinner from the victim. He approaches Dimmesdale under the guise of a doctor, pretending to show concern while secretly probing his inner secrets to destroy Dimmesdale's soul and mind.

The scarlet letter A in the novel represents many symbolic meanings which is researched by many persons. Firstly, it symbolizes "Adultery" for Hester, and she was sentenced by Galvinist Church and humiliated by wearing a red scarlet letter A on her chest. What's more, Hester never said the priest's name and was willing to be punished for her loved. While, Arthur didn't admit himself because of his desire for fame and status, just watching her being exposed and humiliated. The scarlet letter A also symbolizes the lover was the priest, Arthur Dimmesdale. As the time goes, Hester possessed an art that sufficed to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. She has a good command of needlework. By degrees, her handiwork is termed the fashion, so the scarlet letter A could represent "able" to Hester. She likes to help others and is ready to devote herself in trouble.

It was perceived, too, that while Hester never put forward even the humblest title to share in the world' s privileges,—further than to breathe the common air, and earn daily bread for little Pearl and for herself by the faithful labor of her hands,—she was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man, whenever benefits were to be conferred. (Hawthorne, 2011: 104)

At this time, the letter A symbolizes "angel" to describe Hester's devoting behavior. In addition, the letter could also be regarded as "alone", "alienation" for Hester and "avenge", "agony" for Roger. It could be said that the letter A goes across the whole novel just as the title.

As for *A Dream of Red Mansions*, it is one of the most profound works in Chinese literature that employs symbolism, which runs throughout the novel. Many of the main characters' names indicate their lives and fates. Jade, a value jewelry plays a magic role in the story, which is also set to be the beginning of the novel and symbolizes Jia Baoyu's unique character and his emotional affairs with Lin Daiyu

and Xue Baochai. Additionally, many of the plots have symbolic meanings. For instance, the rise and fall of the Jia family symbolize the decline of the feudal dynasty. Also, there are many dreams appearing frequently in the novel, such as Jia Baoyu's dream of the land of illusion, which not only foretell the fates of the characters, but also reflects the author's philosophical considerations of the relationship between reality and dreams, illusion and truth. There are many numbers appearing in *A Dream of Red Mansions* too, which indicate the passage of time and the cycle of life such as "twelve" and "twenty-four". "Twelve" may be related to fate of the twelve beauties, while "twenty-four" may relate to the twenty-four solar terms or the twenty-four hours in a day. Poems, songs, riddles, and other elements that appear in the novel often have a predictive nature, which foreshadow the fates the different characters and the development of the story.

Sun and Xiao (98) hold the opinion that time flows away like a gently burbling stream, and both works use the symbol of the stream (water) to express the poignant parting of falling flowers with the relentless flow of water. Good times past are like passing clouds and never to return. However, the symbolic meanings of the two streams have their unique aspects.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the stream serves as a metaphor for the pursuit of moral purity within a world corrupted by societal ills. It symbolizes the protagonist's quest for an ideal, pure existence in the decay and filth of the Jia family's world. The stream' s presence suggests that even in a world fraught with deception and impurity, there remains a sanctuary where one can find solace and hope.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the stream is symbolic of Hester Prynne's inner purity and her struggle for redemption. It may represent the cleansing of her soul and the efforts she make to atone for her sins. The stream's association with Hester's moral and spiritual journey is closely tied to the novel's themes of sin, redemption, and moral resurrection.

Both works utilize the symbol of water to convey deeper meanings and to explore the moral and philosophical dimensions of their respective stories. The streams or water in these novels serve as powerful symbols that enrich the narrative and provide insight into the characters' psychological states and the broader themes of the works.

To sum up, existing studies have explored symbolic implications of character names in *The Scarlet Letter*, and many scholars have examined abundant symbolic images in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Some comparative thesiss have touched upon water motifs and red imagery between the two novels. Nevertheless, most prior comparative discussions remain at the level of listing similarities and differences of images, and few studies apply thematology of comparative literature to systematically analyze the dual motifs of character naming and red color. They rarely discuss how cultural-religious systems reconstruct the connotation of shared

literary motifs. This thesis fills this gap by adopting thematology and parallel-study perspective to further interrogate the mechanism of symbolic-meaning formation in the two canonical works.

