

## Hawthorne's Pearl: The Origins of Good and Evil in *The Scarlet Letter*

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One need read only a handful of Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous works—"Young Goodman Brown" (1835), "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836), "The Birth-mark" (1843), and, of course, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)—to realize that the author was profoundly interested in matters of good and evil. Time and time again, Hawthorne reminds us that all humans are guilty of some sort of evil: symbolically, we all wear a black veil or scarlet letter or are marred by a birthmark of some kind. This is not to say, however, that Hawthorne has a purely bleak view of humankind. As we will see, "good" and "evil" are more psychological than metaphysical concepts in Hawthorne's world, qualities that arise from the choices we make and actions we take. The most evil characters in Hawthorne's universe are those who either deny their own moral shortcomings or obsess about the sins of others without accepting that humankind is universally imperfect. It is our responses to our own evil and the evil we see in others that ultimately determine the moral state of our souls. These ideas are central to Hawthorne's most famous work, *The Scarlet Letter*.

The genre and setting that Hawthorne selected for *The Scarlet Letter* profoundly shape its conceptions of good and evil. His choice to construct the book as a romance, as the subtitle of *The Scarlet Letter* declares it to be, allows his themes to exist as metaphysical truths in addition to psychological ones. A narrative in which a tinge of the mystical elevates its events above the everyday, a romance implies that forces beyond the ordinary are at play and thus that the "truths" it contains have a universal application. *The Scarlet Letter* is more specifically a historical romance, as the story takes place in a time period that predates Hawthorne's own era by two hundred years. This historical setting affords Hawthorne an opportunity to define his ideas of good and evil in opposition to those of the Puritan leaders of early New England, whose beliefs

he shows to be often harmful. Whereas the Puritans understood evil as a natural product of humankind's imperfect nature that therefore warranted little study, Hawthorne suggests that evil results from a choice to act in ways we know to be wrong. Understanding how and why some go astray could promote sympathy and a sense of community and might even prevent others from making similar mistakes. It would appear, though, that Hawthorne deviates from his psychological understanding of evil in his characterization of Pearl, the child of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, for throughout the text she seems very much an impish creature made so simply by her origins in adultery. As this essay will show, Hawthorne ultimately traces Pearl's strange and sometimes disconcerting behavior back to her treatment by both the community that estranges her and the mother for whom, like the scarlet letter itself, she is a constant reminder of shame. As Pearl demonstrates, evil, for Hawthorne, is not an inherited quality but a psychological response.

While today we think of a romance as a narrative in which romantic love dominates, for Hawthorne and his readers, the word had a very different meaning, defined largely in contrast to the novel. Hawthorne makes the distinction between the two clear in "The Custom-House," the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, in which he describes a novel as being concerned first and foremost with veracity; he likens a novel to seeing a familiar room at "a morning or noontide visibility" (29). The writer of romances, on the other hand, is more interested in the same room viewed in moonlight so that "whatever . . . has been used or played with, during the day, is now invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness." Hawthorne expands on the distinction between novel and romance in the preface to his next novel, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), in which he writes,

When a writer calls his work a Romance, . . . he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not

merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former . . . has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. (351)

According to Hawthorne, in a romance, material is handled with a more imaginative hand so that the writer can explore themes in more symbolically suggestive ways.

This potential of the romance is called upon within the very first pages of *The Scarlet Letter* when the narrator imagines plucking a flower from a rosebush and offering it to the reader as a symbol of "some sweet moral blossom" (37). We do not usually think of everyday life as organizing itself around lessons, but at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne makes it clear that the events of the tale do offer just this kind of "moral blossom," specifically to "be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred" (163). Hawthorne's decision to write *The Scarlet Letter* as a romance suggests that he was less interested in providing a historical record than he was in creating a tale that would emblemize a psychological truth. For this reason, it is probably most accurate to term *The Scarlet Letter* a "psychological romance" (Duyckinck 237), as one of Hawthorne's contemporaries did.

