A Comparative Analysis of The Scarlet Letter from Fiction to Movie

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Abstract. The Scarlet Letter (1850) has been repeatedly filmed. The 1995 film version directed by Roland Joffe caused great attention and controversy. On the basis of this version, this paper dealt with the comparative analysis of both the fiction and the movie. Theme, character portrait, imagery and language of the movie text had the fundamental change. This change not only makes the novel more influential, but makes people come to research on novel text more in-depth. This again shows the enduring charm of the literary classic.

Introduction

The Scarlet Letter (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Masterpiece, has been repeatedly since 1913. The 1995 film version directed by Roland Joffe caused great attention and controversy. The novel tells a story of human nature and emotion under the religious system two hundred years ago while the American film adapted from the novel in 1995 is regarded as a moving and romantic love legend. This paper deals with the argument both the fiction and the film based on the 1995 film version.

Themes and Characters from Fiction to Movie

As to the theme of the novel, many scholars and critics hold different views. Some point out that Hawthorne is a writer full of complicated conflicts in his thoughts. In The Scarlet Letter, one theme has been described by critics as the conflict between heart and mind. This conflict is dramatized within the context of the Puritan moral and social code: individuals who are predestined for salvation exhibit their election by living in strict accordance with God’s laws. These laws are interpreted by Puritan elders who have rigid attitudes toward dress, decorum, and above all, sexual conduct.

However, other critics say, the theme was embodied in Hester—the heroine’s image. She is a woman representative against the unreasonable marriage system and strives for the real love. Therefore the analysis of Hester was mixed with praise and blame.

For my part, The Scarlet Letter is actually a novel about crime and punishment. The scarlet letter A is the concept of “original sin” in religion. Because Hawthorne is a writer with complex worldview, he chose love tragedy as the theme of the novel, thus making his thought deeply into the intrinsic conflict.

In terms of the theme of the movie, the director injected new social content, which makes the film full of profoundly and sharply realistic significance. While it is criticizing the old system, it also revealed the contemporary social moral decay, low human rights and dehumanization.

The novel unfolds around four characters. Hester Prynne, a woman of great courage and pride, suffers the disgrace of wearing the scarlet “A” as a sign of her sin. Although she is a devoted mother to her daughter Pearl and is genuinely repentant for her transgressions, Hester feels that she and Arthur are not totally culpable for their actions. She is willing to make a life for herself and Pearl despite her ostracism. On the other hand, Hester’s lover, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, suffers tremendously but keeps silent. Being unable to expiate his sin by making a public declaration of his guilt, he suffers from inner torments until he finds the strength to confess to the community in Boston. Pearl, the offspring of Arthur and Hester’s unlawful union, is depicted as a
child of nature, more at home in the forest than the city and often unwilling to heed the strictures of society.

In the novel Roger Chillingsworth, Hester’s husband, is a symbol of accumulation of western culture. He is learned, gold art teacher, a doctor; meanwhile he also shows the evil side of the stale culture. So he is such a loaded image. Obsessed with discovering the father of Hester’s child, Chillingsworth seems to associate himself with the forces of evil. His motives seem understandable—he wants the man who cuckolded him to pay for his sin. But in the movie, Roger Chillingsworth is portrayed as a devil and pure avenger.

In the movie, Pearl is as the narrator of the story. As to the hero and heroine, the plot changed a lot from the original novel. It is entirely fabricating a non-existing love story with a happy ending, from the encounter and acquaintance of Hester and Dimmesdale to their falling in love with each other. They fought for their love bravely and eventually got saved. It can be seen that in the movie the original things for the hero and heroine were down to very little.

**Imagery Used from Fiction to Movie**

Hawthorne makes skillful use of imagery in The Scarlet Letter. The most elemental symbol of the novel is the letter A, introduced in the first scaffold scene as a punishment for Hester’s adultery and associated with a multitude of meanings as the novel progresses. When arrayed in a crimson tunic, Pearl is described as the scarlet letter in another form, the scarlet letter endowed with life. It is ironic that the scarlet A that appears in the sky during the second scaffold scene is interpreted to stand for Angel. And in the final scaffold scene, Dimmesdale bares his chest, revealing the outlines of a Scarlet Letter—the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne—imprinted in the flesh. This wound suggests both Dimmesdale’s adultery and his atonement. The art mentioned above used both in the book and in the movie not only improve the themes but strengthen the imagination of both the readers and the audience.

It is worth mentioning that in the movie, there is quite a different imagery from the novel—a red bird. To rebuild the Garden of Eden, there should be a new way of thinking for the Bible to guide our actions. Actually the trinity of holy father, holy spirit and son of God is often an image of a bird. Therefore in the film the red bird is the God that the film shows us, greeting the new Garden of Eden, blessing the new emotion beyond the constraints. When Hester is working at field, the red bird flew over her, and under its guidance, Hester found the Garden of Eden and Dimmesdale in the forest. This shows God’s revelation to her, expressing her desire for fine feelings. So this imagery should be the essence of the film text most similar to the novel text. It causes a great impact on the audience.

**Language Characteristics from Fiction to Movie**

Hawthorne pursues to use the language suitable for the character of his book. As Maugham, the English novelist said that Hawthorne did not have the gift of portraying vivid character images but gave a very wonderful portrait of human nature. He suggested readers to appreciate profound and moving writing. Hawthorne can write a sentence for up to half a page, cascade clauses with an even structure as clear as crystal. His words completely accords with the subject of his theme. Take an example in Chapter Nine of the novel, “For her kindred, should the tidings ever reach them, and for the companions of her unspotted life, there remained nothing but the contagion of her dishonor; which would not fail to be distributed in strict accordance and proportion with the intimacy and sacredness of their previous relationship.”[1] This kind of long and complex sentence is frequently in his book. For another example, “Then why—since the choice was with himself—should the individual, whose connection with the fallen woman had been the most intimate and sacred of them all, come forward to vindicate his claim to an inheritance so little desirable?”[2]

Distinguished from the language of the novel, a completely different dialogue on the screen is popular, straightforward, lively and humorous. This gained a little relaxation and hope under the depressing mood. For example, when Hester’s cart got stuck in mud, Dimondale was just riding
through, they had the following dialogue, “can I help you?” “How can you help if not get off?” “I should apologize to you, I might offend you. There is a place. I always take a bath there.” “Really? I won’t charge you too much tax.”

Summary

To sum up, theme, character portrait, imagery and language of The Scarlet Letter from the novel text to the film text have had the fundamental change. This change not only makes the novel more influential, but makes people come to research on novel more in-depth. This again proves the charm of literary classics.

References


