Hawthorne’s Pearl:
Woman-Child of the Future

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Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* has earned its place in the literary canon precisely because it has retained the ability to arouse interest and intellectual discussion even 154 years after its first publication. The beauty of Hawthorne’s defining work is that it lends itself to contemporary analysis year after year, decade after decade. As each change in society asserts itself, critics look at Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* with a fresh perspective and find the story ripe with new meaning that is relevant to contemporary society. In fact, a fresh look at Pearl, and how Hester contributes to the development of her daughter’s character, can provide new insights into the role of women in today’s society, a role that began to change as early as 1850 when Hawthorne first published *The Scarlet Letter*.

Many critics who focus their analysis on Pearl define her as the sin-child, the unholy result of Hester Prynne’s and Arthur Dimmesdale’s fall from grace, and Hawthorne’s way of presenting the “scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life” (90). As Emily Miller Budick points out:

> In Hawthorne’s novel, the strict authoritarianism of Puritan patriarchy finds its object in the child Pearl, who, as the living “likeness” of the letter . . . becomes the target of the Puritans’ efforts to control both human sexuality, and its literary, historical expression. *The Scarlet Letter*, in other words, dramatizes a relationship between issues of birth (Whose child is Pearl?) and questions of interpretation (What does the letter mean?). Indeed, one of the ways the text validates the centrality and legitimacy of the community’s doubt about the child is by representing it as its own investigation into its major symbol. (201)

The idea that Pearl is nothing more than the “major symbol” of the novel is also seen in Robert Emmet Whelan, Jr.’s “Hester Prynne’s Little Pearl: Sacred and Profane Love,” where he claims, “it is Pearl, the gem on her mother’s unquiet bosom, who throughout the tale betrays to the reader . . . the passionate love for the minister which Hester, of fearful necessity, takes
such great care to hide” (490). And the “badge of shame” upon Hester’s breast, along with “Pearl, its living counterpart—allegorical emblems as they are of Hester’s heart—are intended by Hawthorne to travel through the same range of meanings: ‘Adultery,’ ‘Able,’ ‘Affection,’ and ‘Angel’” (490). Pearl’s function as a living symbol of Hester’s adultery, ability, affection, and role as feminine angel, connected to the story only through Hester’s heart and emotional acuity, fails to acknowledge Hawthorne’s complexity of character development in Pearl. In this analysis, she becomes nothing more than the scarlet letter personified. In another analysis: “Pearl, described by Hawthorne as the ‘effluence of her mother’s lawless passion,’ is the ‘living emblem’ of Hester’s guilt not so much because she resembles the scarlet letter, but rather because she embodies what the letter can only represent—the very passions which motivate Hester’s transgression, and the sufferings that accompany her punishment” (Nudelman 193). Here, Pearl becomes nothing more than the face of Hester’s guilt. The problem that recurs in analyses such as these is that critics are too quick to dismiss Pearl’s integral role in the text, and furthermore, many are in disagreement over what, exactly, the scarlet letter represents. Trying to define Pearl as merely a symbolic element becomes an endless circle of ambiguity that leaves Pearl unexplored as a significant character in the text.

However, when critics endow Pearl with various other functions, symbolic or not, and acknowledge her central place within the text, her true role is expanded. Chester E. Eisinger, in his 1951 article “Pearl and the Puritan Heritage,” argues that Pearl is a symbol of natural liberty, perverse and willful, consulting her own impulses and following them wherever conflicts arose. She is antisocial. She will not be governed by any human will or law. She is as unruly as nature and is therefore unfit for civil society. Only when these natural qualities are washed away in Dimmesdale’s salvation does Pearl become a responsible human being, ready for admission into the community of men and, when Chillingworth’s money came to her, even into the Puritan community. (329)

Eisinger’s comments obviously reflect the time period within which he was writing. Pearl is deemed “antisocial” because she has the temerity to step beyond the preconceived boundaries of what Eisinger sees as her main function: being a female and a child. She cannot be “governed by any human will or law” both of which, especially in 1950, are male-centered; his reference to the fact that Pearl is ready to be accepted into the “community of men” also reflects the social mores of the 1950s. What is not fully understood, however, is how Dimmesdale’s salvation is translated into salvation for Pearl, especially since Pearl has rejected Dimmesdale’s Puritan community.
and disappears at the end of the novel. Ironically, it is Pearl’s willingness to acknowledge Dimmesdale during his scene of salvation that represents “natural liberty,” and the control she maintains in their relationship is a foreshadowing of the coming change in the female role.