That Hawthorne believed that the central message of the tale was to "be true" tells us a great deal about his conception of good and evil. After all, *The Scarlet Letter* is not a condemnation of adultery or even a critique of the type of revenge that Chillingworth undertakes. The sin on which Hawthorne focuses is Dimmesdale's: an unwillingness to confess his own sin, which leaves him wracked with guilt and alienated from his community, a fate that all humans who present a false front to the world will share, according to Hawthorne. To Hawthorne, hypocrisy is "evil" not simply because a moral law has labeled it so but because of its dire mental and emotional consequences for both the individual and the larger community.

Why would Hawthorne choose to explore this theme within a temporal setting that preceded his own by two hundred years instead of simply composing a tale set in his own present time? Perhaps one reason is that *The Scarlet Letter* emerged during a time of remarkable literary output for the nation as a whole. In fact, American authors during the mid-nineteenth century appeared so prolific in retrospect that in 1941 literary critic F. O. Matthiessen dubbed the era the “American Renaissance.” Critics since then have used Matthiessen’s term to refer roughly to the years between 1830 and the Civil War, during which a great number of classic works of American literature were published, among them Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855). These texts focus on American topics, perhaps responding to a general feeling at the time that the country needed to develop a cultural heritage distinct from European subjects and traditions. As Ralph Waldo Emerson makes clear in his essay “The American Scholar,” the sense was that while America had achieved political independence, its artistic and intellectual output was still overly dependent upon the works of the Old World; “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe,” Emerson declares (70). In “Self-Reliance,” he similarly laments the fact that “our Religion, our Education, [and] our Art look abroad” for inspiration (279). Public intellectuals such as Emerson urged American writers to embrace distinctly American topics, to capture the rich variety of the country’s landscape and culture, perhaps, or to preserve the nation’s unique history, as Hawthorne does in *The Scarlet Letter*.

The historical setting of *The Scarlet Letter* affords Hawthorne a unique opportunity to examine his ideas about good and evil, redemption and sin, by contrasting them with the past Puritan attitudes that differed so sharply from his. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne probes the psychological consequences of Puritan beliefs, many of which he considers debilitating and harmful. For one, he repeatedly condemns

the Puritans for their cruel treatment of outsiders to their community, a criticism delivered with particular piquancy when Hawthorne describes Puritan children as “the most intolerant brood that ever lived” and imagines them “disporting themselves in such grim fashion as the Puritanic nurture would permit; playing at going to church, perchance; or at scourging Quakers; or taking scalps in a sham-fight with the Indians” (64). In addition, Puritans held to the idea of natural depravity: the belief that humans are born sinful. By the time Hawthorne was composing *The Scarlet Letter*, dominant religious beliefs had changed considerably such that sin was viewed as a chosen action or sentiment rather than an innate condition. William Ellery Channing, a close acquaintance of Hawthorne, clearly captures this shift in thought in “The Evils of Sin” (1832), in which he explains that sin is not “some mysterious thing wrought into our souls at birth” (11); rather, “to sin is to resist our sense of right, to oppose known obligation, to cherish feelings, or commit deeds, which we know to be wrong” (214).

That Hawthorne held a similar view is evident in his depiction of Chillingworth. Although Chillingworth is the most evil character in the text, he is not malevolent by nature. He first becomes associated with Satan when he learns of his wife’s affair: “writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them” (45). Chillingworth’s demonic characteristics are further emphasized when he discovers for certain that Dimmesdale is Hester’s silent partner in sin: “Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom” (92). Chillingworth becomes evil because he chooses to perpetuate Dimmesdale’s suffering rather than ease it. The narrator tells us, for example, that when Chillingworth first arrived in town “his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like,” but after years of tormenting Dimmesdale, “there was something ugly and evil in his face” (85–86). Chillingworth is guilty of what Hawthorne describes in an 1844 entry in his *American Notebooks* as an “Unpardonable Sin,” committed

when a person “prie[s] into” the “dark depths” of the human soul, “not with a hope or purpose of making it better, but from a cold philosophical curiosity,—content that it should be wicked in whatever kind or degree, and only desiring to study it out” (215).

