

## Pearl in Hawthorne's Romance *The Scarlet Letter*

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### **Abstract:**

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne portrays one of the most enigmatic child figures in American literature. Although she is an illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl plays an important role more as a dynamic force of moral guardian than a static symbol of sin in the plot. The purpose of this article is to present the aspects of Pearl's preternatural character, the functions that she performs in the plot, and the reasons why Pearl could achieve these in Hawthorne's romance.

**Key Words:** Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl, Preternatural, Moral Guardian, American Romance

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, little attention has been given to the significance of Pearl, the illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl is presented, mentioned, or discussed in all but four of the twenty-three chapters of the novel (i.e. chaps. I, IX, XI, XVII) and in the conclusion. The narrator's extensive treatment of the child, his careful delineation of her physical and spiritual qualities, his presentation of her in juxtaposition to both Hester and Dimmesdale, and his use of her in the crucial scenes (the forest scene and the three pillory scenes) seem to justify an assumption that she is more than a passive link between her father and mother and more than a symbol of sin. As the most ambiguous character in this novel, she plays an important role more as a dynamic force than a static symbol in the plot. The purpose of this article is to present the aspects of Pearl's character, the functions that she performs in the plot, and the reasons why Pearl could achieve these in Hawthorne's romance.

### 2. PEARL: THE LIVING HIEROGLYPHIC

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne tells us that Pearl is more than a link between Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, and warns us that we shall have difficulties in understanding the plot unless we can interpret Pearl properly.

'In [Pearl] was visible the tie that united them. She had been offered to the world, these seven years past, as the living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide, — all

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written in this symbol, — all plainly manifest, — had there been a prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame!’ (TSL 296)<sup>1</sup>

Certainly Hawthorne’s reference to Pearl as a hieroglyphic suggests that this character of flame will be a challenge to decipher.

On the one hand, Pearl is the symbol of her parents’ sin because of her identity as the illegitimate child. Child of Hester and Dimmesdale, she serves as a “messenger of anguish” (TSL 339). Just as Hester says, she is “the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!” and “the emblem of her guilt and torture” (TSL 204-205). On the other hand, she serves as “the connecting link” (TSL 251) and “an electric chain” (TSL 250) between Hester and Dimmesdale. That means she is the embodiment of her parents’ true love and passion. Because the love between Hester and Dimmesdale is the oneness of their being, Hawthorne can therefore prophesy their salvation through his comment on Pearl:

‘And Pearl was the oneness of their being. Be the foregone evil what it might, how could they doubt that their earthly lives and future destinies were conjoined, when they beheld at once the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met, and were to dwell immortally together?’ (TSL 296)

Although she is a playful seven-year-old child, Pearl is precociously intelligent, bewilderingly subtle, frighteningly independent, and penetratingly wise. Her demonstrations of perversity toward social and religious authority, her acts of hostility toward the Puritan brats, her repeated demonstrations of sympathetic interest in the *Scarlet Letter* on Hester’s bosom and in the minister’s gesture of pressing his hand to his breast, her precocious and ambiguous quizzing of both her parents, all these symbolic actions could only be described as preternatural.

Another important aspect of Pearl’s preternatural character is her instinct for truth. Pearl’s unconscious awareness of a blood relationship with Dimmesdale (for example, laying her cheek against his hand in the Governor’s mansion) and her recognition of Chillingworth as a “Black Man” (TSL 234) are manifestations of a child’s semi-prophetic discernment. The innocent child could see through their dissimulation. Pearl’s insight into truth is the result of her enforced contact with nature which enables her to preserve her spotless soul from society’s deleterious conventions and lies.

Hester’s dwelling on the verge of the forest, at the outskirts of the town, symbolizes her retreat from man to nature; this situation encourages Pearl’s easy association with nature. Whenever she is outdoors, particularly in the wilderness, there seems to be a conscious desire on her part to merge with nature; while on the part of nature there is a tendency to absorb Pearl. In the forest, when Hawthorne manipulates light and shade so magnificently, the sun seems to avoid Hester deliberately at first. But Pearl catches the sunshine, and “the light lingered about the lonely child, as if glad of such a playmate” (TSL 276). Later even the “great black forest . . . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Hawthorne (1983). The subsequent quotations from *The Scarlet Letter* are all taken from the same edition, marked with the abbreviations of TSL and accompanied by page numbers in brackets.