The connection between Pearl’s character and her nature is another aspect that has garnered critical attention. Darrel Abel has claimed:

Pearl is in her most fundamental character a Child of Nature. She is of course a “natural child” in the euphemistic sense of the phrase. But a Child of Nature is properly speaking one who discovers conscious and valuable affinities with the natural world and enjoys an active and formative relationship with that world. . . . Little Pearl manifests this relationship between man and nature; her life and the life of nature are contiguous and sympathetic modes of being. Therefore, Hawthorne observed: “The mother forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child.” This “wildness,” however, is not the wildness of savagery but the wildness of innocence. (56-57)

This innocence is significant in that it casts Pearl in a new light. Her relationship with nature coincides with the relationship she is creating with the Puritan community, and just as the community cannot control nature, wild and free, it will not be able to control Pearl, either, although it has succeeded in controlling Hester. In fact, as Laurie A. Sterling points out in “Paternal Gold: Translating Inheritance in The Scarlet Letter”:

[T]he patriarchy assumes the authority to rename and revalue Hester. They read her physical shape and assign a spiritual value to her. Hester’s sin was representative of a sinful nature; thus their A, the representation of sin, could likewise embody Hester and thereby reduce her possible valuations. They inscribe on Hester, write her value (and her values) upon her, and in doing so they convert her according to official valuation. After her “conversion” they release her from the prison house in an attempt to show their omnipotence. Without her release into the community, into circulation, she has no immediate use-value to them. She must be displayed in order to substantiate their power within the social realm. (22)

Pearl, on the other hand, is left unmarked by the patriarchy, for the Puritan community assumes Hester will carry on its traditions. Hester, though, cannot bring herself to quell her daughter’s wild spirit, despite the restrictions placed upon her both emotionally and physically. Hester knows the social authorities are viewing Pearl as a devil-figure, and they see her daughter’s connection with nature as proof of her mother’s misdeeds coming out in the actions of her offspring. Yet, despite Hester’s guilt, she sees her child as angelic and innocent, and it is this dichotomy that is at the center of Hawthorne’s characterization of Pearl.

Abel acknowledges this correlation between good and evil/angel and
devil when he states, “Pearl... as a Child of Nature was not a perverted or
damned creature. She was an Undine—a beautiful half-human child who
instinctively aspired to possession of a soul” (58). Abel does not claim Pearl
is in possession of a soul from the moment of her birth into the Puritan
community, but rather that she has the possibility of gaining a soul through
her natural tendencies and aspirations. Abel also claims Pearl’s symbolic
function in the text is secondary, that she is merely a “messenger of anguish”
(62), and that, in fact, “[Pearl’s] symbolism never is energized into character-
ization in the other elements of her presentation, but in this one she is
truly motivated and effective so that she assumes at least a partial illusion
of life. As the emblem of sin (‘the scarlet letter endowed with life’) she fails,
however, to take on a realistic semblance of life” (63). Perhaps this is because
she is not meant to be a symbol—or at least not a symbol of sin.

Anne Marie McNamara states, “Pearl is more than a link, more than a
symbol[,] ... she is the efficient cause of the denouement and thus provides
the motivation for Dimmesdale’s final act” (537). According to McNamara,
when Dimmesdale thanks God “who gives him grace” after he mounts the
platform of disgrace, “Pearl is at last identified: she is grace, the instrument
of his redemption, a powerful but hidden force urging him to good” (552).
Again, Pearl takes on an angelic role, providing grace to the man who has
tried to hide his own part in the scandal of her birth. Pearl’s strength in
becoming “grace” is also a reflection of the changing role of women: she
provides the impetus toward “good” for Dimmesdale, and in doing so,
provides a new view of the power of the female in a male-dominated society.
Pearl, after all, is the one who brings about the cataclysmic revelation near
the end of Hawthorne’s novel. Without her presence, without her ability
to invent a new role for women, which is refined as the novel progresses,
there would be no scarlet letter, both literally and figuratively.