3. Comparison of the symbols of the characters' names in the two works

In the novels *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the symbolism of characters' names are important literary features, and each of them reflects the author' s ingenuity in a unique way. The use of the symbols of the names make the two works have richer literary values and profound ideological connotation.

3.1. Similarities of the symbols of characters' names in the two works

From the perspective of thematology, symbolic character naming can be regarded as a widespread character-naming motif. This motif exists both in Chinese classical novels and nineteenth-century American fiction, yet it operates under distinct cultural logics. In both *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter*, this motif is deployed to foreshadow personalities and destinies of fictional figures.

For example, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the names of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu respectively foretell their characters and destinies, while in *The Scarlet Letter*, the names of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale foreshadow their moral dilemmas and inner struggles.

The names of characters also indicate the themes of the novels. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the name "Jia Baoyu" with its "precious jade" hints at his discord with the vulgar world, reflecting the novel's pursuit of a pure world. Similarly, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne name her daughter "Pearl" symbolizes her purity and rarity, reflecting the novel' s exploration of sin and redemption.

In both works, the characters' names are used to hint at the emotional relationships and connections between them. For instance, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the shared "jade" in the names of Xue Baochai and Jia Baoyu suggests their intricate emotional entanglements. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scarlet letter A on Hester subtly imply the secret relationship between Arthur Dimmesdale.

It also reflects the cultural characteristics of their backgrounds. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, surnames like Jia, Lin, and Xue reflect traditional Chinese family values and surname culture.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne successfully applies Greek mythology, biblical allusions, words initials, implications of words and similar words in form or pronunciation to name the three main characters: Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, which makes these names full of symbolic significance. (Nan, 2015: 2167)

In summary, in both *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Scarlet Letter*, the authors carefully design the names of the characters to make readers understand the

characters' personalities, fates, and the themes of the novels on a deeper level. The use of symbolic naming techniques enriches the literary value and profound thought of both works.

3.2. Dissimilarities of the symbols of characters' names in the two works

3.2.1. Different symbolic meanings of the characters' names in different religious,philosophical and mythological backgrounds

In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin, the characters' names often carry symbolic meanings that reflect the novels' themes and the authors' intentions.

From the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, it clearly shows that the story happening at the new colony, Puritan Boston in 17th-century. Also, the founders wanted to build up a Utopia with Puritan morality with cemetery and prison. At that time, religion and law were almost identical for people. The heroine of the story, Hester Prynne, did not lose the courage of life, and she still held a strong heart when in trouble, full of yearning for a better life.

As some scholars have pointed out, the name "Hester" bears phonetic resemblance to Hestia, the beautiful virgin goddess of the hearth, architecture, and the right ordering of domesticity, the family and the state in Greek mythology (Nan, 2015: 2165). This etymological conjecture offers one interpretative possibility, though it cannot be treated as Hawthorne's definite authorial intention.

Hester, indeed has these good qualities. The author describes her with "perfect elegance on a large scale", "dark and abundant hair" and "marked brow and deep black eyes" (Hawthorne 6-7). From these words, readers could clearly understand that that Hester' s appearance and behavior is like Goddess. She is always ready to help others and make needlework to raise herself and her daughter. Finally, she is respected by others who despised her at first. What' s more "Hester" is like hastier (comparative degree of hasty) both in form and pronunciation, which means "done with very great haste and without due deliberation". In the novel, Hester's marriage with Roger Chillingworth is hasty without thought, and her desire of keeping her daughter Pearl with her also without thought. Additionally, Hester's love for Dimmesdale also reflect the word "hasty".

Arthur has the same first letter with "Adam" in Bible. The sin of Arthur and Hester is also like that between Adam and Eve. Just like Adam, Arthur also could not resist the temptation of love and lust. He falls in love with Hester quickly and commits the so-called adultery.

At the beginning of the story of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, it tells the origin of the "Psychic Treasure Jade"（通灵宝玉）, which is originally a stone left over from Nü wa' s mending of the sky in Chinese mythology. Later, it was carried down to the mortal world by a monk and a Taoist, where it transformed into the beautiful jade that Jia Baoyu was born with in his mouth. This jade also represents a symbol of purity,

beauty, resilience and integrity. Chinese believe that jade could bring good luck to people, which continue to influence the aesthetic and value concepts of the people.

