

## The Religious Appeal of the Name “Pearl” in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

A pearl is a malady of an oyster, and it is that first realization that fostered my interest in the naming of Pearl, the unlawful child of Hester Prynne. Upon further examination of both literatures and histories of Puritan society during Hawthorne’s time, I found that pearl fishing was highly valuable because of the purity and importance of pearls. ~~To better understand why Hawthorne chose the name “Pearl” for such a salient character, it is important to turn~~ Turning to the Puritan religious understandings of the Pearl may help us gain a fuller sense of what is at stake in Hawthorne’s naming his character “Pearl.”n that was so crucial to this Puritan society. The religious texts that called attention to pearls, such as the Parable of the Pearl, speak of the gem as a symbol of heaven's gates, Jesus Christ, and Heaven. Hawthorne skillfully includes the appeal of religion in *The Scarlet Letter* by crafting the image of the bastard child “Pearl” to reflect an understanding of the Parable of the Pearl where the beauty and value of the pearl rests upon its development through strife.

**Comment [A1]:** I like what you are trying to do here, but there is something a little awkward about the language.

Although *The Scarlet Letter* revolves around the main character of Hester Prynne, the book more thoroughly examines the forces that act upon her and transform her. One of the most crucial aspects of the book, therefore, is Hester Prynne’s daughter, Pearl. Pearl is quite young throughout the duration of the story; however, she develops as “...a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion.” In the text, Hester Prynne acknowledges that she did not name Pearl after “...the calm, white, unimpassioned lustre that would be indicated by the comparison,” but because of Pearl’s “...great price – purchased with all she had – her mother’s only treasure” (Hawthorne 108). For this reason, because of her great worth, Pearl was always

**Comment [A2]:** Maybe say a bit more . Connect how you see bastard child and development through strife as connected.

radiant – she was clad in beautiful, flowing robes, and caught the attention of every hateful Puritan in the community.

There is a clear reason as to why Hawthorne portrays this bastard child as such an untainted and beautiful member of such a dark society. Upon first glance, it is easy to brush away the nomenclature as purposeful, but irrelevant to the time. It is easy to look at Pearl as pure and unsullied by those who surrounded her, and consider this to be Hawthorne’s reason behind naming this baby in such a way. However, during the era in which Hawthorne was writing (namely, 1840-1850), Puritan society was classified as rigidly moral, oppressive, and adherent to the terms of the Bible. In order to appeal to those who might be reading *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne may include the name “Pearl” as a reference to the Parable of the Pearl from Matthew 13:45-46.

In interpreting this parable, one must first understand the purpose of parables in the New Testament. “The New Testament parable... consists in bodying forth through language a supernatural truth in a natural fact, either actual or supposable” (E.V.G. 169). A parable implies a comparison of two things that resemble each other – the subject of discourse and an object of comparison. The subject of discourse is “imperfectly known,” according to Article I – The Idea of The Parable from the *Mercersburg Review*. The object of comparison is well known in contrast, and helps to make the subject of discourse lucid.

One may use this According to this description as a direct parallel to explaining how Hawthorne’s character, both the story of Hawthorne’s “Pearl,” and the Parable of the Pearl relate can be read as a parable in the Biblical sense. For instance, the subject of discourse would be the character Pearl, and the object of comparison would be the stone known as a pearl.

**Comment [A3]:** Ok. But why is it important that you tell us this first? Is there something particular about this definition that will change how we interpret the upcoming information?

<sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup> When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (NIV, Matthew 13:45-45).

The Parable of the Pearl (also known by some as the Pearl of Great Price) indicates that the Kingdom of Heaven is of such great value that one would be willing to sell even a pearl of enormous worth to ensure entrance.

The pearl itself has a history of noteworthiness, and has always been priced accordingly. Pearls are valuable because of their rarity – they occur spontaneously in nature when an irritant enters the shell of an oyster. A pearl is the product of an oyster’s defense mechanism against this microscopic disturbance. The mollusk creates a pearl sac around the intrusive object to protect its tissues against it. Although there are many oysters that exist in both salt water and fresh water, finding a pearl is particularly uncommon.

