Scarlet Letter Ambiguity Essay, Research Paper

Ambiguity and The Scarlet Letter go better together than two people that have

been

happily married for 75 years. There is no exemption in Hawthorne?s

exquisite symbolism

of one of his main characters, Pearl. The Scarlet Letter A, worn by Hester

Prynne, was a

punishment for the immoral sin of adultery she had committed. Following

Hester’s act of

adultery, she became pregnant with a baby girl whom she named Pearl. From the

first

moment that we are introduced to Pearl in Nathaniel Hawthorne?s novel, The

Scarlet

Letter, we get the sense that there is something strange and unnatural about

her. Pearl

acts very differently than the other people in Boston in that she seems to be

much more

vibrant than the others. We see this displayed in various different forms

like her dress, her

mood swings, her sometimes mischievous behavior, and her constant liveliness.

Throughout the novel, Pearl is used by Hawthorne to symbolize many different

elements,

and the ambiguity come together for one significant meaning.

A critic of Hawthorne states, ?when depth and ambiguity are much admired in

writing, Hawthorne has continued to offer enough complexity and mystery to

hold a wide

variety of readers.?(Davidson, 361) Pearl was not accepted by virtually

anyone; her

unavoidable seclusion was due to the sin of her mother. Pearl was always

different

somehow. Throughout all of this, Pearl is labeled with many symbols that are

meaningful

in understanding Hawthorne?s novel, and they will be explained in the

preceding

paragraphs.

For one, Pearl is the living embodiment of the scarlet letter. She is the

result from

Hester?s and Dimmesdale?s sins. Pearl plays one of the most crucial roles

in The Scarlet

Letter. Hawthorne uses Pearl as a dynamic character; she is a constant

reminder to Hester

of her sin. When we were first introduced to Pearl, she was immediately drawn

to the

Scarlet A on Hester?s bosom. ?But the first object of which Pearl seemed

to become

aware was the scarlet letter on Hester?s bosom! One day, as her mother

stooped over the

cradle, the infant?s eyes had been caught by the glimmering of the gold

embroidery about

the letter? and, putting up her little hand, she grasped at it, smiling not

doubtfully, but with

a decided gleam.? (Hawthorne, 88). Beginning when she was conceived, Pearl

served as a

reminder of the Scarlet A on her bosom. Hawthorne shows this symbolism

various times.

In Chapter 7, Pearl and Hester go to the Governor?s house and Pearl?s

attire ?inevitably

reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear

upon her

bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed

with life!?

(Hawthorne, 93). Pearl is dressed in a scarlet dress with gold fringe exactly

resembling the

Scarlet A on Hester?s bosom. Pearl had a natural preference to focus on the

Scarlet Letter,

which is show in Chapter 15. ??Pearl took some eel-grass, and imitated,

as best as she

could, on her own bosom, the decoration with which she was so familiar on her

mother?s.

A letter, the letter A, but freshly green, instead of scarlet!? (Hawthorne,

163). In this

scene, Hester eventually has to deny its significance to Pearl after she

constantly confronts

her mother of its significance. One of the most symbolic scenes in the novel

occurs in the

forest as Pearl and Hester are traveling to meet Dimmesdale. Pearl remarks to

Hester that

?the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it

is afraid of

something on your bosom.? (Hawthorne, 168). Sunshine, which can symbolize

composed

happiness or the approval of God and nature, rejects Hester because of her

sin and the

?thing on her bosom?. Therefore, this confirms that Pearl constantly

reminds her of her sin

and her punishment. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, Pearl

prevents Hester

from escaping her sin and shame. Pearl ?bursts into a fit of passion? and

will not go to her

mother until she puts the Scarlet A back on her bosom and places her hair

back

underneath her cap. In the one moment that Hester attempts to escape her sin,

Pearl

refuses to acknowledge her until she returns to the shameful mother that she

has always

known. Pearl is a child without guilt, with all a child?s freshness and

spontaneity, however

to Hester is a persistent remembrance to the Scarlet A, which she must bare

on her bosom.

Pearl really was the Scarlet Letter, because if Pearl had never been born,

Hester would

have never been found guilty of adultery, and thus never would have had to

wear that

burden upon her chest. As Pearl?s symbolic meaning of being the embodiment

of the

scarlet letter, this is not the only symbolic meaning that she has.

Pearl is also symbolic in that she symbolized innocence. She did absolutely

nothing to be treated how she was treated, all Pearl did was be born. Pearl,

in the same

idea of being the symbol of innocence, is the symbol of the treasure of

youth. Her name

designates her to be a child of great value and worth. A pearl in the ocean

is found and

extracted after careful labor. Pearl was brought into the world at a great

cost. She was

brought into the world at the expense of her mother’s public condemnation.

