

The fear of miscegenation in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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



By the middle of the nineteenth century, the young American establishment appeared to have surmounted the instability of its formative stages. The citizens of what had originated as a disorganized and inefficient alliance of thirteen diverse territories succeeded in cultivating a nationalistic pride in the destiny of their great democracy. A new generation recognized the devastations of a distant Revolutionary War and the subsequent struggles for unity as mere specters of history. However, beneath a surface of harmony and contentment, currents of discord threatened to plunge the United States into ruin and collapse. Racial tensions had rested at the center of public focus for much of the preceding century, commanding widespread attention since the contentious issue of slavery first became a matter of federal divisiveness in 1808. Not surprisingly, the subject of ethnicity functions as a primary topic in a substantial portion of the era's literary canon. The external inevitably rendered its impact upon human psychology, and numerous works dating to the epoch in question chronicle the interactions between Caucasian settlers and the other peoples who populated the vast U. S. landscape. In many of these narratives, the latterly mentioned individuals hail from African descent, but the prejudices Anglo Saxons harbored toward their black slaves were rivaled by the paranoia white men harbored for the American Indian. In policies of forced relocation, the federal government acted on a variety of fears regarding the Native American, chief amongst which was that of miscegenation and the pollution of American culture by the primitive influence of the savage. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* exemplifies the extent to which this obsession of bloodline preservation shaped national ideology and ingrained

itself upon the intellectual productions of the 1800s. The undertones of the narrative are evident immediately after the plot commences. A rosebush on the prison exterior functions as the focal point of chapter one. Signifying the elements of passion associated with the inmate, the flower serves to illustrate by contrast the bleakness of the rigidly civilized Puritan community and the encroachment of the surrounding wilderness upon the austerity of the city. Like the dangerous yet alluring plant, the forest and its inhabitants simultaneously attract and repel the sensibilities of the devoutly Christian pilgrims. From the opening paragraphs of the story, the connection between the heroine's pregnancy and the sphere of the Indian is clearly delineated. As Hester stands atop the scaffold, her show of defiance is interrupted by the recognition of her long distant spouse at the periphery of the crowd gathered to observe the spectacle. Situated beside "an Indian in his native garb stood a white man, clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume" (Hawthorne 53). The suspicions regarding the paternity of the Prynne infant are thus projected at the tale's outset onto the man who might and should have been the girl's father. The conclusion at which the community has arrived involves a transgression even more serious than that of faith. The potentiality is that Hester, obstinate in her refusal to name the partner in her crime, has ignored the ultimate boundary: that of race. Considering the gravity of the religious felonies in question, the townsfolk cannot know to what extremity the sinner's depravity extends. Her infidelity may have been perpetrated with one of the heathens indigenous to the foreign New World. The mysterious physician is the outlet onto which the fantasies and horrors of the pale men find their expression. His "heterogeneous garb" (53) is an

amalgam of the rumors, verities, and terrors that the Salemites in have constructed to satisfy their curiosities and preconceptions concerning the scandal at hand. In much the same way, Hester's movement to the dilapidated cottage is an active advancement toward the primal chaos of the wilds. The heroine associates herself all the more closely, both in a physical and metaphorical sense, to the lifestyle of the red man. Hester's decision to relocate to the outskirts of the town is not one of independence but one of matrimony, a choice in which she weds herself to all of the dark possibilities and suggestions of the woods. To the societal scrutiny from which she is attempting to escape, such behavior is suspect indeed. The link between the fruits of the protagonist's affair and the realm of the nomad extends throughout the entirety of the book. The child is imparted with an array of properties that render her the mortal approximation of the titular seal of shame. Pearl is such an appropriate product of her mother's lawlessness that she, " was indeed the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!" (91) The little girl is of a red aspect, not only in the fact that she is the emblem incarnate but also in the singularity of her personality. The seven-year-old conducts herself with a deportment that vacillates between tantrums and docility: Above all, the warfare of Hester's spirit, at that epoch, was perpetuated 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. They were now illuminated by the morning radiance of a young child's disposition, but, later in the day of earthly existence, might be prolific of storm and whirlwind. (81) This disconcerting strain of unpredictability mirrors