In the 1980s T. Walter Herbert, Jr. published “Nathaniel Hawthorne,
Una Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter: Interactive Selfhoods and the
Cultural Construction of Gender” in which he explored the connection
between Hawthorne’s daughter, Una, and Hawthorne’s literary creation,
Pearl. He claims, “Little Pearl is made to enact the qualities that most
troubled Hawthorne in his daughter, and she is eventually delivered from
them. Hawthorne surrounds little Pearl, that is to say, with a therapeutic
program, which includes a diagnosis of her difficulty and a prescription
for cure, grounded on the gender categories that he considered natural and
that defined a femininity he hoped his daughter would grow into” (287).
Pearl’s role as the definer of femininity is an interesting one, and one rarely
acknowledged in the vast body of critical works centering on Hawthorne’s
The Scarlet Letter. While Herbert seems to suggest that Hawthorne squelched
Pearl’s “unnatural” and “unfeminine” attributes, in reality, Hawthorne’s
text emboldens and authenticates Pearl's newfound feminine power. Pearl is the sole character who completely casts aside the Puritan definition of the female and breaks away from the Puritan community to find happiness. Herbert's article goes on to clarify what he sees as Pearl's role, connecting Pearl's actions with her function as a symbol of chastisement for Hester: "Just as Hester's rebellion brings on a conflict with her own 'womanly' nature, so Pearl suffers from internal contradictions. On the one hand, she is an agent of Hester's punishment, upholding the validity of the order that Hester violates. Pearl's preoccupation with the scarlet letter, her persistent allusions to it, and her eerily apt questions to Hester about Arthur fill out her character as an enforcer of the lawful order of society" (289). Herbert notes, however, that this occurs despite the fact that Pearl could not be made amendable to fit the rules. Clearly, though, it is this detail that allows Pearl to function as a symbol for Hester within the context of the story, and also to function as a role model for women. Herbert is correct when he states, "Pearl ... insists on the lawful order of things with hysterical passion, which takes on an eerie self-propelling quality—the scream of the bewitched at being bewitched" (290). In other words, Pearl may be used as a living symbol for Hester, but she will never become the symbol.

Mark M. Hennelly, Jr., in "The Scarlet Letter: A Play Day for the Whole World?" also connects Pearl with Una. His argument is based in part on Hawthorne's writings about Una's playtime antics and the connections Hennelly sees between those writings and The Scarlet Letter. Hennelly gives Pearl yet another function, claiming she is the "embodiment of Hawthorne's own ambivalence toward play, [Pearl] is a pure personification of a playful imp of the polymorphous perverse." Introduced as "the plaything of the angels" in "Eden," she is also repeatedly identified as "a demon offspring" and in that guise reminds us of Emerson's boast in "Self Reliance": "'if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil.' No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature' (545-46). Yet, if Hawthorne does not fully understand the value of play for females, it is not for want of trying. He notes: "The spell of life went forth from [Pearl's] ever creative spirit, and communicated itself to a thousand objects, as a torch kindles a flame wherever it may be applied. The unlikeliest materials, a stick, a bunch of rags, a flower, were the puppets of Pearl's witchcraft, and, without undergoing any outward change, became spiritually adapted to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world" (85). Clearly, there is something magical in Pearl's playtime, something that transforms her ordinary life into something akin to witchcraft, something that will allow her to transform herself, in much the same way she transforms her play materials, without an outward change, but with immense inward or spiritual change. Clearly, too, it is in Pearl's nature to go against the norm. In fact, her mother and father, from
the moment their adulterous action set forth Pearl's life, guaranteed her a life outside of the Puritan norm. Pearl's life would seem to those inside the community as one led by devilish concerns, but for those outside the community, those no longer encapsulated in that community, Pearl's actions can be viewed as angelic or "good"—a foreshadowing of the change for the better women are seeking at the end of the novel.