The story also tells Zhen Shiyin's story as well as Jia Yucun. The surnames of the two persons is Zhen（甄） and Jia（贾）, which represent Chinese characters 真（true） and 假 (false). In Buddhism, it does explore the relationship between reality and illusion, which is called Reality(真） and Emptiness（空）. The Zhen Mansion and Jia Mansion are the two big families in the novels, where the big matters happen. Jia's family has a very miserable ending like Zhen's family, which strengthen the philosophical implications of the novel.

These names are rich with symbolism and contribute to the depth and complexity of the characters and the novels' themes. The authors use these names to convey meanings that resonate with the readers' understanding of the cultural and mythological references embedded in the names.

3.2.2. Dissimilarities of symbolic meanings of the characters' names in the two works

Hester is one of the most important characters in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne gives her this name showing his love and attention to her. Hester not only has elegant behavior and appearance, but also represents many good characteristics. She always helps other like a rightful inmate instead of a guest. The glimmered letter, at this time, enlightens herself and brings comfort to others like the Goddess, which mentioned before.

What's more, Hester's surname has two different meanings. Firstly, "Prynne" has similar pronunciation of the word "prurient"(characterized by lust). Hester's husband Roger couldn't give the love she wants, so when she met Dimmesdale who is talented and knowledgeable, they soon fell in love with each other. However, her "adultery" was exposed because of pregnant, and people there punished her by wearing a scarlet letter A on her chest. The author designing Hester's surname as "Prynne" discovers the source of her lifelong pain. Secondly, "Prynne" is similar to the word "prune"（cultivate,tend, and cut back the growth of） in both form and pronunciation. When Hawthorne portrayed the character, he not only pointed out the reason why Hester crimed, but also trusted that Hester could create a new life through her own efforts.

As for another character, Dimmesdale who is the priest and knowledgeable, but he didn't admit the secret for 7 years. There is a word "dim" in the name, which means lacking clarity;not bright or harsh, and a "dale"(an open river valley in hilly area). It can be inferred that Dimmesdale is in pain for a long time and faces much trouble. However, his pain is from his internal heart, instead of external materials. He's a hypocritical and cowardly person. On the one hand, he did something wrong against God, but didn't have the courage to recognize fault because he was a holy, respectable priest to others and didn't want to lose his position and fame. On the other hand, his pain in his heart disturbed him so severely that he looked so weak.

After seven years' conflict, he went to the scaffold and confided to the crowds of the evil that has been hidden for a long time.

Another main character, Roger Chillingworth, is small in stature, with a furrowed visage. He had lived alone for a long time, only looking for revenge, which blinded his eyes. "Roger" is similar to "rogue" (a deceitful and unreliable scoundrel). He is ugly and old and couldn't give the love his Hester wants, but he still got married with her. It could be said that Roger led to the tragedy. When back from Indian area knowing his wife's betrayal, he dedicates all his time and energy to seeking revenge and hunting for "treasure", which is the deep-hidden secret in Arthur Dimmesdale's heart. As a physician, Roger used his position to get into Dimmesdale's heart and constantly torture him.

His surname "Chillingworth" is made up of "chilling" and "worth". Chilling means so scary as to cause chills and shudders, which indicates Roger is cold-blooded and to realize his desire of avenging, he lost his own meaning of life. By using the word "worth", Hawthorne intends to imply that the physician's life is totally worthless. In order to seek revenge on the clergyman, Chillingworth gives up his identity and goes to great lengths to cause physical and mental suffering to Dimmesdale (Nan 2167).

Hester's daughter Pearl, which means very precious, is the symbol of life and vitality. She almost has all the good characters. As the result of the scarlet letter A, she is like a ray of sunshine warming Hester and making Hester temporarily forget the pain.

In A Dream of Red Mansions, Cao Xueqin named the characters with many images, such as flowers, birds, and jade. All these names reflect the fate and characteristics of the characters.