It might seem, then, that Dimmesdale should also be an evil character, since for years he has chosen to present himself daily to the community as a thoroughly virtuous man. Although cowardice is surely one reason for Dimmesdale’s behavior, he also believes that in remaining silent about his adultery, he is trying to maintain “a zeal for God’s glory and man’s welfare” (88). In Dimmesdale’s view, some men hide their true selves because “no good [could] be achieved by them” (88) if they did not. Dimmesdale believes that the community would be severely disrupted by the revelation that their minister is an abominable sinner, and thus he feels compelled to keep his secret. His desire to flee the town with Hester and live as lovers elsewhere is a greater sin than his silence because it is entirely selfish; no longer would he be serving the larger community. After he makes this decision, he is possessed by the urge to commit other wicked deeds. He feels a desire to make “certain blasphemous suggestions” to an “excellent and hoary-bearded deacon” (139) and to deposit into the soul of a young and virtuous girl “a germ of evil that would be sure to blossom darkly soon” (140). Shocked by his own behavior, Dimmesdale wonders, “Am I given over utterly to the fiend? Did I make a contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood?” (140). The narrator confirms his suspicion: “He had made a bargain very like it! Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself, with deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew was deadly sin. And the infectious poison of that sin had been thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system” (141). One becomes evil, Hawthorne implies, by willfully engaging in a wrongful act, behavior that he suggests will lead to further wickedness.

Hawthorne’s treatment of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale indicates that he viewed evil as a condition that arises from a willingness to commit sinful acts. The character of Pearl would, however, seem to call that

very claim into question, for Pearl's impish behavior seems to be an outcropping of her very nature rather than the result of purposeful action. Pearl is from birth a tempestuous and somewhat wayward child, and the suggestion is that she is like this because she is the product of a sinful act. She thus would seem to refute the assertion that Hawthorne viewed evil as the result of choice and suggest that he believed that evil could be innate or inherited. Certainly, Hester believes the sinfulness of Pearl's origins will influence Pearl's character: "[Hester] knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be for good. Day after day, she looked fearfully into the child's expanding nature; ever dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity" (61). As she watches Pearl mature, Hester believes that she can see within her daughter the "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 [own] heart" (61) while Pearl was growing inside her.

These passages suggest that Pearl could somehow absorb both the passion Hester experienced at the time of Pearl's conception and the anguish she later suffered throughout her pregnancy. To a modern reader, such assertions would suggest supernatural mechanisms at play, but during Hawthorne's time, as critics such as Barbara Garlitz and Franny Nudelman have demonstrated, the inheritance of moral, emotional, and psychological material from one's mother was considered both feasible and biologically likely. In fact, the influence of a pregnant mother's emotional and mental state upon the physical and psychological characteristics of her child was a salient idea due partly to the prominence of P. T. Barnum's American Museum in Hawthorne's milieu. Estimated by historian A. H. Saxon to have been more popular in its years of operation than Disneyland (107–8), Barnum's American Museum frequently exhibited a variety of "freaks," including Bearded Lady Madame Clofullia, the so-called Siamese twins Chang and Eng, and General Tom Thumb. Quite often, the deformities of these "freaks" were accounted for by calling upon the premise of

maternal impression. A theory dating back to antiquity, maternal impression held that a pregnant mother's mental state could be passed onto her unborn child in the form of mental or physical abnormalities. Thus, the deformity of Ann E. Leak, the "Armless Wonder," was attributed to her mother having seen her husband coming home with "his overcoat thrown over his shoulders without his arms in the sleeves" (qtd. in Bogdan 219), and General Tom Thumb's diminutive size was explained as having been caused by his mother's deep grief over the drowning of a puppy (151).