Other critics have continued their debate of Pearl's function, revisiting earlier scholarly works in an attempt, yet again, to define Pearl, whom Barbara Garlitz has deemed the "most enigmatic child in literature" (689). Garlitz defends her claim: "[C]riticism of Pearl almost forces one to conclude that her character is an unfathomable maze, or of such an involved richness that it can become all things to all men" (690). The irony of that statement is not commented upon, but there is, indeed, irony. The idea of Pearl becoming "all things to all men" leads to the conclusion that, in essence, Pearl's character demonstrates a new type of woman—one capable of answering whatever needs society may have. This type of analysis becomes richer when Pearl is not viewed solely as a secondary character—the stark symbol of Hester's and Arthur's sinful indulgence or some other one-dimensional symbol—but rather as one of the prime characters necessary to give the novel one of its strongest thematic elements. Pearl, in all her symbolic presentations, is the character who demonstrates the changing role of the female that began in the nineteenth century.

Her transformation throughout the novel, linked directly to Hester's influence, is also a direct result of the Puritan moral code that served as a catalyst for this profound change—a change still reverberating in today's society. Pearl's metamorphosis can best be demonstrated by concentrating on two specific areas within The Scarlet Letter: Hawthorne's repetition of certain images and words used to describe Pearl's actions and inherent nature, and Hester's role as a mechanism to bring about the new woman—all of the "Pearls"—of the future.

One area critics seem to overlook when discussing Pearl's role in the novel is Hawthorne's description of the eagle—our national symbol—in his opening gambit "The Custom House." However, when viewed through a language-lens, specific foreshadowing of Hester's influence and Pearl's function in the remainder of the text become evident. In "The Custom House" Hawthorne describes his view of the front of the custom house in the following way:

Over the entrance hovers an enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of intermingled thunderbolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes this unhappy fowl, she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general
truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community; and especially to warn all citizens, careful of their safety, against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking, at this very moment, to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow. (23-24)  

First, it is interesting to note Hawthorne’s eagle is female—and wears a shield before her breast. Perhaps Hawthorne’s custom-house eagle is a symbol of both Hester and Pearl—and of their combined magnitude in terms of their influence on the community, our nation, and, more particularly, on women in general. The reference to the shield is a direct link to the scarlet letter Hester wears throughout the novel, and, in fact, willingly re-places on her breast again at the end of the work. There is also an implicit link to Hester’s role at the end of the novel when women seek her out (based, in part, on their knowledge of what lies upon her breast) in order to gain her hard-won wisdom concerning the upcoming role of women in the world. And yes, these women may presume, as Hawthorne implies, that Hester’s womanly breast is the only soft place they may find to shelter them as they question their place in society, since Hester, of all females, knows what it is to be subjected to the pain of ostracism.  

But there is more in this passage in addition to its link with Hester. In considering that Hester’s influence on Pearl is a direct result of her own attempts to conform to the Puritan demands on her, it is also apparent that Pearl is reflected in this symbol of a nation simply because the reference to the eagle echoes Hawthorne’s descriptions of Pearl throughout the novel. Pearl is often referred to as “bird-like.” His descriptions of her include the following: “Whenever that look appeared in her wild, bright, deeply black eyes, it invested her with a strange remoteness and intangibility; it was as if she were hovering in the air and might vanish, like a glimmering light that comes we know not whence, and goes we know not whither” (83); “Pearl laughed and began to dance up and down, with the humorous gesticulation of a little imp, whose next freak might be to fly up the chimney” (87); “The child . . . escaped through the open window and stood on the upper step, looking like a wild, tropical bird, of rich plumage, ready to take flight into the upper air” (96); “What little bird of scarlet plumage may this be?” (95, emphasis added). In addition, Pearl could easily be described as consisting of “thunderbolts and barbed arrows” in her personality; and she certainly “threatens mischief to the inoffensive community.” The detailed description of the eagle at the beginning of the novel is a moment of foreshadowing that points to the influence both Hester and Pearl are going to have for the entire Puritan community, and also to their influence for future generations.
of women. It is also a direct connection to the idea of Pearl as America’s utopia—"all things to all men"—and is a preliminary symbol of what America ultimately has in store for her future.¹