Jia Baoyu's name discovers his status first. Jia's Mansion is one of the biggest families in the novel, symbolizing nobility and social status. "Bao" means precious and valuable, suggesting Jia Baoyu' s central role in the novel and his personal worth. He is considered a treasure of the family and also symbolizes the valuation of innocence and beauty. Jade has rich symbolic meanings in Chinese culture, including virtue, purity, resilience, and integrity. The connection between Jia Baoyu and jade profoundly reflects his personality traits and fate. The "Psychic Treasure Jade" that he was born with is not only a token of his birth but also a link between him and the world of "Red Mansions", as well as a symbol of his special fate and character. What's more, in Chinese, "yu(玉）" (jade) is homophonic with "yu（欲）" (desire), which suggests Jia Baoyu's complex relationship with desire, emotion, and human nature. His passion for art, deep affection for women, and questioning of secular values all embody this complex internal conflict.

Lin Daiyu's name is also rich in symbolism. "Lin" as a common surname can evoke images of trees and forests, symbolizing the beauty of nature and vitality, which resonates with Lin Daiyu's natural beauty and her fragile vitality. "Dai" refers to the black pigment that ancient women used to paint their eyebrows, metaphorically representing Lin Daiyu's beauty and her feminine traits. In the novel, Lin Daiyu is

renowned for her exceptional talent and profound emotions (Yu 119). The "Yu" in once again emphasizes the association with jade, as well as the relationship and love with Jia Baoyu.

Xue Baochai belongs to the Xue family, which is one of the four great families in the novel. "Bao" not only has the meanings mentioned before, but also indicates Xue Baochai's central role in the novel and her personal worth. She is considered a treasure of the family and also symbolizes the valuation of innocence and beauty. "Chai" refers to an ancient hairpin used by women to secure their hair, typically made of precious metals like gold and silver. This part of her name metaphorically represents Xue Baochai's external beauty, dignified demeanor, and feminine traits.

Despite different symbolic meaning of the characters' names, it can be inferred that both authors make much effort to designing their names, and all the names could reflect certain information to readers to have a better understanding of the novels.

The above comparison of the character-naming motif demonstrates a core thematological viewpoint: the same literary motif can adopt different expressive forms under disparate cultural systems. The Scarlet Letter draws on Greek mythology and biblical allusion for its naming practice, while A Dream of Red Mansions relies on Chinese homophonic puns and jade-related cultural archetypes. Both authors utilize the naming motif to reflect on individual fate, but their symbolic strategies are deeply constrained by local mythological, religious and philosophical traditions.

4. Comparison of the symbols of color red in the two works

The Scarlet Letter and *A Dream of Red Mansions* both have the same color "red" in the titles and they have some points in common. However, the image symbolizes different meanings in different cultural backgrounds. In China, people always like red which symbolizes luck and happiness, while people in western countries don't think so.

4.1. Similarities of the symbols of color red in the two works

Red constitutes a typical color motif in thematological research. This motif recurs across world literatures, yet its symbolic valence is highly dependent on specific cultural contexts. In both *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the red motif runs through the whole text and carries weighty thematic connotations concerning human nature, morality and fate.

First, In *The Scarlet Letter*, the word "red" is at the core of the plot, threading through the entire novel and becoming a symbol of the protagonist Hester Prynne's fate. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the word "red" is also central to the novel, symbolizing the birth and destiny of Jia Baoyu, as well as representing the mundane world, prosperity, and illusion. On the other hand, both *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Dream of the Red Mansions* delve into profound themes such as human nature, sin,

morality, and fate, with the word "red" serving as a symbol and vehicle for these themes.

Therefore, the word "red" holds significant symbolic meaning and importance in both *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Dream of the Red Mansions*.

4.2. Dissimilarities of the symbols of color red in the two works

4.2.1. Different symbolic meanings of the color red in different religious and cultural backgrounds

In Chinese culture, the color red is often associated with joy, luck, and prosperity. It is the traditional color used in celebrating the Spring Festival, weddings, and other important occasions. Red also symbolizes love and passion in Chinese culture and is believed to bring good fortune and happiness.

In Western culture, red also holds different symbolic meanings. It is commonly associated with love, passion, and romance, as seen in the red roses given on Valentine's Day. Additionally, red symbolizes danger and warning in Western culture, such as the red light in traffic signals indicating stop.

In religious contexts, red has special symbolic significance in various religions. In Christianity, red represents the blood of Jesus Christ, symbolizing his sacrifice and redemption. In Hinduism, red is associated with the goddesses Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and prosperity) and Durga (goddess of power and protection), representing purity, spiritual wisdom, and the essence of life (Shi 74).