became the play mate of the lonely infant” (TSL 294). When Pearl stands on one side of the brook, Hester and Dimmesdale summon her to the other side, Pearl seems to have melted into a natural environment, caressed by the sun, enveloped by the forest and identified with the brook. Little Pearl manifests the relationship between man and nature; her life and the life of nature are contiguous. When she is in nature, “the mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child” (TSL 295). This “wildness,” however, is not the wilderness of savagery but the wilderness of innocence, just like the state of prelapsarian innocence in Adam and Eve. So Hawthorne says of Pearl, “The infant was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden” (TSL 194), and records the rumor that even a wolf in the forest, responsive to her primitive innocence, “came up, and smelt of Pearl’s robe, and offered his savage head to be patted by her hand” (TSL 294-295).

In Governor Bellingham’s hall, it is Pearl’s conscious kinship with nature which prompts her to respond perversely, when the Reverend Mr. Wilson asked her who had made her, “that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison door” (TSL 213). It is an answer, like her other conduct and speech, reveals her symbolism rather than her character. To express Pearl’s fundamental affinity to nature, Hawthorne inevitably chooses a flower metaphor.

Even in the opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne calls our attention:

‘But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imaged to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.’ (TSL 158)

Why does Hawthorne bring the rosebush into the story at the beginning? Prison is “the black flower of civilized society.” The mark of civilization in human society symbolizes law and order. The wild rosebush, in obvious contrast, is the mark of nature. The wilderness of nature is symbolized by the rosebush. The contrast between the “wild rose-bush” near the prison door and the prison itself introduces the conflict maintained throughout the novel between the town and the wilderness surrounding it. Whereas the town stands for reason and order, for the reign of law, the wilderness stands for all that is primitive, mysterious and lawless. Hester and Pearl are behind the prison door. It seems clear that Hawthorne is seeking to personify the rosebush as Hester and Pearl.

There is a lot of consistent imagery applied to Pearl. She is endowed with “natural dexterity” and “native grace” (TSL 194). On one occasion she is a lovely flower, possessed, a page later, with “wild-flower prettiness” (TSL 195). On at least five occasions she is likened to a bird: “a wild tropical bird, of rich plumage” (TSL 212), a “floating sea-bird” (TSL 322), and so on. On innumerable occasions she is a sprite, an imp, an elf, a dryad. Hawthorne endows her with “airy charm” (TSL 189) and “elfish intelligence” (TSL 208); Pearl is hardly a human child but is an

airy sprite, a little elf gathering handfuls of wild flowers. Mistress Hibbins suggests that the child is of the “lineage of the Prince of the Air!” (*TSL* 327)

The characterization of Pearl is not simple but profound and complex. Pearl is not only a real child, but a child of nature. Hawthorne leaves it in no doubt as to the significance of Pearl’s identification with nature. But, Pearl is more than the child of nature. Some supernatural elements must speak through her. Hawthorne says, “We have as yet hardly spoken of the infant; that little creature, whose innocent life had sprung, by the inscrutable decree of Providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion” (*TSL* 194). Even Dimmesdale says, “In Pearl’s young beauty, as in the wrinkled witch, it has a preternatural effect” (*TSL* 299). It is her distinctive preternatural feature enables her to perform her function as a moral guardian to Hester and Dimmesdale.

### 3. PEARL’S FUNCTION: A MORAL GUARDIAN

Pearl plays a very important role in the story. She is an efficient cause of the salvation of Hester and Dimmesdale and particularly provides the motivation for the public confession of Dimmesdale.

Hawthorne stresses the moral rather than the biological importance to Pearl of her human origin:

‘The child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder...The mother’s impassioned state had been the medium through which were transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life: and, however white and clear originally, they had taken the deep stains of crimson and gold, the fiery luster, the black shadow, and the untempered light of the intervening substance.’ (*TSL* 195-196)

Pearl not only offers instinctive affiance to whatever is good in the persons around her—a trait which vividly reminds adults that the power of goodness is still present in themselves, but also makes repeated instinctive appeals to her parents to prefer spiritual goods. The changes in her moods, her conduct, and her character in the progress of the story are an index to the varying moral condition of Hester and Dimmesdale.