Throughout the novel, Pearl represents the future of all women. Near the beginning of the story, Hawthorne compares Hester to the "image of Divine Maternity . . . of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world" (59). Claiming this idea is merely a contrast to the real view of Hester, whose motherhood is far from sinless in the Puritan eye, does not negate the underlying point: Hester’s child, too, may be one to "redeem the world." And like that other savior, Pearl suffers from the onslaught of her community’s rigid beliefs as those beliefs are perpetrated upon her mother. As Hawthorne points out, “the child; who, drawing its sustenance from the maternal bosom, seemed to have drunk in with it all the turmoil, the anguish, and despair, which pervaded the mother’s system” (69). Pearl must find the strength within herself, even as a child, to overcome that which her mother has been forced to place upon her. Eisinger, too, explores how Hester influences Pearl: “Pearl is heir . . . not only to a passion that transcended the moral law but to an intellect that was at once free and subject to confusion. In short, Pearl’s mother, having conceived the child in sin by giving way to natural passion, brings down upon herself and the child social and religious ostracism and forces herself and the child into a sympathetic relation with nature” (326).

As she grows, Pearl is described as "a lovely and immortal flower . . . [with] beauty that became every day more brilliant, and the intelligence that threw its quivering sunshine over the tiny features . . ." (81). Hester, on the other hand, is fearful of the things she sees developing in Pearl, even as she is powerless to stop them—powerless because she tries to accept what her community has decreed to be the proper punishment for a female who has dared to challenge her role. “Day after day, [Hester] looked fearfully into the child’s expanding nature; ever dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity, that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed her being” (81-82). Hester knows instinctively that Pearl will be influenced by the guilt her mother feels, but she is not certain what form this influence will take within her child. And, since there has been no precedent for strong females in Hester’s life, it is no wonder that “at times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide” (134).

The notion of Hester’s guilt is examined carefully in Kenneth D. Pimple’s "‘Subtle, but Remorseful Hypocrite’: Dimmesdale’s Moral Character" where he compares and contrasts Hester’s guilty feelings with Dimmesdale’s by examining their conversation in the woods. Pimple points out:
Hester is forced by her society to display her guilt (in the form of the scarlet letter) though she does not really believe she has sinned; Dimmesdale hides his guilt though he has accepted his society’s definition of his action as sinful. Hester is defiant of society even as she adheres to its strictures; Dimmesdale is so cowed by his society that he is unable to live up to its (and his) standards. (270)

Pearl, on the other hand, is neither forced into displaying guilt, nor into hiding it, because she does not own the guilt brought into her life by her mother and her mother’s lover. Instead, Pearl is left to interpret her mother’s shame, or lack of shame, since the scarlet letter is adorned in gold, and her own dresses are beyond compare and fit for a princess, even while she takes in the community’s frowning disapproval. Surely Pearl was perceptive enough to realize Hester was attempting to compensate for the darkness of Pearl’s existence in the community by using her womanly skill as a seamstress to outfit Pearl in splendor and, in doing so, was able to comment effectively on what she really thought of the community’s attitude without ever saying a single word. Hester allowed Pearl’s clothing—and Pearl’s physical beauty—to speak Hester’s unspeakable belief: namely that Pearl, regardless of her flawed conception, was the perfect child. What might be missed, without careful examination, though, is that Hester’s Puritan upbringing is also apparent in the magnificent clothing she creates for Pearl. The outfits are, in part, an attempt to cover up, literally and figuratively, Hester’s own fears that Pearl did, indeed, carry the sin of her parents. Hawthorne, however, demonstrates that Pearl is, in fact, the perfect female child whether or not she is clothed in Hester’s outer creations: it is Pearl’s inner beauty that has created her personality. He describes this importance in clear detail:

So magnificent was the small figure, when thus arrayed, and such was the splendor of Pearl’s own beauty, shining through the gorgeous robes which might have extinguished a paler loveliness, that there was an absolute circle of radiance around her, on the darksome cottage floor. And yet a russet gown, torn and soiled with the child’s rude play, made a picture of her just as perfect. Pearl’s aspect was imbued with a spell of infinite variety; in this one child there were many children, comprehending the full scope between the wild-flower prettiness of a peasant-baby, and the pomp, in little, of an infant princess. (82)

