Scarlet Letter Essay, Research Paper

Often throughout The Scarlet Letter there are symbolic references made.

The story deals with a Puritan woman who commits adultery and raises an

illegitimate child named Pearl. The author, Nathanial Hawthorne, seems

to be rather fond of using religious and natural images to symbolize

different points, possibly because of his own Puritan background. One

of the purposes of this symbolism is to show that Puritanism is

hypocritical and that their religious viewpoints are against the

natural order, which is done by using contrasting natural and religious

symbols in the descriptions of Pearl.

First, Hawthorne uses the backdrop of the natural world to show

not only that Pearl is anonymous to the Puritan culture, but

also above it. This is done by using positive natural images

and metaphors to the natural world. Describing Pearl as a

“…lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a

guilty passion” (pg. 81), begins this image. This “rank

luxuriance” is based on the strict Puritan morals. It describes

the child as a mistake or an outcast even though the birth of a

child is supposed to be a wonderful thing. Pearl also has a

sort of love and disposition uncommon of other Puritan children

illustrated by the statement: “…Hester could not help

questioning, at such moments, whether Pearl were a human child.

she seemed rather an airy sprite…” (pg. 84). Her mother,

being of a Puritan background, seems to disturb her that Pearl

acts so free spirited. The best example of the difference of

Pearl in a positive way is a direct statement about Puritan

children: “…Puritan elders; the ugliest weeds of the garden

were their children…” (pg. 87). By describing the other

puritan children as weeds, Hawthorne symbolizes the paths that

their lives will take. Weeds will grow up big but will never be

as beautiful as a flower and often tries to smother flowers and

kill them off. The religious descriptions of Pearl are often

used to show the Puritan ideals of the fact that the mother

committed adultery. Even though the child can not help that she

has been labeled as an outcast the rest of her life

indefinitely. Cited conscientiously, “Pearl was a born outcast

of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of

sin, she had no right among Christian infants.” (pg. 86). These

people which are supposed to be Christian and love their

neighbors are being total hypocrites by despising a child just

because they believe that it was erected by the process of a

sinful act. Even her simple childhood temper tantrums are

described as being evil; “…with shrill, incoherent

exclamations, that made her mother tremble because they had so

much the sound of a witch’s anathemas in some unknown tongue.”

(pg. 86). Hawthorne uses the witch connotation to give it more

image as to what exactly it was that the Puritans feared the

most. Even Pearl’s own mother, an outcast herself, is

frightened by these temper tantrums. Throughout the book there

are examples of when Pearl has almost some kind of supernatural

ability to see things the way that they really are. A child

these young with these gifts of perception would definitely

have been viewed evil in Puritan society. It was assumed to be

some type of witchcraft. This is even more obvious with the

observations that she makes. When Pearl questions her mother as

to where she came from, the response typically was “the

Heavenly Father.” Pearl then proceeds to point at Hester’s

scarlet letter and replies that she did not come from the

heavenly father. This statement at such a young age reflects

that not only does she recognize herself as an evil outcast

from the Christians but also somewhat of a heretical

statement. These two different conflicting groups of symbols

are more than likely nothing more than a resentment of

Hawthorn’s Puritan upbringing, but do say a lot about Puritan

society. This contrast of two almost opposite worlds show a

great deal of hypocrisy among the Puritans. The natural world

symbols show Pearl as a normal good-hearted child, while the

religious symbols show her as not only a horrible mistake, but

as a child that almost teeters on the brink of being possessed

or demonic in some way. The most important part is that it is

the reader’s own opinion as to who is correct.