

Scarlet Letter Paper

"What is one man's poison...is another's meat or drink," Beaumont and Fletcher wrote in one of their plays. Almost everything in the world is interpretable in at least two conflicting ways. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritan society shuns a character named Pearl, yet the author, who lived in the Romantic period, views her with awe and reverence. Nathaniel Hawthorne's use of nature imagery in *The Scarlet Letter* reflects Pearl's wild, capricious character that serves as a constant reminder of Hester's sin and whose romantically idealistic beauty frightens the Puritan society.

In Hawthorne's descriptions of Pearl as an infant and toddler, nature imagery emphasizes Pearl's startling beauty and unpredictable, yet innocent, character. Pearl's beauty and innocence are apparent from the time of her birth. Hawthorne describes Pearl's "innocent life [as] a lovely and immortal flower" (Hawthorne 81). Even though Pearl is a product of the "guilty passion" (81) between Hester and Dimmesdale, both her soul and her body are untainted and flawless. Hester notices that Pearl has no physical defects, but Pearl's character has an unexplainable aspect of oddity and unpredictability. When she plays near Hester's cottage, Pearl "[smites] down [and] uproot[s] most unmercifully [the] ugliest weeds" (87) which she pretends are the Puritan children. Hester believes that Pearl is so emotional and temperamental because the passion which Hester

and Dimmesdale experienced during their sinful act somehow transferred into Pearl's soul. However, Pearl's antipathy for the Puritans is justified; the children often torment her for no good reason. When Hester and Pearl go into town, the Puritan children stop playing and either surround Pearl and stare at her or prepare to hurl mud at the unfortunate pair. Both actions by the Puritans result in a fit of outrage by Pearl. One reason that the Puritans treat Pearl badly is because of her mother's sin. The Puritans believe that since Pearl is the product of adultery, she is automatically evil and depraved. The Puritan hatred for Pearl is also due to the fact that she, like Hester's scarlet letter, is beautiful, and they are in a way jealous of both. Supposedly, Hester's scarlet 'A' is a punishment, but she embroiders it richly and wears it with subtle pride. When the Puritans first see the 'A', they want to replace it with an 'A' made out of rheumatic cloth. The Puritans look at Pearl in the same way; they do not think Hester deserves such a beautiful child. The Puritans like simple, bland things and shun beauty because it is tempting. This view of the Puritans appears again when the Reverend Mr. Wilson first sees Pearl in Governor Bellingham's mansion. Mr. Wilson calls her a "little bird of scarlet plumage" (100) and asks her "what has ailed [her] mother to bedizen [her] in this strange fashion" (100). Mr. Wilson first compares Pearl to a bird, something from nature, which the Puritans distrust, then implies that something is wrong with Hester for tastelessly dressing Pearl in such beautiful, striking clothing. In this instance, Mr. Wilson's comments are hypocritical because Governor Bellingham, the leader of the Puritans, decorates his mansion lavishly and enjoys many worldly pleasures. Hawthorne, who lived in the Romantic period, included this passage to indicate that in his eyes, Pearl

is beautiful and the Puritans are wrong in thinking that Pearl is wicked. When Pearl tells Mr. Wilson that her name is Pearl, he answers, "'Pearl?—Ruby, rather!—or Coral!—or Red Rose'" (101). Even though Mr. Wilson disapproves of Pearl's attire, he still acknowledges her beauty by comparing her to beautiful things in nature. At the same time, he shows his disapproval because he, like most Puritans, distrusts nature. Later on, Mr. Wilson asks Pearl if she knows who made her. She replies by saying that "she had not been made at all but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that [grows] by the prison-door" (103). Pearl's answer tells the reader that she understands both her physical beauty and her internal wildness because she compares herself to a wild rose. The answer's creativity and

unexpectedness also reveal Pearl's unusual, whimsical character. At this point in the novel, the reader can already discern Pearl's fundamental character traits.

As Pearl grows older, her isolation from the Puritans leads her to spend more time with nature, and she continues to remind Hester of her sin. When Hester goes to the seashore to talk to Chillingworth, she tells Pearl to go "to the margin of the water and play with the shells and tangled sea-weed"(154). In response, Pearl "[flies] away like a bird"(154) to the margin of the sea. Pearl is eager to play with nature. She has grown used to having nature as a playmate and finds playing with it enjoyable. Pearl builds "boats out of birch-bark...seize[s] a live horseshoe [crab] by the tail...catches several five-fingers...lays out a jelly-fish to melt in the warm sun"(162), throws foam, and pelts sea-birds with pebbles. When Pearl thinks that she actually hit a bird, however, she feels remorse for having "done harm to a little being that was as wild as...herself"(163).