Hawthorne himself points out that when Pearl is viewed honestly as a beautiful female child, whether her outer covering remains perfect or not, she becomes representative of all female children regardless of class or position within the community. Hawthorne must have been fully aware that the Pearl he created was a representative “girl-child” who would grow into a representative “female-woman”—a woman in no manner bound to the Puritan female code of conduct.
The underlying character of this girl-child is demonstrated throughout the novel. When Pearl goes after the Puritan children who mock and scorn her mother and herself, she “made a rush at the knot of her enemies, and put them all to flight. She resembled, in her fierce pursuit of them, an infant pestilence,—the scarlet fever, or some such half-fledged angel of judgment,—whose mission was to punish the sins of the rising generation” (90). Unlike Hester, who willingly wears the scarlet letter, even while she mocks the situation by adorning the letter (and Pearl) in elegance, Pearl is not willing to accept the judgment of her contemporaries.

Pearl, in her role as “half-fledged angel of judgment,” is viewed by the primary male characters in the novel as a child the likes of which they had never encountered. When Chillingworth and Dimmesdale speak about Pearl, their confusion is readily apparent:

“There is no law, nor reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that child’s composition,” remarked [Roger Chillingworth], as much to himself as to his companion. “I saw her, the other day, bespatter the Governor himself with water, at the cattle-trough in Spring Lane. What, in Heaven’s name, is she? Is the imp altogether evil? Hath she affections? Hath she any discoverable principle of being?”

“None,—save the freedom of a broken law,” answered Mr. Dimmesdale, ... “Whether capable of good, I know not.” (112)

Indeed, Pearl is something new, created from the “freedom of a broken law”—from her mother’s choice to commit adultery—and her mother’s choice to dress up the punishment, which thereby fills Pearl with the notion of the beauty of freedom itself. And when Pearl draws her mother away from this overheard conversation between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, she is

skipping, dancing, and frisking fantastically among the hillocks of the dead people, like a creature that had nothing in common with a bygone and buried generation, nor owned herself akin to it. It was as if she had been made afresh, out of new elements, and must perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime. (113)

Hawthorne bluntly tells readers Pearl has “nothing in common with a bygone and buried generation”; she “had been made afresh” and “must perforce be permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself.” The implication seems clear enough: there is something (someone) new in the air, something strong and new and growing powerful as the law that once sought to strangle it. And like a real pearl, created from irritation and extracted from its living source, Hawthorne’s Pearl presents her real value
Hawthorne’s Pearl

once she is introduced to the community.

Obviously, Hawthorne thought deeply about the role of women in the nineteenth century, and part of his story was an examination of those roles as viewed through Hester’s and Pearl’s circumstances. When he compels Hester to wonder if “it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been born at all” (134), he does not stop there: “The same dark question often rose into [Hester’s] mind, with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting even to the happiest among them?” (134). While Hawthorne’s feelings about females in the story are clearly ambivalent, he nonetheless gives an answer. Pearl refuses to accept the Puritan code of behavior for females, while simultaneously refusing to limit her life to mere existence. Jesse F. Battan points out that in the nineteenth century, “[t]he transition from thought to behavior that openly challenged social norms was a difficult one to make” (610), and this is clearly expressed in Hawthorne’s work. Battan’s article also uses sociologist Karen Hanson’s work on the creation of community in antebellum New England to reveal the accuracy of Hawthorne’s fictional world:

Women who broke the rules and engaged in premarital or extramarital sex were shunned. Those women whose sexual reputations had been tarnished by the corrosive power of local gossip had few avenues of escape. They could give in, accept their shame, and bear the ostracism of the community. They could move on in hopes of recreating a more “respectable” sense of self. Or they could reject the community’s judgment of their behavior. This last option was the most dangerous to the social order because it challenged the extralegal power of public opinion and social respect. (610)

Hester decides to “give in,” but Pearl, living the result of her mother’s decision, chooses to reject the community’s judgment and therefore becomes dangerous to the social order.

Hester’s reaction, on the other hand, is limited by her sense that her own situation is helpless, and while this makes her “sad” (Hawthorne’s own descriptive word), Hawthorne provides the reader with this speculation about the role of females:

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. (134)
In reference to the "very nature of the opposite sex," there is a reference to Pearl, whose nature is revealed to be strange as well as "hereditary," taken from the very sins her mother is accused of perpetuating. In doling out Hester's punishment, the Puritan community has forced a change to occur: namely, Pearl's nature. And in doing so, it has served as a catalyst that will bring to the women of the future—of Pearl's generation and beyond—a "fair and suitable position." Despite Hester's sadness as she contemplates whether or not this future is possible, or perhaps spurred on by her sadness, Pearl's personality and "nature" is formed, in part, by her mother's inner desire to see such a future come to pass.

Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne shows Pearl's actions and reactions in her formative years as a demonstration of outright rebellion, yet, despite these rather negative portrayals, he takes extreme care to express the underlying meaning of those actions: "In the little chaos of Pearl's character, there might be seen emerging—and could have been, from the very first—the stedfast principles of an unflinching courage,—an uncontrollable will,—a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect,—and a bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined, might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them" (144). She is learning, slowly, that her own instincts may be more than enough to live by, and that, like her mother, the "tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (157). Hester, without conscious thought or plan, grants this freedom to Pearl, even though Pearl has yet to recognize and accept the gift of freedom the scarlet letter has provided because she has not yet determined the true source of her own character. Franny Nudelman's "Emblem and Product of Sin: The Poisoned Child in *The Scarlet Letter* and Domestic Advice Literature" addresses how a child's character is developed:

> To form the character of her child, a mother must first reform her own [character]. . . . If, however, a mother cannot discipline herself, if she fails to cleanse her interior of all "violent passion," her child's preternatural capacity to embody maternal character will reveal her failure to the public gaze. The perfect transmission between mother and child and the consequent externalization of maternal character in the constitution, moral and physical, of the child, works to reveal the mother's hidden heart. . . . While the mother influences the world through her child, the child, in turn, offers the world access to the mother's interior. (203-04)

Hester's "dressing up" of the scarlet letter, and of her child, demonstrates her lack of discipline in regards to the punishment she receives. Yet by the end of the novel, the correlation between what Hester wishes and what Pearl is ultimately capable of becoming is externalized.
In her child’s mind, Pearl has speculated about her parentage and has perceived the association between the scarlet letter and her own existence. When Hester and Arthur meet up in the forest and proclaim their continued love for one another, Pearl is stunned by her mother’s ability to cast off, so quickly, the scarlet letter that has been the link between them for as long as she has had memory. Janice B. Daniel in “‘Apples of the Thoughts and Fancies’: Nature as Narrator in The Scarlet Letter” points out: “Hester and Pearl are forced by a ‘civilized’ community of humans to form a community of their own” (314), and it is this community Pearl sees disintegrating before her eyes. She stares at her mother and Dimmesdale, until Hester catches a glimpse of her daughter and suddenly feels “herself, in some indistinct and tantalizing manner, estranged from Pearl, as if the child, in her lonely ramble through the forest, had strayed out of the sphere in which she and her mother dwelt together, and was now vainly seeking to return to it” (163). As a child, Pearl cannot quickly make sense of the shock of seeing her mother without the letter, and she even forces her mother to don the letter again, returning order to the world as she knows it. But when Dimmesdale attempts to claim Pearl with a kiss on her brow, Pearl again rebels and washes away the kiss that would seal the pact the three of them seem destined to share. Of the three, only Pearl seems capable of recognizing the impossibility of a shared future, and when Dimmesdale continues to refuse publicly to acknowledge her, Pearl stands up for herself and refuses to acknowledge him. This willful action is certainly not the action of a “good” Puritan child. It is, rather, the action of a young girl who is learning to take charge of her own life regardless of what the patriarchal society deems is appropriate.