Pearl is

innocent and is her mother’s only treasure and companion. Pearl is different

from ordinary

Puritan children in that she has a mind of her own. A pearl would not belong

in Puritan

society because it would contrast with society’s austerity and

utilitarianism. A pearl would

be a luxury and an object that would not be found on any proper Puritan

woman. Pearl

nonetheless stands out as beautiful and charming in a society of dull and

stern people. In

the same way that her mother Hester was different from Puritan society, her

offspring also

was a not a normal Puritan. Pearl is different but it?s her difference that

gives her great

worth and beauty. Though her symbolizing innocence and the treasure of youth,

she is

also used to symbolize a contrasting element.

As Pearl symbolized another substantial element in the novel, there were no

possibilities of any character appreciating this symbolization. Pearl was

also used to

symbolize evil and secret sin. On the rare occasion that the children would

show interest

in Pearl, she would ?grow positively terrible in her puny wrath, snatching

up stones to

fling at them?? (Hawthorne, 87) Throughout most of the book, Pearl is

wild. When she

is in the forest with her mother, she fits in with the wild things and they

seem to accept

her. ?…the mother forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all

recognized a

kindred wildness in the human child.? (Hawthorne, 188) Nature recognizes in

Pearl, a

wildness. Pearl?s character is described as developing, ?…the steadfast

principles of an

unflinching courage, ?an uncontrollable will, ?a sturdy pride…?

(Hawthorne, 165) Also,

Pearl asks Hester where she came from, and Hester says that she came from the

Heavenly

father and Pearl says, ?He did not send me…I have no Heavenly Father.?

All of these

characteristics relate to sin, especially sin that is not recognized. While

committing the sin,

a person has strong will, pride, and courage just like Pearl does. Pearl is

wild along with

passionate. Since Pearl is so wild and passionate, she is accepted very well

in the forest.

This explains very straight forwardly how she is evil. Since she is accepted

well in the

forest, which is the home of the ?Black Man? or evil, she is symbolizing

evil. Likewise,

when the sin is discovered, Pearl?s character changes dramatically. Before,

Pearl had been

wild and not very caring, when her father, Arthur, finally admits he is Pearl?s

father and is

dying, Pearl changes. This breaks her free from being the symbol of evil and

sin, and gives

a chance to go to the next and final symbolization of Pearl.

Hawthorne uses Pearl for one last symbol in The Scarlet Letter, the symbol of

the moral blossom. This is very much associated with symbolizing a rose.

Since her

mother symbolized passion through the rosebush, the child is thus comparable

to the

blossoms on the rosebush. Once and a while, Pearl would bring happiness to

Hester?s life,

and that gave her a reason to keep on living. Pearl really symbolized a rose

to her mother,

at some times she could be bright and vibrant, and really love her mother,

but at other

times, she could be ?wilting?. It was the times when she was

"wilting" that brought

Hester the most grief. Hawthorne comments that the rose may serve as a moral

blossom.

Pearl does represent a moral in the novel, making her parents take

responsibility of their

sins, and Pearl was persistent until this happened.

Hawthorne has much ambiguity throughout The Scarlet Letter, and it is often

through

his points or important figures or important settings. One critic agreed with

Hawthorne?s

ambiguous ways of writing, but at the same time, praised the continually, ?But

the reader

feels that his vision was clear, and his feeling about the matter very strong

and rich.

Hawthorne?s imagination, on the other hand, plays with his theme so

incessantly, leads it

such a dance through the moon-lighted air of his intellect, that the thing

cools off, as it

were, hardens and stiffens, and, producing effects much more exquisite,

leaves the reader

with a sense of having handled a splendid piece of silversmith?s work.?

(James, 815)

Hawthorne?s ambiguity of the symbolism of Pearl is extremely evident to

each of his

readers. Some will think, what is his point of so ambiguously describing the

symbolic

Pearl. Well, Hawthorne gives the reader a chance to adjudge their own opinion

on what

Pearl is really standing for. Yet, he leads the reader to believe that Pearl?s

overall

symbolic ambiguity is standing for the possibilities of sin combining with

innocence. His

ambiguity shows the true complexity to Pearl and each of her symbolic

meanings that were

covered in the previous paragraphs. It truly is put together quite

magnificently because

Hawthorne incorporated the aftermath?s of Hester and Dimmesdale?s sins

into one

innocent character, Pearl.

In conclusion, Hawthorne?s portrayal of Pearl and her symbolism are quite

ambiguous. This is clear in how many symbolic meanings Pearl had. She

symbolized the

scarlet letter, innocence and treasure, evil and sin, and the moral blossom

and rose. It is

evident that he wanted to ambiguously portray the symbolism of Pearl. So, was

Hawthorne meaning to show the possibilities of combining sin and innocence

through the

ambiguous description or was he just putting symbolization in the only one

character that

wasn?t a sinner? Well, this is a question that can never be answered.