

The Puritan Elf in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (revised)

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 her father acknowledges her, Pearl is 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, he 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 depicts Pearl presents her as a wild creature of nature.

Though Puritans believed that no one could thrive by nature alone, the wild Pearl apparently 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 exists 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. 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.

Perhaps Pearl's most complex relationship is with her parents. As a confessed adulteress and, therefore, a societal outcast herself, Hester raises Pearl on her own. The very name that Hester bequeaths to her child suggests her feelings and the nature of their relationship:

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)

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).

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. At that chosen moment, though, Dimmesdale does not impart to Pearl the paternal recognition that she seeks. (Note: How does she react? Need to discuss briefly—and show—the existing behavior before we can refer to the swift change in the next paragraph.)

Pearl changes swiftly, however, in a climactic scene on the scaffold, where Dimmesdale finally confesses before the town. In complying with her father's wishes, the kiss that Pearl

bestows upon him becomes a sign of her belonging—a sign that she is no longer fatherless—a sign that she is no longer an outcast. And with that one kiss, the wild infant cries. Each tear that “[falls] upon her father’s cheek” (269) represents one more step away from wildness and perversity.

Through Dimmesdale’s ultimate confession, 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 disappear to reveal the new Pearl, the Pearl who has ceased to be an outcast.

(Adapted)
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Work Cited

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

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Original 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.

Revised by J. Bennett.