While Pearl is wild and unpredictable at times, she has a kind heart. Pearl's kinship with nature becomes apparent through the seashore imagery. Pearl obviously is at ease with and delights in nature. She has chosen nature as an ideal playmate because of her isolation from other humans. The Puritan children treat her as an outcast and the only interaction between them and Pearl is malicious. After she stops throwing pebbles at birds, Pearl uses some eel-grass to make a "freshly green"(163) letter 'A' on her bosom and runs back to Hester. When she sees Hester, Pearl laughs and points to the 'A' on her bosom. Pearl's A reminds Hester of her sin, but the reader learns that Pearl does not make the 'A' to hurt her mother. Instead, she does it because she is curious about the nature of her mother's 'A'. Pearl has grown more mature and kind since her toddler years. Nature has taught her to be sensitive and curious.

Pearl's closeness to nature and her innocence develop further as the novel approaches its conclusion. While Hester and Pearl stroll through the forest on their way to meet Dimmesdale, Pearl observes that the sunshine "'does not love [Hester]'"(168). The sunshine seems to "run away and hide itself because it is afraid of something on [Hester's] bosom"(168). Pearl, however, easily catches the sunshine because she "wears nothing on her bosom yet"(168). As soon as Hester gets close to Pearl, the sunshine vanishes and it appears as if Pearl absorbs the energy. Hawthorne uses the sunshine as a judge of innocence. The sunshine, which is part of nature, never graces Hester and even avoids her because she is a sinner and has a tainted soul. Pearl is the opposite. The sunshine loves her so much that it plays enthusiastically with her. The mother and

daughter soon come upon a babbling brook. The brook sounds "kind, quiet, soothing, but melancholy"(171), like an unhappy child or a person who knows only sadness.

Pearl calls the brook "foolish and tiresome"(171) and asks it why it is so sad. Pearl is like the brook in some ways. She has been through hardships in her life such as isolation and insults, but she is still too young to understand how to be unhappy. Therefore, Pearl is actually quite different from the brook. The brook has experienced many things and has existed long enough to understand the world. Pearl, on the other hand, is young, naive, and innocent. She knows only how to be happy. Hester points out that if Pearl "[had] a sorrow of [her] own, the brook might tell [her] of it even as it is telling [Hester] of [hers]"(171). Hester comprehends the brook's melancholy mood because she has been through hardships herself and has enough experience to be sorrowful. When Dimmesdale arrives and Hester talks to him, Pearl goes off on her own to play. Pearl is so close to nature that a wolf comes up and "[smells] of Pearl's robe, and offers his savage head to be patted by her hand"(188). Wolves can be as large as grown men and are aggressive hunters. This image is effective because it accentuates the kindred relationship between Pearl and nature. Pearl, like nature, is wild and uncontrollable. The Puritans can not understand either one and therefore equate both to evil and the Devil. These similarities bring Pearl and nature closer and let them understand each other. Once again, Hawthorn contrasts his Romantic view of nature with that of the Puritans.

While the Puritans see nature as wicked and tempting, Hawthorne sees it as something benevolent and compassionate.

In the end, Dimmesdale finally decides on the course of action that he must take to free his, Hester's, and Pearl's souls. On the holiday to welcome a new governor to his office, Dimmesdale makes his fateful decision. He knows that he is going to die and will

not be able to follow through on the plans that he and Hester made. He also realizes that no matter where he goes in the whole world, Chillingworth, his tormentor, will be able to follow him, so the only place he can go is into the afterlife. After giving his sermon, Dimmesdale asks Hester to support him. They and Pearl walk onto the scaffold. After asking Dimmesdale to stand with her and her mother numerous times, Pearl finally receives her wish. Dimmesdale confesses his sin to the audience, then falls down. Before he dies, he asks Pearl to kiss him, and she complies. At this point, a complete change in Pearl occurs. She starts to cry, her first taste of human joy and sorrow. She does not have to constantly struggle against society anymore, and her duty as a messenger of anguish to Hester is also done. With her father's confession and sacrifice of his life, Pearl is able to begin a new existence.

Hawthorne's utilization of nature imagery illustrates Pearl's character, whose beauty excites fear in the Puritans and whose eccentricity reminds Hester of her sin.

The Puritans seem negative and ignorant. Everything that they can not explain is evil to them. The Enlightenment caused people to think rationally, so in Hawthorne's time, many things that the Puritans knew nothing about were understood and people were able to view the world more optimistically. Pearl's character is a perfect example of something that is completely different when seen from two points of view.
