The Scarlet Letter: A Look At Pearl Essay, Research Paper

The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter is a novel with much symbolism. Throughout the novel several characters represent other ideas. One of the most complex and misunderstood characters in the novel is Pearl, the daughter of Hester Prynne. Pearl, throughout the story, develops into a dynamic symbol ? one that is always changing. Although Pearl changes, she always symbolizes evil. Pearl symbolizes evil in the story by representing God?s punishment of Hester?s sin, symbolizing the guilt and the scarlet letter that controls her behavior, and defying Puritan laws by being cheerful and associating with nature.

Pearl represents God?s punishment by her mocking and nagging of Hester. Throughout the novel she sometimes seemed to her mother as almost a witch baby (Matthiessen 104). She is a baffling mixture of strong emotions with a fierce temper and a capacity for evil. With Pearl, Hester?s life became one of constant nagging, and no joy. The child could not be made amenable to rules. Hester even remarks to herself, ?Oh Father in heaven ? if thou art still my father ? what is this being which I have brought into the world? (Hawthorne 89)? Pearl would harass her mother

over the scarlet ?A? she wore. In time, Hester was subjected to so much ridicule from Pearl and others that she was forced into seclusion.

Pearl represents the sins of both Hester and Dimmesdale. Pearl is said to be the direct consequence of sin (Martin 108). Their sins include lying to the people about the affair that led to Pearl. Hester realizes what Pearl represents when she does not hold Pearl up in front of the ?A.? She carries the child around because it is a direct reflection of her sin. Hester is, ?wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another? (Hawthorne 48). Dimmesdale?s sin is not adultery but not having the courage to admit that he had adulterated. Therefore his is a ?concealed sin.?

The scarlet letter amuses Pearl, and also controls her behavior. It is noted that, Pearl has been described in terms almost exclusively of uncontrolled, chaotic passion (MacLean 54). Throughout the novel Pearl is attracted to the ?A.? Even when she is just a baby, ?her infant?s eyes had been caught by the glimmering of the gold embroidery about the letter? (Hawthorne 90). When Pearl is older and Hester throws the letter on the ground, Pearl yells at her mother until she places the ?A? back on her bosom. Hawthorne says that Pearl is, ?the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life,? (95) which proves the she is truly the scarlet letter. Throughout the book the ?A? is the sign by which the colonial authority seek to fix the crime and the criminal (Ragussis 97), although the cloth shows the sin so does Pearl. She is a far stronger device for punishing Hester than

the piece of cloth on Hester?s chest. Due to her influence, Pearl becomes the chief agent to her mother?s salvation.

Hester and Dimmesdale share much guilt because of Pearl. Dimmesdale?s guilt is filled with mental anguish, and serves as a constant reminder of his sin. Dimmesdale is a minister [who] commits adultery and is driven to public confession by remorse (Martin 108). He remains silent so that he can continue to do God?s work as a minister. It is said that he was a guilty character [who] finds empathy in connection with others (Peckham 92). Pearl brings him guilt when he would not stand with them on the scaffold; ?Thou was not bold! ? thou wast not true! ? Thou wouldst not promise to take my hand, and my mother?s hand, tomorrow noontide? (Hawthorne 150)! Hester?s guilt, however, is derived from both Chillingsworth and Dimmesdale. Chillingsworth married a woman who did not love him, which is one of the causes of Hester?s guilt. Dimmesdale causes her guilt when he sees her suffering alone for the sin that they both committed. Though they both committed the same sin, only Hester?s shines through.

Pearl was cheerful due to the scarlet letter her mother possessed. When the breastplate at Governor Bellingham?s Mansion distorts the scarlet ?A? into something overpowering and horrible, it is Pearl who points at it, ?smiling at her mother with the elfish intelligence that was so familiar an expression on her small physiognomy? (Hawthorne 99). Even as a child, Pearl is affixed to the letter ?and, putting up her little hand, she grasped it, [the letter] smiling, not doubtfully, but

with a decided gleam? (Hawthorne 90). Pearl?s tendency to focus on the scarlet letter is fully developed when she mimics her mother by placing a seaweed ?A? on her own chest. Much of Pearl?s strangeness comes from her exceptional quickness of mind and the abnormal environment in which she is reared with only her mother as a companion. As Pearl develops a personality, she becomes symbolic of the kind of passion that accompanied Hester?s sin. Hester tolerated Pearl?s pretentious behavior but could not find it in her heart to condemn the child. As Pearl thus becomes so closely associated with the letter ?A? on Hester?s breast she becomes the embodiment not only of Hester?s sin but also of her conscience.

Nature is an amusing hobby for Pearl; therefore one of her favorite activities is playing with flowers and trees. She fits in with natural things, ?and she was gentler here [the forest] then in the grassy margined streets of the settlement, or in her mother?s cottage? as Hawthorne notes in the novel (202). She is so closely affiliated to nature that the creatures of the forest approach her instead of disperse. ?The mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child? Hawthorne notes as Pearl is on a walk with her mother (202). However, the Puritans believed that anything affiliated with the forest was evil; therefore, Pearl defies their laws by being effervescent and joyful in the woods. Some of the Puritans even believe her to be a demon offspring. So unusual is her behavior that she is often referred to in such terms as ?elf child,?

?imp,? and ?airy sprite.? Pearl is a virtual shouting match between the Puritanical views and the Romantic ways.

Pearl is a source of many kinds of symbolism. She is both a rose and indeed the scarlet letter. If she had not been born, Hester would not have had to wear the letter. Pearl is a burden to Hester; yet Hester loves her. She is also her mother?s only treasure and her only source of survival. Without Pearl, Hester would have lived a different life, one without the scarlet letter, one without sin, and one without her treasure.