To a certain extent, Hawthorne does ascribe Pearl's personality to some version of maternal impression. At one point, for example, he characterizes Pearl as much happier than her Puritan counterparts because "she had not the disease of sadness, which almost all children, in these latter days, inherit . . . from the troubles of their ancestors" (119). There is a spiteful lawlessness to many of Pearl's actions that mirrors her mother's own former rebellion against the community's laws. Pearl is uninhibited by rules of propriety: she dances where she pleases, even on the graves of Puritan patriarchs (89). She also expresses a bitter hatred of those who treat her as an outcast, a sentiment that her mother must have felt during her pregnancy. The narrator tells us, "If the children gathered about her, as they sometimes did, Pearl would grow positively terrible in her puny wrath, snatching up stones to fling at them, 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" (64). Pearl's desire to wreak revenge on the community that reviles her is evidenced further in the games she plays: "The unlikeliest materials . . . were the puppets of Pearl's witchcraft. . . . The pine-trees, aged, black, and solemn . . . needed little transformation to figure as Puritan elders; the ugliest weeds of the garden were their children, whom Pearl smote down and uprooted, most unmercifully" (65).

Nevertheless, Pearl's behavior can also be explained psychologically, and, in fact, the narrator pushes us toward understanding Pearl in this way. At one point, for example, Pearl is described as rushing

after a group of Puritan children. The narrator tells us that in that moment “she resembled . . . an infant pestilence,—the scarlet fever, or some half-fledged angel of judgment” (69). But what prompts Pearl’s behavior is the children’s voiced desire to “fling mud” at Pearl and her mother. Pearl’s response to this type of cruel treatment from those around her, the cause of which she does not understand, seems understandable in light of the narrator’s sympathetic explanation: the children “scorned [Pearl and Hester] in their hearts, and not infrequently reviled them with their tongues. Pearl felt the sentiment, and requited it with the bitterest hatred that can be supposed to rankle in a childish bosom” (64). While we might be tempted to see Pearl as a symbolic manifestation of her mother’s deep resentment of the Puritan community, Pearl’s behavior also has a clear psychological impetus.

The other aspect of Pearl’s behavior that makes her seem if not supernaturally demonic then at least preternaturally cruel is her kinship with the scarlet letter. On the one hand, it is no surprise that Pearl should be linked to her mother’s token of shame; after all, like the letter, Pearl is a marker of Hester’s past sin. On the other hand, her relationship to the scarlet letter goes beyond a shared origin in Hester’s adultery, for Pearl’s mission seems to be to chastise her mother for her past crime. At times, Pearl seems to function as some sort of conscience for Hester, a reminder that the scarlet letter and all it represents can never be discarded. The narrator notes that even as a baby, Pearl is captivated by the scarlet letter: “But that first object of which Pearl seemed to become aware was—shall we say it?—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” (66). As she grows up, she constantly draws attention to the letter: at one point, she flings wildflowers “at her mother’s bosom; dancing up and down . . . whenever she hit the scarlet letter,” even though, all the while, her mother “look[s] sadly into little Pearl’s wild eyes” (66). At another point, she

simply decorates the letter with burrs (89). Pearl seems intent on keeping Hester forever aware of her shame.

Pearl performs a similar function for Dimmesdale. She shows him an unusual affection that suggests she instinctively recognizes him as her father, but at the same time, her behavior subtly points out his hypocritical existence. Even as an infant, Pearl is drawn to the voice of her unacknowledged father: “the poor baby . . . directed its hitherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and held up its little arms with a half pleased, half plaintive murmur” (49). Furthermore, Pearl’s continual requests for him to stand at the scaffold “with mother and me, to-morrow noontide” (101) seem like demands that he publicly confess his part in her creation. Dimmesdale’s unwillingness to appease Pearl causes her to withdraw her affection by pulling her hand away or washing off his kiss. Perhaps most unsettling is that Pearl seems cognizant of a connection between the two objects of her interest: when her mother asks her if she knows “wherefore [her] mother wears this letter,” Pearl responds, “It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart!” (116). Pearl seems a messenger of retribution, ever delivering a fresh round of punishment for her parents.

