

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, 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 to the religion 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.

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 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 description as a direct parallel to explaining how Hawthorne's character, "Pearl," and the Parable of the Pearl relate. For instance, the subject of discourse would be the character Pearl, and the object of comparison would be the stone known as a pearl.

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ 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.

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 ‘pēnînm’ 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 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.

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