

The following selection focuses on Pearl, one of the characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's highly symbolic novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Pearl's mother, Hester Prynne, has been accused of adultery by her Puritan community and must wear the scarlet letter "A" as punishment. Despite her public shame, the letter links Hester to her illegitimate daughter and to the preacher Dimmesdale, Pearl's father. In this excerpt, taken from a book of literary criticism, the writer explains what Pearl represents in the novel. As you read, jot down answers to the numbered analysis questions.

from *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*

The Character of Pearl

by NINA BAYM

The character of Pearl is as much, or more, a symbolic function as she is the representation of a human child. In all the descriptions of Pearl, her affinity¹ with *The Scarlet Letter* is stressed. She is its symbol, its double, its agent: "it was *The Scarlet Letter* in another form; *The Scarlet Letter* endowed with life!" (page 102). Hester carefully dresses Pearl in clothing that mimics the color and embroidery of the letter; this gesture also stresses the way in which the child is her mother's creation. As such, she is both something that the mother produces deliberately, and something that reflects the mother despite herself. More particularly, she reflects the mother's deeds that

1. In what two ways does Pearl function in the novel?

1. **affinity** (ə•fin'i•tē): close association; kinship.

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gave her life (her life is never attributed to her father).

In one sense, the Puritan sense, that deed is equal to a broken law. “The child could not be made amenable² to rules. In giving her existence, a great law had been broken; and the result was a being, whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder” (91). Hester recognizes in Pearl’s character “the welfare” of her own spirit during the months when she was pregnant: “she could recognize her wild, desperate, defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart” (91).

2. Which of the writer’s main ideas do you think the quotations in this paragraph support?

In another sense, however, the child is beauty and freedom and imagination and all the other natural qualities that the Puritan system denies. Beautiful, intelligent, perfectly shaped, vigorous, graceful, passionate, imaginative, impulsive, capricious,³ creative, visionary: these are only a sampling of the adjectives with which she is described. And these are all traits in Hester as well as in Pearl. Such descriptions suggest that Pearl is not an independent character so much as an abstraction of elements of Hester’s character: a kind of “double,” or “other self.” This means that character analysis of Pearl is really analysis of Hester, and that the child’s

3. How does the writer explain the adjectives Hawthorne chose to describe Pearl?

lawlessness shows how superficial Hester’s quiet and subservient public demeanor is. And Hester’s great love for the child signifies in part her refusal to disown her “sin” through a judgment that it was evil.

But Pearl is not simply a splitting off and intensifying of some aspects of Hester’s character, a way of measuring Hester’s attitudes. Quite apart from anything that Hester might intend consciously or unconsciously, Pearl seems to have a special, original relation to the letter. She is not only the letter as Hester might conceive it, but its agent in a scheme⁴ that is quite independent of her. If, in Hester’s scheme, the child represents elements of defiant and lawless beauty,

2. **amenable** (ə•mē'nə•bəl): responsible, or able to be controlled.

3. **capricious** (kə•prē'shəs): whimsical; given to sudden, impulsive behavior.

4. **scheme** (skēm): overall plan; a system of definite arrangement.

in this other scheme the child represents a form of conscience. It is her role to enforce the mother's guilt as well as to represent her rebellion. She does this simply by making it impossible for Hester to forget the letter. The letter is the first object that Pearl becomes aware of as a baby, and she keeps the letter firmly at the center of Hester's life by keeping it firmly in her infant regard. We see this role as enforcer of the letter most clearly in the forest scene, the one and only time that Hester throws the letter away. Oblivious to the mother's resurgent⁵ youth and beauty and happiness, Pearl refuses to join her until the letter is returned to its usual place. Only when she wears the letter is Hester her mother: and this, alas, is a true perception on Pearl's part. Should Hester repudiate⁶ the letter, she will repudiate Pearl.

4. What evidence does the writer provide to prove that Pearl represents a form of conscience?

Much in the depiction of Pearl is realistic; she is not all symbol and allegory.⁷ Hawthorne used his journal entries about his first child, Una, as sources for elements of his depiction of Pearl. Wildness, caprice, imaginativeness are all traits consistent with the nature of a young child who is endowed with energy and creativity and allowed a great deal of freedom. She lacks reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born, Hester thinks (91); but kept apart from society as Pearl is, any child would find it difficult to adapt.

5. What information does the writer give that she's learned from a source other than the novel?

If we could separate Pearl from her symbolic tasks in the novel, we might take her simply as an unusual (for its time), unidealized, and unsentimental description of a real child. Her attraction to the letter is easily explained: The letter is colorful and shiny. Her equation of it with her mother is likewise comprehensible: Pearl has never seen Hester without it. And as for her behavior in the forest, Hester herself offers the

6. In what ways does the writer think that Pearl is a realistic character?

5. **resurgent** (ri•sur'jənt): returning; rising again.

6. **repudiate** (ri•pyoo'dē•āt'): get rid of publicly; refuse relationship with.

7. **allegory** (al'ə•gōr'ē): a story in which characters or objects have symbolic meaning.

explanation that the child is jealous. Her reflecting of Hester's moods may have nothing mysterious about it: Spending so much time with her mother, being completely dependent on her, and possessing an imaginative nature, Pearl would naturally be keenly attuned to Hester, even more than the preoccupied mother might be herself. Pearl's extreme restlessness during the last scene in the marketplace, the narrator says, was "played upon and vibrated with her mother's disquietude" (244).

However realistic she may be, there is no mistaking that at the end of the book (when she kisses her father)⁸ Pearl becomes fully human for the first time.

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 that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, not for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled. (256)

So Pearl has been the letter's messenger (its angel, in the word's original sense) and the letter's incarnation,⁹ and she has also been its victim. Her victimization has consisted in being denied a reality of her own. At the very moment when she becomes real, nevertheless—when her errand toward Hester is fulfilled—she ceases to be a character in the story.¹⁰ Thus, the human character Pearl is not really part of *The Scarlet Letter*, and the character in the book is best thought of as a symbol and a function who is "naturalized" by being given a smattering of realistic traits.

7. How does the writer explain the long quote above?

8. her father: Dimmesdale, the preacher, who has never before publicly acknowledged he is Pearl's father and who has privately suffered great shame for allowing Hester to bear all the punishment. As Dimmesdale is dying, he calls out to Pearl for a sign of her affection (and forgiveness), and she kisses him.

9. incarnation (in'kār•nā'shən): given a human body as a living example of something.

10. she ceases . . . in the story: From this moment on Pearl does not appear in the novel as a character. Her importance does not dim, but she is just not shown again.