Much of Pearl’s enigmatic behavior can, however, be accounted for without calling on supernatural explanations. Take, for example, Pearl’s fascination with the scarlet letter as an infant. If we examine the passage carefully, it becomes clear that the narrator suggests it is the “glimmering of the gold embroidery about the letter” (66), not the letter itself, that draws the baby’s attention. As critics such as Lois Cuddy, Douglas Powers, and Daniel Hoffman have noted, it is really not very surprising that baby Pearl is captivated by the scarlet letter, a piece of bright red fabric “surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread” (40). Surely Hester’s drab dresses, which are “of the coarsest materials and the most sombre hue” (58), only serve to highlight the “fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy” (40) that characterize the scarlet letter, which must seem to blaze upon dresses “of the plainest and most ascetic description” (58). In fact, the

scarlet letter and Pearl's clothing are the only spots of color among the "sable simplicity that generally characterized the Puritan modes of dress" (57), the only contrasts to the Puritans' "sad-colored garments" (36).

The continued attention that Pearl gives the letter as she matures makes sense as well. After all, the residents of the town pay a great deal of attention to the scarlet letter, and Pearl has noticed their behavior. She tells Hester, for example, that she overheard an "old dame" say that the "scarlet letter was the Black Man's mark" (120) on Hester. With Pearl aware that the symbol on her mother's chest is an object of great interest to everyone in the town, it is no surprise that her attention would be drawn to it as well. Hester and Dimmesdale are prone to exaggerate the significance of Pearl's behavior toward objects associated with high emotions and unresolved tensions, such as the scarlet letter or Dimmesdale himself. In turn, because Hawthorne focuses our awareness on Pearl's actions toward these emotionally charged objects and characters, we also are apt to see Pearl as something more than just an intuitive little girl, and because her behavior causes both of her parents such distress, she seems like a vengeful sprite who refuses to allow them to transcend their painful past.

The scarlet letter is a painful reminder of Hester's traumatic past and lonely present; thus, the mere sight of Pearl must surely evoke distress for Hester, for we are told that it is "a remarkable attribute of [Pearl's] garb, and, indeed, of the child's whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester was doomed to wear upon her bosom" (69). And yet Hester herself has cultivated this resemblance by fashioning Pearl's clothing so that she is very much a visual reflection of the scarlet letter, ensuring that her daughter is linked in her mind with the detestable symbol. The narrator several times mentions the attire Hester has made for Pearl, and with each mention, his disapproval becomes more apparent. He initially claims, rather mysteriously, that "the child's attire . . . was distinguished by a fanciful, or, we might rather say, a fantastic ingenuity,

which served, indeed, to heighten the airy charm that early began to develop itself in the little girl, but which appeared to have also a deeper meaning. We may speak further of it hereafter” (58). He mentions Hester’s fashioning of Pearl’s garb in more negative terms a few pages later but still refuses to discuss it in detail: “Her mother, with a morbid purpose that may be better understood hereafter, had bought the richest tissues that could be procured and allowed her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dresses which the child wore” (62). When the narrator finally delineates the correspondence between Pearl’s attire and the scarlet letter, he describes Hester’s desire to fashion such a similarity as the result of a morbid preoccupation on Hester’s part: “The mother herself—as if the red ignominy were so deeply scorched into her brain, that all her conceptions assumed its form—had carefully wrought out the similitude; lavishing many hours of morbid ingenuity, to create an analogy between the object of her affection, and the emblem of her guilt and torture” (69).

By purposely clothing Pearl in this distressing outfit, Hester ensures that Pearl’s appearance will always cause her anguish. Even her choice of Pearl’s name—“she named the infant ‘Pearl,’ as being of great price,—purchased with all she had” (61)—emphasizes that the child is as much a burden as a treasure. Can much of Pearl’s seemingly evil behavior be explained by the fact that in many ways, Hester is a bad mother? Her maternal shortcomings are certainly understandable considering her great plight; however, the narrator, at the very least, emphasizes that Hester’s perception and treatment of Pearl is problematic.

First of all, it is apparent that Hester’s love for Pearl does not immediately blossom at her birth. Hester’s actions toward Pearl at the beginning of the novel appear on the outside to be those of a caring mother, but the narrator shows us otherwise by allowing us a peek inside Hester’s heart. As Hester emerges from prison, “her first impulse [is] to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; *not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which [is] wrought or fastened into her dress*” (40, emphasis

added). Moments later, Hester again clutches her child “so fiercely . . . that it [sends] forth a cry” (44). This gesture is repeated a third time, again without any sort of maternal care: “she pressed her infant to her bosom, with so convulsive a force that the poor babe uttered another cry of pain. But the mother did not seem to hear it.” On the scaffold, Hester remains oblivious to Pearl’s pain: “The infant . . . pierced the air with its wailings and screams; she strove to hush it, mechanically, but seemed scarcely to sympathize with its trouble” (50). Were we to view Hester’s actions only from the outside, we would think her behavior that of any mother protectively clasping her child, but the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that Hester’s feelings toward Pearl are far more complicated.

