

The garden of eden in america: dichotomies in the scarlet letter

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



The story of Adam and Eve illustrates the sinful nature of man. A common theory about the story of Adam and Eve is that God intended Adam and Eve to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge. The argument is, if God had not intended Adam to eat the apple, He would not have put the tree there in the first place. It was not the serpent that tempted Eve, but God. The serpent urged Eve to give into temptation, but it was God who created the temptation. The duality in God's action is obvious. Had God created a paradise without temptation, the serpent would have had no sin to urge Eve to commit. Therefore, had God not created that temptation, the serpent essentially would have no purpose. So, God not only created the temptation, but, in so doing, created a purpose for the serpent, and assuming that the serpent would not have existed had he no purpose, created the serpent as well. Not only was the God necessary to the serpent's existence, but the serpent was also necessary to God's existence. Without the presence of evil, the presence of good has no meaning, and vice versa. The Puritans, as presented in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, create a serpent by denying all human ties to nature and to sin when they attempt to create a virtual Garden of Eden in America. John Winthrop stated in "A Model of Christian Charity" that "we shall be as a city upon a hill... if we shall deal falsely with our god in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and by-word through the world." Adam and Eve attempted to deceive God, but God knew that they were "deal[ing] falsely" with him, so he "withdrew his present help from [them]". In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne illustrates, primarily through Pearl and Hester, the inevitable dichotomies generated by the creation, by human

hands stained with original sin, of a “ Utopia of human virtue and happiness”(41) on earth. The foremost dichotomy is found in the novel’s protagonist, Hester Prynne, the wearer of the scarlet letter. Hester is at once a representation of Eve, the first woman and creator of original sin, and the Virgin Mary, the only human born without original sin. When Eve sinned, she gained knowledge:” And when the woman saw that the tree was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took the fruit thereof, and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened...”(Genesis 3: 6-7)When Hester sins, she also gains knowledge, the knowledge “ that the outward guise of purity was but a lie, and that, if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne’s” (77). Hester knows that people are infatuated by sin and the knowledge that it brings because people are infatuated by her, and Hester, prior to “ Another View of Hester,” is the embodiment of sin in the eyes of the community. “ She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts.” (76). The others may not act upon the sins that they hide in their hearts, as Hester does, but the potential for sin is present, and Hester can sense this when “ She [feels] an eye – a human eye – upon the ignominious brand, that seem[s] to give a momentary relief, as if half of her agony were shared.”(76). In the Christian faith, to merely think unholy thoughts is considered a sin; the scarlet letter is an inevitable catalyst for unholy thoughts, so, when members of the community look upon it, they sin with her, by thinking unholy thoughts. The thought of others sharing in Hester’s sin provides her, even gives her,

knowledge of secret sin in others, just as the tree of knowledge gives Eve knowledge of good and evil. Also, just as Eve is not alone in sin, neither is Hester; Dimmesdale is the Adam to Hester's Eve, but because Dimmesdale refuses to reveal his sin, the only knowledge he gains is the knowledge of the torture of secret sin. Were Hester only a representation of Eve, Hawthorne's religious and social implications would be elementary and rather unchallenging, but Hawthorne challenges the reader by giving Hester characteristics of the Virgin Mary so profound that they cannot be denied. Hester's representing Mary is a dichotomy in and of itself in that Hester's shame is a result of her infidelity, making her far from a virgin, and even further from sinless. Yet Mary's virginity is her most noted and revered characteristic; the virgin birth is a central theme of the New Testament. Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit, one of the three persons of God. It is not coincidence that Dimmesdale, a Preacher, supposedly God's human channel, conceives Pearl. Pearl is the most obvious manifestation of the Virgin Mary in Hester. Jesus is the Son of God, and also the third person in the holy trinity, the embodiment of God in three persons, and so is immortal: Hawthorne refers to Pearl as "a lovely and immortal flower"(79). The angel Gabriel told Mary that "'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...'" (Luke 1: 35). When Hawthorne states "God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child..."(79), it is implied that Pearl was conceived in part by God, but in addition to God's hand in Pearl's conception, Hawthorne, while acknowledging that Pearl's conception was "a direct consequence of the sin," also describes Pearl as "the scarlet letter endowed with life"(91). The

scarlet letter is a symbol of sin, the same sin that resulted in Pearl's conception, so Pearl is not only infected by original sin, but also is the embodiment of it. This role is a logical one for Pearl; she is the daughter of Hester, the Puritan Eve, the creator of original sin, and the quintessence of sin in the eyes of Salemites, but Pearl is also the symbol of Jesus, who never sinned. The idea of simultaneous innocence and guilt is demonstrated through the symbol of the green "A" that Pearl makes for herself in the woods." Pearl took some eelgrass, and imitated, as best she could, on her own bosom, the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's. A letter – the letter "A" – but freshly green, instead of scarlet!"(160-161) Pearl unknowingly creates a mark of shame for herself because she has seen that mark of shame on her mother. This act illustrates Pearl's sinful birth, but is also a sign of Pearl's innocence in many ways. Pearl is simply emulating her mother and is ignorant of the meaning of the letter "A" on her mother's bosom. So, though Pearl's birth is sinful, Pearl does not knowingly sin, or even fully understand the concept of sin. The color of the letter is significant as well. Green is the color of nature, and nature is inherently godlike in that it sustains all life and all life is a part of it. So, Pearl's "A" is a godlike symbol of sin, an obvious duality. In addition, all the sins of the novel occur in the forest, the heart of nature. If it is assumed that nature is the earthly form of God, then it follows that sin is in some way a part of God, as suggested in the story of Adam and Eve by God's creation of sin through the creation of temptation, which in turn created the serpent, the messenger of sin and evil. Even the arguably mentally challenged rapper 50 Cent acknowledges in his song "Many Men" that "Sunny days wouldn't be special if it wasn't for rain.

Joy wouldn't feel so good, if it wasn't for pain." Joy and pain are opposite feelings, and so this lyric is essentially another acknowledgement of the necessity of an opposing force to validate the existence of any force. So, in turn, 50 Cent's lyric is an acknowledgement of the duality of all polar opposites, explaining the impossibility and hypocrisy of the idea of a human utopia. A commonly known law of physics states that "each action must have an equal and opposite reaction", so for every good force in the universe, there must be an equal and opposite evil force to authenticate that good force. The ancient religion Zoroastrianism, in which all monotheism is rooted, stated that there were two gods or forces in the universe and that all lived in tension between the two. If either of these gods were not present, there would be no universe because there would be no tension. One must wonder why it is that even a mentally challenged hip-hop star can make conclusions that stem to an ancient religion on which all monotheism is based, but the staunchly monotheistic founders of what would later become The United States of America could not.