Later, after the three of them leave the forest and meet up again in the marketplace for the Election Sermon, when the procession of magistrates and citizens makes their way through the town, Pearl at first pretends her world is intact as she watches the parade pass by: “Little Pearl at first clapped her hands, but then lost, for an instant, the restless agitation that had kept her in continual effervescence throughout the morning; she gazed silently, and seemed to be borne upward, like a floating sea-bird” (182). This epiphanic moment is when Pearl’s body will no longer allow her to hide her true feelings: “When the procession passed, the child was uneasy, fluttering up and down, like a bird on the point of taking flight” (185). Hawthorne dramatically changes the repetitive description previously used in connection with Pearl. Before this moment she had always been filled with energy, always taking flight, but now she “floats,” and then “flutters up and down,” and then she is merely “on the point of taking flight.” This reversal in description points to the realization—both physical and emotional—Pearl experiences at that moment. She is coming to understand, and to accept,
that she cannot, and does not want to, maintain the status quo of her present existence. This realization is furthered when she keeps her feet firmly planted on the ground, finds her mother, and asks point blank about Dimmesdale, who has passed by her in the procession. "'Mother . . . was that the same minister who kissed me by the brook?'" (185). When Hester tries to hush her daughter at this inappropriate time, Pearl tells her if she had known that was Dimmesdale, she would have run to him and "bid him to kiss her now" (185), in front of everyone in the market place. The key point is that Pearl is willing, now, to take Dimmesdale's kiss—but it is clearly on her own terms. She wants Dimmesdale to acknowledge her because she knows only then will she have "undergone a still mightier change" wherein her "ethereal essence"—the symbolic power of the scarlet letter, the thing that has, until now, defined her "truest life"—will "evaporate" and she (all females) can start to take control of her (their) life (lives).

Hester continues her attempt to silence Pearl, in fear, still, of the Puritan community that has so effectively silenced her. But Pearl, unlike Hester, will not accept its authority. It is only after Dimmesdale's acknowledgement of her as his child, and after she waits for him to ask her for a kiss, that she steps boldly forth and kisses his lips in front of all the community: "A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (196). Yes, at this point, it is certain Pearl will grow up and be a woman in the world, but, based on what has been revealed in the story, Pearl will not suddenly tumble back into the Puritan definition of a "good" woman; she will take charge, and remain in charge, of her own life.

In the end, Hawthorne writes of the mystery of Pearl in terms of the future: "If still alive, she must now have been in the flush and bloom of early womanhood" (200), and there were some who faithfully believed "Pearl was not only alive, but married, and happy, and mindful of her mother; and that she would most joyfully have entertained that sad and lonely mother at her fireside" (200). By giving Pearl only the possibility of a future, Hawthorne accomplishes two ends: first, he avoids a sentimental ending in order to add power to his development of Pearl; second, he provides the suggestion that there is the possibility of a future for all women. Pearl is not a symbol cast aside, but rather has developed into a woman with a life of her own. Furthermore, the life she is leading can be inspirational for women everywhere.

As for Hester, she has work to do in the Puritan community she returns to. She takes up the scarlet letter as a calling to other women who seek her out:
Women, more especially,—... came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counseled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! (201)

This presentation of the "angel and apostle of the coming revelation" completely describes Pearl, for it is Pearl who is "in the flush and bloom of early womanhood"; it is Pearl who is "happy" and "joyful." Pearl, throughout the novel, is referred to as an angel (and a devil—who was once an angel, too) creating the picture of a strong female child, and in the end, it is just that kind of girl-child who will grow into the woman, beautiful and wise, Hawthorne describes through Hester's voice as the savior of all women. Seen in this light, Pearl is the representation of the beginning of the future for all women, for it is Pearl (the scarlet letter personified) who has taught her mother to value the (Pearl of) great price of freedom and to have the strength and ability to teach other women to look forward to a whole new relationship between men and women. It is Pearl, too, who has transformed the scarlet letter her mother has taken back onto her breast into "something that should speak a different purport" (136), something that renounces once and for all the old Puritan doctrine of punishment as salvation. It is Pearl who first looked upon the scarlet letter "with awe, yet with reverence, too" (200), and it is Pearl, whose own place in The Scarlet Letter seen from the vantage point of 150 years of history demonstrates that women have the power to grant their own absolution, and can willingly don that metaphorical "A" upon their own breast.

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Notes

1 This idea is credited to Dr. Sarah Gates of St. Lawrence University, who read the manuscript with a keen eye.
Interestingly, Deborah A. Stone states in “Sex, Lies, & The Scarlet Letter” that Hawthorne’s text is “that great American textbook of sex education” (105). She points out that “The Scarlet Letter is much more than a metaphor for searing stigma. Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl are the archetypal unwed mother and illegitimate child in American social history” (105).

Works Cited


Eisinger, Chester E. “Pearl and the Puritan Heritage.” College English 12.6 (1951): 323-29.