For **this reason**, the Bible uses a pearl as an example of beauty through suffering, and places a high value upon this beauty. Although the price of wisdom is above pearls according to Job 28:18, when the heavenly Jerusalem emerges, each of its twelve gates is a single pearl (NIV, Rev 21:21).

**The Puritans were aware of the significance of pearls, both from their religious studies and from the culture that surrounded them.** When the colonies first came to fruition, North America was known as a new harvesting ground for round, lustrous fresh water **pearls**. There was already a market structure in place in Europe that this supply fueled, and so a market in America was formed for selling pearls. Even though the Puritans did not engage actively in this market, they must have been aware of the value of pearls.

**Comment [A4]:** What reason? Are you talking about the physicality of the pearl that you talk about in the previous paragraph? If so, I think you need to be more specific, and you might even begin that paragraph with a topic sentence that tells me what your main purpose is in telling us the physicality of the pearl.

**Comment [A5]:** This is a great detail, but you need to say more. Even if you feel like it is self evident, you need to actually say the follow up.

**Comment [A6]:** Good topic sentence.

**Comment [A7]:** Might need a reference citation. This move in your paragraph is good though.

Hawthorne, therefore, names Hester Prynne's daughter "Pearl" in order to call attention to and potentially fuel a critique of the values of the Puritan society. It is interesting to note that although he makes extraordinary efforts to ensure that all characters work within the confines of Puritanical society (in order to maintain realism in the novel), there is one occurrence that stands out:

"Pearl? —Ruby, rather—or Coral! —Or Red Rose, at the very least, judging from thy hue!" responded the old minister, putting forth his hand in a vain attempt to pat little Pearl on the cheek. "But where is this mother of thine? Ah! I see," he added; and, turning to Governor Bellingham, whispered, "This is the selfsame child oh whom we have held speech together; and behold here the unhappy woman, Hester Prynne, her mother!" (Hawthorne 133).

According to Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, "...the Hebrew 'pēnînim' is translated either as pearls or corals. Pearl refers to the third of three precious stones (the first of which is coral), which are valuable enough to purchase almost anything. Only wisdom is considered more precious than the three stones (Job 28:18)" (Freedman 1023). It is interesting that the minister would reference stones mentioned in the Bible, especially corals, when correcting Pearl's name in the passage mentioned above. Here is a slight indication that the minister believes Pearl *should* be considered holy under God, as all Puritans are. When the minister's response fails to negate Pearl's value, he essentially assents to this belief of her **worthiness**.

In order to better understand how Hawthorne crafted such a narrative in *The Scarlet Letter*, the reader must consider how Hawthorne appeals to the religious inclinations of his audience. Although he quietly poses questions regarding the behaviors of the Puritanical society, he does so in a way that readers may not perceive these thoughts. His decision to name the

**Comment [A8]:** Great find.

**Comment [A9]:** As mentioned in class, I think you might make more here of what color has to do with things. Is the governor really objecting to her association with whiteness? Since he confirms that she could be ruby and you have shown that rubies and pearls share a Biblical origin.

daughter character “Pearl” is a prime example of this careful artfulness – because pearls contain religious value in the Bible, the reader might not consider that the naming of “Pearl” is also used as a means of reflection upon the values that the Puritanical reader holds so dear.

**Comment [A10]:** Hmm this conclusion is vague. I'd rather see you dig deeper into what's at stake in the information you've brought to bear on the reading.

Thesis: you have a thesis, but it's a little broadly stated right now. (see: engagement with text) B+

Argumentation: You make a lot of good observations and points. I wish you had stronger transition and topic sentences, so I had a better idea of how each part fits with your overall argument. A-/B+

Engagement with the text: I think you do a great job going into the name Pearl, and I find it particularly compelling that you then go back and focus on a particular passage (and a fitting one in which Pearl is declaring her name to the officials). I think you might let this move help structure a more focused thesis. For ex: Thinking about the biblical allusion and the historical reality of pearl fishing enables us to see in what otherwise seems like a refusal of Pearl's name a very subtle assent to the jewel that she is. I'm not saying that's what your thesis has to be. But I'm trying to give an example of how you might structure a more focused thesis around what you're actually doing. A

Language. You have a lot of passive constructions, but it was not hard to follow when read out loud. A-

Presentation: A

Total A/A-

## Works Cited

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