For Hester, Pearl’s function is to chasten and redeem her by making her feel shame and remorse and permit her to love. In Governor Bellingham’s hall, Hester tells the old Puritan magistrate,

God gave men the child!... He gave her in requital of all things else, which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness! —she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a millionfold the power of retribution for my sin? (*TSL* 214)

Hester’s salvation is dependent upon her guiding her child to Heaven—a point that is emphasized by Dimmesdale in his defense of Hester’s right to little Pearl:

‘...that his boon was meant, above all things else, to keep the mother’s soul alive, and to preserve her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her! Therefore it is good for this poor, sinful woman that she hath an infant immortality, a being capable of eternal joy or sorrow, confided to her care, — to be trained up by her to righteousness, — to remind her, at every moment, of her fall, — but yet to teach her, as it were by the Creator’s sacred pledge, that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child also will bring its parent thither!’ (*TSL* 215-216)

This means Pearl is intended by God “to connect her parent forever with the race and descent of mortals and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven” (*TSL* 194). So the child serves the important function of keeping her mother within the magnetic chain of humanity. She enables Hester to face hardships and sufferings. She saves Hester from human isolation during the years she had been set apart to infamy. Hester’s diligence and kindness gradually changes people’s bias against her. “They had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of that one sin, for which she had borne so long and dreary a penance, but of her many good deeds since” (*TSL* 258). The letter A has changed its symbolic meaning from Adultery to Able, then to Admirable and Angel.

This story also traces the change within Dimmesdale from a sinner, a hypocrite, and a weak capitulator to Hester’s plea for flight and resumption of sin, to a penitent, sincere and finally strong enough to make public confession. There must be a cause for a change. Pearl plays a role of a regenerative, redemptive, disciplining power to guide the minister. She helps the transformation of Dimmesdale.

When Dimmesdale is pressed by Mr. Wilson in the first scaffold scene to exhort Hester to confess her partner in sin, the minister pinpointed the importance of an open confession: “Believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee in thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life” (*TSL* 175). To these words of truth the infant in Hester’s arms reacted sympathetically by directing “its hitherto vacant gaze toward Mr. Dimmesdale” and by holding “up its little arms, with a half-pleased, half-plaintive murmur” (*TSL* 175). Pearl made a kind of appeal for the minister to recognize her and by doing so to confess his sin.

During the visit to Governor Bellingham, when Dimmesdale made an appeal to permit Hester to keep Pearl, the child made a second appeal to the minister to acknowledge her. The spirit-child, implying that she wanted Dimmesdale to acknowledge her, stole “softly toward him, and taking his hand in the grasp of both of her own, laid her cheek against it; a caress so tender, and withal so unobtrusive” (*TSL* 216). The minister responded by laying his hand on the child’s head, hesitating an instant, and then kissing her brow (*TSL* 217). The minister, however, did not make the acknowledgment and old Roger Chillingworth asked, “Would it be beyond a philosopher’s research... to give a shrewd guess at the father?” (*TSL* 217) Still Dimmesdale remained silent. Pearl “laughed, and went capering down the hall, so airily” (*TSL* 217). This typical response of hers—a laugh—was later interpreted by Dimmesdale as mockery of him.

Perhaps here it suggests reproof and mockery because he refused to take the essential step of confession.

The second scaffold scene provides another example of Pearl's pointing Dimmesdale towards the path of transformation. The minister, standing at midnight upon the scaffold, burdened with guilt and fears that his sin would be detected, burst into a kind of hysterical "peal of laughter" (*TSL* 249), which was immediately responded to by a "light, childish laugh" (*TSL* 249) of little Pearl, who was returning with her mother from the Governor's house. At Dimmesdale's request Hester and Pearl ascended the steps and the three stood, both Hester and Dimmesdale holding Pearl's hands. This is the union which Hester had dreamed of—a union of her, her child, and her lover. This is the relation which Pearl had promoted, both as a child and as a regenerative symbol. For the earthly child, the acknowledgment would mean recognition from her father; for the regenerative symbol, it would mean Dimmesdale's confession and progress toward redemption. The minister momentarily felt the spiritual strength of confession the moment they held hands: "there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying through all his veins, as if the mother and the child were communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system. "The three formed an electric chain" (*TSL* 250). The natural order of father, mother and child moves Dimmesdale a step toward transformation.

