

The Puritan Elf in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Many writers have created characters who seem different from their society, detached from the usual world. Such a person is Nathaniel Hawthorne's Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*. Until she is acknowledged by her father, Pearl is depicted as an alien in society; to the Puritans her traits seem peculiar, as do her relationships with the primary elements in her life: nature, other children, and her parents.

One of Pearl's most important relationships is with nature. Hawthorne describes her as an "elfish child" (162) and an "airy sprite" (92). In describing Pearl's many facets, Hawthorne refers to her attractiveness as a "wild-flower prettiness" (90). Hawthorne also likens her to a bird, "a bird of bright plumage" (256) or a "floating sea-bird" (248). Indeed, the imagery that is applied to Pearl depicts her as a wild creature of nature.

The Puritans believed that no one can thrive by nature alone; yet it is apparent that the wild Pearl feels a strong allegiance to her natural surroundings, the forest being both her nursery and her second home. Thus, by Puritan standards, Pearl is not a normal child, and she becomes a stranger to society.

Pearl is obviously in harmony with nature. Her friends consist of the forest and its inhabitants. She plays with flowers, berries, and leaves; she adorns her hair and clothing with foliage, transforming herself into a nymph-child. During the process of her decoration, Pearl seldom disturbs the woodland members: "The small denizens of the wilderness hardly took pains to move out of her path. . . . these wild things which [the mother-forest] nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child" (215-216). One particular element, the sun, seems especially allied with Pearl, for it tends to follow her wherever she goes: "Through the dim medium of the forest-gloom [Pearl was] all glorified with a ray of sunshine that was attracted thitherward as by a certain sympathy" (219).

A contrasting relationship can be seen between Pearl and other children. The Puritan children recognize that Pearl is not one of them, and they consider her and her mother, Hester, outsiders. "Mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society. . ." (95). Pearl often watches her peers, yet she never attempts to make acquaintances.

Comment [j1]: Intro to general topic: "characters . . . different from their society"

Comment [j2]: Specific character from specific work

Comment [j3]: Thesis—presents the argument the writer will prove

Comment [j4]: Comment—presents the main points that she will develop to support her thesis

Comment [j5]: Topic Sentence clearly presents first main point (see comment above)

Comment [j6]: Once writer has used the author's full name in the intro. paragraph, refer to him by last name only throughout the rest of essay.

Comment [j7]: Using only the part of the quote she needs

Comment [j8]: Parenthetical documentation of page number where original passage resides. (Only one source in Works Cited list—clear to which entry this reference points)

Comment [j9]: End punctuation comes after the parenthesis.

Comment [j10]: Space between quotation mark and parenthesis.

Comment [j11]: Concluding statement for 1st main point

Comment [j12]: Points directly to thesis

Comment [j13]: Further development of 1st main point

Comment [j14]: Documentation for paraphrase/summaries?

Comment [j15]: Period denotes end of sentence in quoted passage.

Comment [j16]: Ellipses denotes that the writer omitted part of the passage between "path" and "these."

Comment [j17]: Writer's interpolation to clarify meaning within the context of her paper—must use [] to denote that the words inside them are yours.

Comment [j18]: Transition connects this point to the point in the previous paragraph.

Comment [j19]: Next main point

Comment [j20]: Ellipses needed because without it, readers could erroneously conclude that what is within the quotation marks is the entire sentence from the passage.

Comment [j21]: This period goes after the parenthetical documentation indicating the end of the writer's sentence.

When the children advance toward her, she throws stones at them and mutters incoherent exclamations. When amusing herself outdoors, Pearl envisions the weeds as her peers and uproots them unmercifully, illustrating the hostility with which she regards the children.

Comment [j22]: Documentation?

Comment [j23]: Documentation?

Perhaps Pearl's most complex relationship is with her parents. Pearl is brought up entirely by Hester. The very name that Hester bequeaths to her child suggests her feelings:

Comment [j24]: Transition (1) connects this point to the previous two and (2) presents a relationship of importance between them.

Her Pearl! For so had Hester called her; not as a name expressive of her aspect, which had nothing of the calm, white, unimpassioned lustre that would be indicated by the comparison. But she had named the infant "Pearl," as being of great price ... God... had given her a lovely child ... to connect her parent forever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven! (89)

Comment [j25]: Blockquote format = no quotation marks (would be redundant)—indenting the entire passage sets it apart from the essay writer's text.

Comment [j26]: Use blockquote format when quoting passages that are more than four lines long.

Comment [j27]: Ellipses denotes omitted material from original passage.

Comment [j28]: Blockquote format = end punctuation comes before the parenthetical documentation

Although Pearl is Hester's "only treasure" (89), she is also her mother's cause for sorrow, especially when Hester sees in her child a wild, desperate mood. Moreover, Pearl has an obsession with her mother's scarlet letter A and constantly questions the meaning behind it. Much to Hester's despair, Pearl imitates the symbol, crafting her A out of green eel grass. It is as if Pearl's purpose is to "make out its hidden import" (186).

Comment [j29]: Nice transition!

Comment [j30]: Support? Develop this sub-point further.

Comment [j31]: No ellipses necessary—quoted phrase is clearly a fragment of a larger passage.

Pearl's relationship with her father, Arthur Dimmesdale, is quite different. She repeatedly seeks recognition from him. Even as a mere infant in her mother's arms, Pearl demonstrates her feelings of kinship when she stretches her arm toward Dimmesdale. When Pearl's life with Hester is threatened and the minister speaks successfully on their behalf, Pearl thanks him by laying her cheek against his hand and caressing it so lovingly that even her own mother is surprised. Furthermore, when mother and daughter encounter Dimmesdale on the scaffold in the dead of night, Pearl attempts to extract from the minister a promise that he will stand with her mother and her on the scaffold the following day at noon. However, the paternal recognition that Pearl seeks is not to be had yet.

Comment [j32]: Part B of main point III

Comment [j33]: Documentation?

Comment [j34]: Documentation?

Comment [j35]: Documentation?

Pearl changes swiftly, however, in a climactic scene on the scaffold, where Dimmesdale finally confesses. When Pearl complies with her father's wishes and kisses him, it is a sign that she is finally acknowledged publicly. With that one kiss, the wild infant cries. Each tear that "fell upon her father's cheek" (269) represents one more step away from wildness and perversity.

Comment [j36]: Significance? Has Pearl not cried before?

It is through Dimmesdale's ultimate confession that Pearl and society are reconciled. Now she has a name, a social status in the Puritan community. Her wildness, her capriciousness, and her elfish charm have been pushed aside in favor of the new Pearl, the Pearl who has ceased to be an outcast.

Comment [j37]: Nice opening of concluding paragraph to validate thesis—argument won!

Comment [j38]: Not clearly established—develop this point further in the previous paragraph.

(Adapted)
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Work Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.

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Essay source:

Chang, Martha. "The Puritan Elf in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*." *Houghton Mifflin English: Grammar and Composition*. Teacher's ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984. 469-471. Print. Houghton Mifflin English: Grammar and Composition, 5<sup>th</sup> Course.

Comments on essay added by J. Bennett.