

## CHAPTER VI: PEARL

**F**rom the careful description of Hester in the previous chapter, the narrator moves to an equally in-depth look at her daughter Pearl in Chapter VI. The description begins by focusing on Pearl's contradictory nature: She is a "lovely and immortal flower," but one that has grown out of "rank luxuriance" and "guilty passion." The narrator continues to use the flower imagery that began in the first chapter with his description of the black flower and the wild rosebush. Pearl's name does not evoke the calm, white, unimpassioned beauty of the gem but instead bespeaks the pearl of great price, a biblical reference to Matthew 13:45–46. Like the merchant in the Bible who sells everything he has in order to purchase a single pearl, Hester has sold everything that was valuable to her—her reputation, her status in the community, and all manner of social acceptability and contact—for this one treasure, her daughter.

No single meaning can fully capture Pearl's significance, and critics have spent hundreds of pages arguing about different interpretations of her name; as the narrator tells us, inside this one child there are "many children." Most argue that Pearl should most properly be viewed as a symbol, rather than as a character. First, she is a symbol of the scarlet letter itself, and all the descriptions of her in the book emphasize this connection. For example, when we first see Pearl, as her mother steps out of the prison door, Hester tries to use the baby to

cover the scarlet letter on her breast; the narrator tells us that both Pearl and the letter share a place on the “same dishonored bosom.” Hester expects her daughter’s nature to correspond with the sin that brought her into the world. Every day Hester looks for a “dark and wild peculiarity” in Pearl’s personality. These images of darkness and wildness reoccur throughout the novel.

Pearl can also be viewed as God’s blessing on Hester. At times, Hester recognizes the discrepancy between the treatment she has received from man and that she has received from God: While man has marked her with the heinous scarlet letter and separated her from all human sympathy, God has sent her a lovely child, who will “He did not send me!” cried she, positively. “I have no Heavenly Father!” “Hush, Pearl, hush! Thou must not talk so!” answered the mother, suppressing a groan. “He sent us all into the world. He sent even me, thy mother. Then, much more thee! Or, if not, thou strange and elfish child, whence didst thou come?” “Tell me! Tell me!” repeated Pearl, no longer seriously, but laughing and capering about the floor. “It is thou that must tell me!” But Hester could not resolve the query, being herself in a dismal labyrinth of doubt. She remembered—betwixt a smile and a shudder—the talk of the neighbouring townspeople, who, seeking vainly elsewhere for the child’s paternity, and observing some of her odd attributes, had given out that poor little Pearl was a **demon offspring**: such as, ever since old Catholic times,

had occasionally been seen on earth, through the agency of their mother's sin, and to promote some foul and wicked purpose. **Luther**, according to the scandal of his monkish enemies, was a brat of that hellish breed; nor was Pearl the only child to whom this inauspicious origin was assigned among the New England Puritans.

connect Hester to humanity and will someday become a "blessed soul in heaven." Although Hester does not have much faith in this logic—because her deed was evil, she believes the product of it, Pearl, must also be evil—these musings again imply the narrator's critique of Puritan hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness. What right do these cold men have to condemn Hester's passion, especially when God has seen fit to reward her with such a beautiful child? Just as Hester has fashioned the scarlet letter to be fanciful and imaginative—a fit emblem of her passionate adultery—Pearl is also adorned in clothes that emphasize her connection with a bohemian luxury. Pearl's clothing is made of the richest material Hester can find and reflects the heights of her imagination. Pearl is thus surrounded by a magnificent circle of radiance that expresses her mother's own repressed nature.

Within the darkness of their lonely cottage, Pearl's light shines. But it doesn't shine with just one kind of light. Her look varies from the simple "wild-flower prettiness" of a peasant baby to the luxurious excess of a young princess. One constant, though, is Pearl's passion, which adds a depth to her personality that she never loses. The variety of Pearl's outward appearance is a fitting emblem

for her equally mutable inner life, which lacks any understanding of the nature of human laws. Hester believes that the child's nature grew out of Hester's mood while she was pregnant: Pearl has absorbed the "deep stains of crimson and gold, the fiery lustre, the black shadow, and the untempered light" of her mother's feelings and the wild, defiant, and flighty aspects of her mood. A product of sin, of passion, and of love, Pearl has an understandably contradictory nature. She is a symbol of her mother's imagination, passion, vision, and capriciousness: all qualities Puritan society rejects. In some sense, Pearl can be seen as Hester's double, as the carrier of all the characteristics Hester must repress in order to fit within the boundaries of the Puritan worldview. Although these features now emerge from Pearl's personality as "morning radiance," Hester worries they will be transformed into "storm and whirlwind" when Pearl ages.

Given Pearl's capricious and wild nature, Hester finds it difficult to discipline her. The Puritans advocated the harsh discipline of children, just as they advocated severe punishment of adult transgressions. Born of intolerant parents, other children in town learn early in life to revile difference and, therefore, treat Hester and Pearl as outcasts. Even the games of these children show their repressed and severe nature: They play at going to church, scouring Quakers, or taking Indian scalps in fake fights. But Hester is incapable of using strict discipline with Pearl. Pearl is associated with a "wild flow of spirits" and "an airy sprite." She has an "intangibility," like a

“glimmering light,” which could vanish at any moment. To the Puritans, Pearl is a symbol of sin and a child of the devil, so she is not allowed to interact with the other children in the village. When they try to surround her, Pearl shouts at them in a terrible manner that reminds Hester of a witch’s curse. To Hester, this behavior reflects a strand of the evil from which Pearl was born. Pearl’s creative spirit is in touch with “the spell of life,” and she applies her “witchcraft” to the objects around her. Using her wild imagination, she recreates everything around her so it becomes a participant in her fantastic drama. Her intellect is like the “phantasmagoric play of the northern lights.” Thus, Pearl is associated with passion, imagination, magic, and intensity.

Another oddity of Pearl’s life is that the first thing she noticed as a child wasn’t her mother’s smile, but the scarlet letter. When Pearl stares at the letter, a “freakish, elfish cast” comes into her eyes, and Hester fears that she sees a “fiend-like” visage in Pearl’s face. Although Hester interprets Pearl’s fascination with the letter as symbolic of her impishness, her pleasure in the bright gold and red of the embroidery might have a much simpler explanation: Most children are fascinated by bright colors and vivid images. But Hester’s Puritan indoctrination causes her to fear that the child is inherently evil because she was born out of an unlawful relationship. Pearl’s fascination with the letter does serve as a constant corrective to Hester: It prevents her mother from ever forgetting the letter’s presence.

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