

Law of nature versus man in the scarlet letter

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne demonstrates the need for humans to abide by the laws of nature and conscience, rather than the laws of man, to achieve happiness. The laws of nature, enforced only by the human conscience, govern every individual. Humans learn these laws by experiencing and interacting directly with nature. When left alone on the beach, Pearl pelts small birds with pebbles for amusement. However, when she injures one “ she [grieves] to have done harm to a little being that was as wild as the sea breeze” (160). Pearl learns an important lesson about right and wrong by using nature and her own conscience. The remorse she feels leaves a lasting impression far more powerful than punishment from authority. Nature provides clear examples for children to learn from and on which to base their morals. By learning from nature children can use their conscience instead of the rules of authority to learn the difference between right and wrong. Left alone in the forest, Pearl interacts with various animals which accept her because they “ all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child” (185). This ‘ wildness’ refers to Pearl’s natural childhood environment free from the pollution of civilization. Unlike most people, Pearl has grown up under the ideal circumstances where only her conscience shapes her decisions and actions. Ostracized by the Puritan community, the rules of civilization do not apply to her and she can live by the laws of nature. This accounts for her constant “ vivacity of spirits” and lack of the disease of sadness, which almost all children... inherit” (166). Pearl’s ability to live by the laws of nature ensures a strong moral foundation as well as happiness, without the unnecessary involvement of authority. Pearl’s healthy development as a result of her interaction with nature exemplifies the

importance of the laws of nature in molding human beings. The laws of nature provide children with an environment in which to grow and develop freely. This freedom of choice allows children to form beliefs they will follow throughout their lives by avoiding the disparity between their natural instincts and society's standards, which results in feelings of inadequacy and self hatred. The laws of man, enforced by authority, govern all people existing within civilization. Civilization encompasses the cultural, religious, and social systems of a group of people. Humans learn these laws by growing up in a community which enforces rules and punishes those who disobey authority. Dimmesdale suffers from a tormented conscience as a result of remaining in the Puritan community after he has transgressed its laws. He ironically interrogates Hester about the identity of her fellow adulterer during her public mortification on the scaffold. This leaves him with a perpetual feeling of hypocrisy that consumes him and eventually ends his life. After his talk with Hester in the forest, Dimmesdale has the urge to commit various sins. These animalistic impulses "[grew] out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulses," revealing Dimmesdale's true nature. His encounter with nature has awakened the dormant troublemaker in the minister. Like Pearl, Dimmesdale needs to run freely and have only Nature and his conscience to guide him. However, due to a childhood under the influence of the laws of man, Dimmesdale has lost his true self. He tries to conform to the ideal of a pious minister, a god-fearing and worshipping man. However, his affair with Hester and his reaction to his encounter with Nature show the fiery and uncontrollable side of his character. Dimmesdale suffers from chronic mental unrest because he mistakes himself for a rule-

abiding man. This failure to live up to the community's expectations of a minister causes his "positive and vivacious suffering." Although he has won the admiration of his parishioners as a gifted orator and model Puritan, he focuses on his flaw. Humans obsess over their imperfections but take for granted their positive attributes. Humans follow the laws of nature by removing themselves from civilization and the corrupt laws of man. This requires both self-reliance and independence, which scares many people. The Puritan community forces Hester and Pearl to live by the laws of nature by ostracizing them for Hester's sin. Although "mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society," this isolation has drastically different effects on Hester and Pearl. Hester, a part of civilization since childhood, is physically separate but emotionally and mentally attached to the laws of man, causing her lifelong suffering and anguish. Hester endures constant torture because "man had marked [her] sin by a scarlet letter, which had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her." The laws of man, not the laws of nature, punish her continuously. The laws of man instilled distorted values in Hester at a young age, just as they do to all humans. These principles include valuing the opinions of others and the emphasis on conforming to standards outlined by the community in which a person lives. Even when cast out of the Puritan community, Hester still lives by these laws because humans follow the values inculcated in them in childhood. This accounts for her suffering and Pearl's mirth in the same natural setting. The isolation from the laws of man allows Pearl to develop and thrive because she has never been a part of civilization. Nature and her intuition have shaped her values. Pearl "

could not be made amenable to rules” and this unruly nature reflects the free environment in which she grew up. The values children learn during childhood remain with them throughout their lives. The morals civilization imparts in children contradict human intuition, and therefore guarantee unhappiness. Happiness comes with self-acceptance, and unhappiness accompanies self-hatred. Humans achieve happiness by following the laws of nature, not the laws of man. The laws of man ensure unhappiness because they force people to idealize an unattainable model of perfection. The community holds their preacher Dimmesdale up on a pedestal and tries to emulate his pious behavior. Although revered by his community, Dimmesdale, the supposed embodiment of spiritual perfection, has committed adultery. The individuals whom society admires are no closer to achieving perfection than their followers. This hypocrisy reveals the unrealistic value system of society. Human nature resists conformity, as seen through the lives of Hester and Dimmesdale. Only in the forest do Hester and Dimmesdale experience happiness since committing their sin. The environment of the forest had “ the exhilarating effect- upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart- of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region.” The forest represents a sanctuary ruled by the laws of nature. While in the forest Dimmesdale experiences happiness because he accepts himself and his sin. In the Puritan community this flaw, his adulterous sin, consumes him and he can not accept his inadequacies as a community role model. Hester “ heave[s] a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish depart[s] from her spirit” after removing her scarlet letter. The lawless

atmosphere prompts Hester to revoke the brand of ignominy placed on her by the Puritan community. She too accepts herself for the first time since the day on the scaffold. This feeling of self-acceptance relieves the suffering Hester has endured for the past seven years. In the presence of only the forest and her fellow sinner, Dimmesdale, she feels freed of the shame the Puritan community has placed on her. Hester and Dimmesdale experience “the sympathy of Nature- that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illuminated by higher truth.” The natural law of the forest supercedes human law, accounting for Hester and Dimmesdale’s miraculous recovery from the torment of guilt and shame. The laws of the forest even overpower the laws of religion, implying that Hester and Dimmesdale’s affair, although an act of adultery by religious standards, does not constitute a truly evil deed. Human nature tends to defy rules, ensuring unhappiness and self-doubt as long as humans live within the confines of civilization. Human nature opposes the structured laws of man. All human beings need to accept themselves as unique individuals, not compare themselves to a standard set by the community in which they live. Comparison guarantees failure in some ways, as no human can attain perfection. Everyone has imperfections or unconventional characteristics that make them ‘human.’ Everyone knows that human nature has flaws, yet that knowledge still fails to prevent them from trying to achieve perfection.