Overall, the imagery of red varies in different cultural and religious contexts between Chinese and Western cultures. In Chinese culture, red is more closely associated with joy, luck, and prosperity, while in Western culture, it is more associated with love, passion, danger, and warning. In different religious backgrounds, red also has its own symbolic meanings.

4.2.2. Dissimilarities of symbolic meanings of the color red in the two works

The Scarlet Letter and *A Dream of Red Mansions* are two classic novels that employ the color red symbolically, but with different meanings reflective of their respective cultural and literary contexts.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the color red is most prominently symbolized by the scarlet letter "A" that Hester Prynne is forced to wear as a mark of her adultery. The scarlet letter A is a symbol of shame, guilt, and sin in the Puritan society in which the story is set. However, over the course of the novel, the letter's meaning evolves. It comes to represent Hester's strength, her ability to endure societal scorn, and even her status as a competent and compassionate member of the community. The red color of the letter can also be seen as a symbol of passion, love, and the human capacity for sin and redemption. In the novel, red is used to denote societal condemnation and sin signifying Hester's individual sin and transformation. The symbolism of the red letter changes throughout the novel, from a symbol of shame to one of empowerment.

In contrast, *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin, a masterpiece of Chinese literature, the color red holds different connotations. The novel's title itself, "Hongloumeng" (*A Dream of Red Mansions*), refers to the grand residence where the story primarily takes place. The color red symbolizes wealth, luxury, and the opulence of the Jia family as well as the main characters of the novel. It also represents beauty, elegance, and the transience of life, as the novel delves into the decline of the family and the inevitable fall. Moreover, red can be associated with passion, romantic love, and the emotional intensity of the relationships depicted in the story, which symbolizes the grandeur and social status of the Jia family.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, red is also multi-layered: it symbolizes material prosperity as well as the transience and disillusionment of worldly glory. The color red is used to describe the physical environment and the lifestyle of the characters, reflecting their collective fortune and destiny.

Both novels use the color red to explore complex themes, but they do so in ways that are deeply rooted in their respective cultural and literary traditions, leading to distinct symbolic meanings.

The divergent symbolic values of the red motif in the two novels illustrate a key insight from thematology: a motif does not possess fixed inherent meaning. Instead, meaning is generated in the interaction between the motif and specific religious ethics, social customs and literary traditions. In Puritan New-England context, red is first marked as the symbol of sin and passion, which gradually obtains new meanings through Hester's personal experience; in Chinese feudal cultural context, red is tied to prosperity, worldly splendor and the vanity of mortal glory. Although they share the same color motif, their symbolic trajectories are shaped by their respective civilizations.

5. Conclusion

The thesis has explored the dissimilarities of symbolic meanings of characters' names and the color red in *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Through a comparative analysis, it has been evident that the color red holds distinct symbolic connotations in each novel, reflective of their respective cultural and literary contexts.

By comparing the symbolic meanings of the characters' names in these two works, readers can uncover how the authors use symbolic naming to deepen the complexity of the characters' images, and how these characters find their place within their social and cultural environments. Such a comparison not only provides a profound understanding of the works themselves but also shows the diversity and richness of literary creation across different cultural backgrounds. By comparing the symbolic meanings of the color red in these two works, readers can observe how the authors utilize this color to enhance the themes and emotions within their narratives, as well as how the interpretation of red varies through different cultural

lenses. Such a comparison not only deepens the understanding of each work individually but also demonstrates how the symbol, red is endowed with multiple meanings within different literary and cultural contexts, thereby enriching the human symbolic language and literary expression.

From the perspective of comparative-literature thematology and parallel study, this thesis confirms that literary motifs are flexible cultural carriers rather than static signifiers. Both the character-naming motif and red-color motif obtain their concrete symbolic meanings only when embedded within specific religious and philosophical contexts. When conducting cross-cultural parallel comparison, researchers should guard against the trap of crude analogy, namely projecting one culture's symbolic system onto texts of another civilization.

Admittedly, this research has its limitations. This thesis selects merely two motifs for comparative analysis; other significant symbolic motifs such as water, dream and plant imagery deserve further exploration. In addition, this thesis focuses on textual parallel comparison, without discussing the cross-cultural reception history of the two works. Subsequent research could explore how these symbolic motifs are re-interpreted in translation and cross-cultural communication.

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