The forest scene illustrates Pearl's efforts to affect her parents' salvation by pointing out to her mother's and the minister's errors in judgment and action. Pearl was across the stream from Hester and Dimmesdale when the former discarded the scarlet letter. While the child stood by the brook and gazed silently at the clergyman and then at Hester, the minister responded as if he understood the significance of the child's disapproval: his hand "stole over his heart" (*TSL* 298). After Hester had reassumed the scarlet letter, the child bounded across the brook and clasped Hester in her arms, "drew down her mother's head, and kissed her brow and both her cheeks... and kissed the scarlet letter too!" (*TSL* 301) But when Hester encouraged Pearl to be friendly with the minister, the child asked succinctly, "Doth he love us? Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town!" (*TSL* 301) It seems that public revelation of the real relationship among the three is to Pearl the only means of reconciliation. She was not cajoled by the promise of a future home in which the three will be together and in which Dimmesdale will love her dearly. Her only reply is again a question: "And will he always keep his hand over his heart?" (*TSL* 301) She clearly implies that guilt will plague Dimmesdale even if he succeeds in the plans for escape which he and Hester are now formulating. Her mother, not sensing the profound implications of her questions, lightly evaded them. Pearl "would show no favor to the clergyman" (*TSL* 301) throughout this scene. Consequently, she stubbornly refused to show any friendliness towards the minister and grimaced with disapproval. The minister, tensed and "painfully embarrassed, but hoping that a kiss might prove a talisman to admit him into the child's kindlier regards, bent forward, and impressed one on her brow" (301). Pearl, the spiritual symbol broke away, ran to the brook and washed away his "unwelcome kiss"

(*TSL* 301). She told him through her action that his acquiescence to Hester's will to escape was a false answer to his problem and is distasteful to her. He would be involved in a continuation of his concealment of sin. According to the author, the minister was in a "maze" when he left the forest, perhaps because of the conflict between his desire to escape with Hester and his sensing the truth which the spirit child had been trying for seven years to reveal to him and which he apparently understood at least in part during this scene. This chapter develops the motivation generated in the forest scene for the minister's confession in the final chapter.

The final scene is at the pillory on the Election Sermon Day. After he had delivered his sermon, he left with the procession for the town hall. Passing the scaffold by which Hester was standing, he turned toward the pillory and bade both Hester and Pearl to ascend it with him. Pearl "with bird-like motion ... flew to him, and clasped her arms about his knees" (*TSL* 335). The minister, "leaning on Hester's shoulder" and clasping the hand of Pearl, ascended the scaffold. The people were "appalled... as knowing that some deep life-matter... was full of anguish and repentance" (*TSL* 337). The minister stood on the scaffold "to put in his plea of guilty at the bar of Eternal Justice" (*TSL* 337). Then here came his final confession and his completion of the several steps for man's transformation. His last spoken words about God show that the change in him was one of spiritual regeneration, not one of sinful capitulation. He said, "God knows; and He is merciful... Praised be his name! His will be done!" (*TSL* 339)

At this death scene, the minister requested Pearl to kiss him, the sign of reconciliation that she had refused him in the forest. She "kissed his lips" (*TSL* 339), as she had kissed the lips of her mother when she had restored the scarlet letter to her bosom in the forest. As a human child her "tears fell upon her father's cheek," pledging "that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow" (*TSL* 339). Significantly, she was also the redemptive force in this scene. She had promoted the way of transformation as a spirit child. These foregoing scenes may be called the phase of transformation in the process of Dimmesdale's redemption. Pearl is a powerful but hidden force urging him to good. At this level, *The Scarlet Letter* may be the story of man redeemed by the child.

Pearl has fulfilled her function as a moral guardian on the preternatural level. From the very beginning Hawthorne makes clear the nature of Pearl's mission to her mother: she has been sent as a blessing and as retribution to remind Hester of her fall from grace and to teach her way to heaven (*TSL* 216). Pearl's mission to her father, however, has been a hidden one. Pearl, the elf-child, is the efficient cause of Dimmesdale's public confession. The author has chosen to suggest rather than to present her function.