the notions that might easily connote the image of the beastlike Indian unable to exert the necessary repressive devices that typify civilized culture. Such a sense of dis-ease is created by the ethereal sprite that, "Hester could not help questioning, at such moments, whether Pearl was a human child." (82) The city from which the pariah has been ostracized agrees in totality with this doubtfulness. Pearl has no father, but, more importantly, is without a white father. The child lacks the legitimacy of a verifiably Caucasian heritage, and in the absence of racially untainted familial predecessors, she is incomplete. The narrator can consequently refer to her only as "an imp of evil" (83) and a "demon offspring" (88). Dimmesdale's failure to publicly assume the responsibilities that he shoulders privately reiterates the significance of the effects generated by this mystery of paternity. Until the uncertainties surrounding her lineage can be resolved, Hester's daughter is as unredeemed as the pagans. When the girl declares, "I have no Heavenly Father!" (87), the statement is unironic. This progression of ideas is underscored by the evolution of Chillingworth. Though initially welcomed by the village, the old physician quickly loses favor with the majority of Salem. Compelled by the same intuitions that reflected the doctor's bonds to the dishonored Hester in the third chapter, the members of the congregation begin to view the erstwhile parent in a decisively pejorative context: To sum up the matter, it grew to be a widely diffused opinion that the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, like many other personages of especial sanctity, in all ages of the Christian world, was haunted either by Satan himself, or Satan's emissary, in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth (114). The stress is deliberate when the author informs his audience, "Two or three individuals

hinted that the man of skill, during his medical attainments by joining in the incantations of the savage priests, who were universally acknowledged to be powerful enchanters, often performing seemingly miraculous cures by their skill in the black art" (113). The relationship between the diabolical and the indigenous is thus emphasized to a degree that demands acknowledgement from the participant in the fiction. The contrast between the misconstructions of the mass imagination and reality provides the central conflict of the novel, and it is this disparity between presumption and fact that propels the climactic scene in which the Reverend takes his place upon the scaffold beside his family. Open confession and abbreviated reunion are preferable to the darkness of that veritable jungle, the home of the redskin: "Is this not better," murmured he, "than what we dreamed of in the forest?" (231) The mystery of paternity is also solved in this scene, and the ramifications are of epic magnitude: Pearl kissed his lips. 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, nor forever 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 (233). The truth of the implications that haunted the seven years of Pearl's life has finally been illuminated, and the revelation, however scandalous, is indeed more acceptable in the view of society than any alternative that gossip and rumors might have been allowed to perpetuate. A spotless ancestry has been confirmed, and the child is restored to the purity and blamelessness to which the young are typically elevated. The lives upon which she and her mother

embark remain undistinguished by event or misfortune, and eventually assume the quality of normalcy. Yet certain stigmas can never be completely forgotten, and it is for this reason that Hester returns to New England. The heroine will forever be associated with the untamed, the "Indian," and finally resigns herself to these associations. Self-perception is largely determined by the influence of exterior opinion, and Hester consequently surrenders to the prejudices that will forever link her to the carnal, the bestial, and the savage. Creative expression is frequently considered a testament to the power of the environment over the individual. The manifestations of artistic thought unavoidably bear the telltale signatures, on one level or another, of the atmosphere in which they were conceived. The *Scarlet Letter* operates as an invented past onto which Hawthorne transferred the fears of miscegenation that dominated the culture of which he was a contemporary. The writer's masterpieces illustrates the profound repercussions of ethnic divides in the epoch of such perversely xenophobic policies as the government-endorsed Trail of Tears and underline the subjective component inherent in psychic labor. Works Cited Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*.