

Pearl prynne – a blessing and a curse

Literature, Russian Literature



“ This child hath come from the hand of the almighty, to work in many ways upon her heart. It was meant for a blessing, for the one blessing of her life! It was meant, doubtless, for a retribution too, a torture to be felt at many an unthought of moment; a pang, as sting, an ever-recurring agony in the midst of a troubled joy” (Hawthorne 105). This, as Arthur Dimmesdale poignantly and almost prophetically expresses in the preliminary scenes of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, was the role of the strikingly beautiful yet fatally elfish Pearl, the child borne of his and Hester Prynne’s forbidden passion. In the midst of the already troubled and sinful life of her mother, Pearl is the cause of her further pain, agony and yet also of Hester’s happiness and sense of worth. While forever a tormentor to her mother, Pearl was also her savior; while a reminder of her guilt, she proved to be a promoter of honesty and true virtue, and while an embodiment of her parents’ worst qualities, she was the true reflection of a troubled heart. Pearl was at times a literal thorn in the flesh, bringing trouble, heartache, and frustration to her mother, yet while at the same time serving a constructive purpose lying far beyond the daily provocations of her childish impishness. Besides being Hester’s savior, so to speak, from temptation and the wild passion her nature tended toward, Pearl was a perpetual reminder of her mother’s ignominious sin. However, despite the guilt and shame that this invoked, it was a kind of blessing to Hester, for it strengthened her character by forcing her to confront her sin and be true to herself and others about it. Pearl reminded Hester of her sin in many ways, most powerfully by her fascination with the scarlet letter. Hawthorne notes that instead of some comforting aspect about her mother, “ the first thing the infant was

conscious of was the infamous letter, and when she noticed it, she reached out her infant fist and touched it with a disturbing smile and gaze" which to her mother was like " the stroke of sudden death" (Hawthorne 89). As Pearl grew, this fascination only increased, for when she began to make connections between different aspects of her world, she began to persistently ask Hester why she wore the scarlet letter and why Reverend Dimmesdale held his hand over his heart. She even makes a letter out of seaweed and places it on her bosom, which greatly disturbs her parents. In the recesses of the forest, the impish child again seemingly displays a cold and malicious heart. When Hester frees herself for a brief moment from the letter that had stained her being, the child cannot accept her mother and wails until the scarlet letter is restored to its place. In the closing moments of the episode, Pearl embraces her mother and specifically kisses the scarlet letter, prompting her mother to exclaim " That was not kind! When thou hast shown me a little love, thou hast mockest me" (Hawthorne 200). Thus does the child once again mercilessly force on her mother the sin that she has committed, while also portraying a hollow duty partnered with a youthful innocence. While from the outset of the novel, Hester is shamed by having a baby as tangible evidence of her sin and shame, the responsibility of caring for Pearl and raising her with love and wisdom serves to calm the defiant, destructive passion of Hester's nature and save her from its wild, desperate promptings. This sentiment is poignantly portrayed in Hester's visit to the governor's mansion, in which she is forced to plea for the right to keep her child. " She is my happiness! — She is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter,

only capable of being loved!” (Hawthorne 104). As Hester retreats from the mansion having been given the right to keep her child, she encounters the dark persona of Mistress Hibbins, who tempts the sinful woman to join her in making a pact with the “black man,” the devil. Hester contrarily replies, “I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the black man’s book too, and that with mine own blood”

(Hawthorne 107). Thus, one can see that Hester’s motherly sense of duty and love toward Pearl saved her from succumbing to the temptation that her natural desires would otherwise have driven her to give in to. Later, we also see this effect on Hester’s motherly responsibilities toward Pearl as

Hawthorne reflects upon how Hester might have turned out had her child never “come to her from the spiritual world” (Hawthorne 151). He remarks that without Pearl, she would have been a “radical or a dissenter, driven by her unquieted passionate nature” (Hawthorne 154), undermining Puritan beliefs, and eventually being put to death for her actions. However, Hester did not face a dissenter’s death, for she conformed humbly and quietly to her religious society, as was best for her daughter. Accordingly, as these feelings of loving duty spread beyond her daughter, Hester began to show her motherly love and service to the poor and needy — sewing garments for others without pay, nursing the ill and infirm, and bestowing comfort when it was needed most. Pearl’s presence in her life stirred up sentiments and resolve within Hester that saved her from death and temptation and led her to show love toward others. Pearl was also a blessing to Hester by serving as a reflection — as a mirror, so to speak — of her character. This often troubled

Hester because Pearl embodied many of her worst qualities — those that had led to her ignominious downfall. In Pearl “ 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” (Hawthorne 83). Thus Hester could interpret her own feelings through her daughter and accordingly act in the paramount will of both. Despite being a true “ thorn in the flesh,” Pearl was a blessing to her mother and effected a positive change in her character. It was her errand, her purpose, to “ soothe away the sorrow that lay cold in her mother’s heart...and to help her to overcome the passion, once so wild that had brought her to ruin and shame.” (Hawthorne 165). It was Hester’s motherly sentiments to nurture and love her child that saved her from temptation and from death and opened her heart to the poor and needy around her. It was the torturous fixation of her child upon her shame that tempered and refined her character and led her toward the precious virtue of being true to herself and others. And it was the reflection of her own character, even at its worst, in her child that brought Hester to a greater understanding of herself and a desire to build a better life for Pearl. Pearl was more than merely her mother’s tormentor, she was her blessing, her life, and the giver of the freedom to live a life true to herself and to her faith.