#### 4. HAWTHORNE'S ROMANCE

Why Hawthorne could present the profundity of the character Pearl and the regenerative and redemptive functions this child performs? I think the form of *The Scarlet Letter* should be taken into consideration. The dominant form of the nineteenth-century American novel is the romance. Joel Porte began his book on the American romance by remarking:

‘Thanks to a series of major critical studies that have appeared in the past decade and a half, it no longer seems necessary to argue for the importance of romance as a nineteenth century American genre. Students of American literature—notably Richard Chase—have provide a solid theoretical basis for establishing that the rise and growth of fiction in this country is dominated by our authors’ conscious adherence to a tradition of non-realistic romance sharply at variance with the broadly novelistic mainstream of English writing. When there has been disagreement among recent critics as to the contours of American fiction, it has usually disputed, not the existence per se of a romance tradition, but rather the question of which authors, themes, and stylistic strategies deserve to be placed with certainty at the heart of that tradition.’ (ix)<sup>2</sup>

Porte also said, “It is no exaggeration to say that without Hawthorne there could be no firm theory of American romance”<sup>3</sup>. As Porte suggested, Hawthorne is the author who frequently provided the evidence supporting that the dominant form of American fiction is the romance.

As we all know, Hawthorne declared himself to be a romancer, not a novelist. He subtitled *The Scarlet Letter* “A Romance” and introduced his fiction with preface in which he explained and even defended his use of the romance form. The study of American romance is useful to our understanding of Hawthorne’s artistic aims and our appreciation of the character Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne distinguished between the novel and the romance in his well-known Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*:

‘When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation.’ (THSG: 11)<sup>4</sup>

Both forms aim at communicating “the truth of heart”, but the romance achieves its goal by representational means “of the writer’s own choosing or creation”, while the novel transcribes “the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” and is therefore restricted to “a very minute fidelity” to man’s daily activities. A romancer may employ the improbable and extraordinary—even the supernatural—while a novelist must conform to more realistic expectations.

These statements provide evidence to the fact that the major authors in a key developmental period in American literary history were consciously striving to create fictions that were not

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<sup>2</sup> Porte (1969).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,95.

<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne (2008).



novels, and that they were doing so according to a distinction current in their own time. Hawthorne was fully aware of what a novel is. He deliberately chose the romance to convey what he wanted to say.

In "The Custom-House," Hawthorne suggests that romance is "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (*TSL* 149). Hawthorne's "neutral territory," the meeting place of the actual and the imaginary, is a metaphoric definition of the romance.

Hawthorne's aesthetic goal of blending the two cannot be doubted. Another evidence of such a blend is Miriam's studio in *The Marble Faun*:

'The room had the customary aspect of a painter's studio; one of those delightful spots that hardly seem to belong to the actual world, but rather to the outward type of a poet's haunted imagination, where there are glimpses, sketches, and half-developed hints of beings and objects grander and more beautiful than we can anywhere find in reality.' (*TMF* 33)<sup>5</sup>

This room reflects the artist's role to blend the two realms and it is this role that Hawthorne claims for himself in the prefaces of his two romances. He states, in *The Scarlet Letter*, he is "creating the semblance of the world out of airy matter" (*TSL* 150). In *The House of the Seven Gables*, he brings "his fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of moment" (*THSG* 12). Hawthorne keeps the ideal and the real as his fixed points of reference in determining his artistic distance.

The primary goal of the romance is artistic distance. It differs from the novel in the extent of this distance. The study most responsible for establishing this distinction is, of course, Richard Chase's *The American Novel and its Tradition*. In that enormously influential book, Chase differentiated the American novel from the British "novel" by saying that there was an observable American variant more properly called a romance. It was Chase who labeled it. Chase said, "Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms."<sup>6</sup>

Hawthorne's romance form allows him to embody his major thematic concerns. He has more freedom to follow the nature of heart. The technique of romance offers a means to engage the reader in a kind of experience by providing artistic distance from such experience. Hawthorne may self-consciously probe its range of possible consequences and present the particular traits of his characters. Hawthorne's art involves a deliberate balance between the marvelous and the natural and therefore creates that artistic distance so crucial to the romancer's meditative ends. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the supernatural elements arise from the minds of the onlookers. By using

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<sup>5</sup> Hawthorne (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Chase (1957), 13.

the form of the romance, Hawthorne portrays one of the most enigmatic child figures in American literature.

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