So conflicted are Hester’s feelings, in fact, that she contemplates killing Pearl several times. When Hester is returned to the prison after her distressing time on the scaffold, she is given “constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself, or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe” (50). While we might accept that the torment of Hester’s public shaming might cause her to act more erratically than usual, we find seven years later that Hester still at times questions whether the child’s birth is a positive occurrence. Believing that “the child’s own nature had something wrong in it, which continually betokened that she had been born amiss,” Hester is often “impelled . . . to ask, in bitterness of heart, whether it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been born at all” (108). As much as we may pity Hester, many readers would find it difficult to sympathize with her sentiments here. (In fact, the previous owner of one of my copies of the novel left a note in the margin alongside this passage: “I think it was good that she was born.”)

Thus, although at times Pearl may seem somewhat fiendish, it is important to recognize that many of the more sinister descriptions of her are actually Hester’s perceptions, not the narrator’s. In fact, the narrator is often very careful to distinguish his perceptions of Pearl from Hester’s. When describing Hester’s tendency to see a disturbing crea-

ture in Pearl's eyes, the narrator even implies that sometimes Hester's perceptions are just plain wrong:

Once, this freakish, elvish cast came into the child's eyes, while Hester was looking at her own image in them . . . and suddenly,—*for women in solitude, and with troubled hearts, are pestered with unaccountable delusions*,—she *fancied* that she beheld, not her own miniature portrait, but another face in the small black mirror of Pearl's eye. It was a face, fiend-like, full of smiling malice. . . . It was *as if* an evil spirit possessed the child and had just then peeped forth in mockery. Many a time afterwards had Hester been tortured, though less vividly, by the same *illusion*. (66, emphasis added)

The italicized phrases in this passage clearly show the gap between Hester's beliefs and the narrator's, a gap the narrator wishes to emphasize. Hester's perceptions, the narrator suggests, cannot always be trusted. Consider, too, that what Hester really sees when gazing into Pearl's eyes is simply a reflection of herself: in other words, any evil she sees in Pearl is possibly merely a projection of the evil that she senses within herself.

Perhaps the most telling moment occurs when Hester and Pearl visit Governor Bellingham's mansion. Pearl delights in seeing her reflection in a suit of armor and calls her mother over. What Hester observes in the polished breastplate is emblematic of the distorted way in which she views her own daughter. She first sees the token of shame on her breast, but "owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance" (72). At the same time, Hester also sees an image of Pearl smiling "with the elfish intelligence that was so familiar an expression. . . . That look of naughty merriment was likewise reflected in the mirror with so much breadth and intensity of effect, that it made Hester Prynne feel as if it could not be the image of her own child, but of an imp who was seeking to mould itself into Pearl's shape" (72). To Hester, the scarlet letter

looms unnaturally large, and the image of her daughter next to it seems unnatural and menacing. This passage seems a fitting emblem for the ways in which Hester's trauma has warped her view of her daughter. Since Hester is our point-of-view character for the majority of the book, our perception of Pearl is distorted as well.

In short, then, even Pearl, the character whose mischievous personality most seems to affirm a nature-over-nurture argument, can be explained in psychological terms. She, like Chillingworth, shows that Hawthorne understood good and evil—though he was far more interested in evil—as states of being that result from action and choice. Thus, Hawthorne assigned to all individuals not only the power but also the responsibility to determine their own moral outcomes. In addition, he gave his work an important purpose: by investigating the psychological interiors of tragic and wayward characters, Hawthorne could offer “moral blossoms” that might prevent his readers from erring and encourage them to treat those who do with compassion and understanding.

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