

Elf Child: Recounting American History

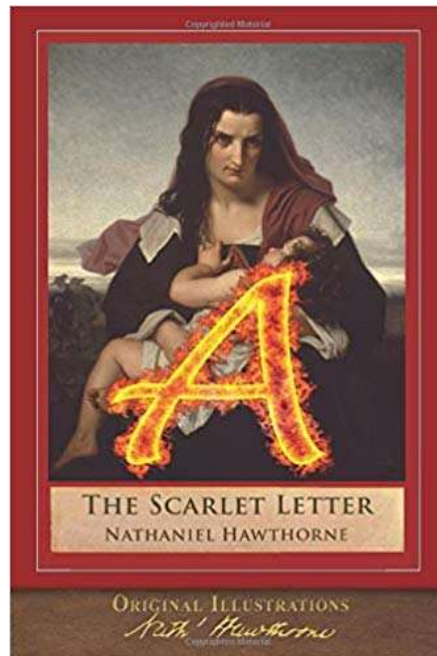
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Abstract

Children's literature is a significant tool for the amusement of children and portrayal of childhood in the frame of an adult's intention. Defining it, Hollandale expresses "Children's literature is narrative, an important characteristic of which is the provision of access to understanding through empathy with the lives and experiences of others" (Hollandale, 1997). Hollandale (1997, p. 62) notes that the experiences recorded need not be fictional but might, for example, be based on the author's memory of his or her childhood (*Signs of Childness in Children's Books*, 62). Charlotte Huck points out that children's literature is "the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language" (*Children's literature in the elementary school*, 5). It is socially and culturally constructed and focuses on the lives and experiences of

children, thus enabling young people to broaden their old world view through the imaginative apprehension of new experiences.

Almost all the literature projected by the adult writers deals with youngness, innocence, enthusiasm, valorization of its socio-cultural and psychological aspects with the portrayal of children. And this literature is the embodiment as the adult's world dominance over the child's world. But the sensitization of the child always contrasts with the sensitiveness of the adults. Children resonate with the adults' sensitivity and the adults' so-called old world experience reincarnates the child for a younger age.

Since children's literature is comprised of adults' writing and was mainstream literary competence of the early American writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne utilized the genre to connect with readers. He orchestrated the young and the aged personages to ascend the conflict between England and New England. *The Scarlet Letter* suffered from "hidden conflictive" intention of textual representation of the young "Pearl". The name "Pearl" itself contrasts with the authorial consciousness and deconstructs the centrality from present day to the specific past. Her identity haunts the inner consciousness, and the demented semblance of Arthur Dimmsdale.

This paper will examine the meanings and implications of the appellation "children and adult in the context of *The Scarlet Letter*" as defined within a body of mainstream fiction formative literature. It, subsequently, will highlight how this text negotiates questions related to refugee status, immigration, identity, and belonging, contributing in many instances to a bland re-creation of a formerly oppressed but now coherent and increasingly prosperous and Americanized people.

The children's literature plays an important role in defining the relatively new community to itself and mainstream America. In its dissemination of truisms about Confucian heritage and stereotypes of "model minorities," the literature reveals as much about American ideological desires as it does about the 'new Americans'. My paper strives to read Hawthorne's child character Pearl as the reflection of the American past. While we witness in the deepening of sensuality in Pearl's character a reminiscence of the past, we are concerned with Hawthorne's socio-cultural and psychological insights in the projection of such a child character.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, children's literature, American history, *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl, Americanized people

As critics traditionally believe that children stand for the present and adults stand for the past, but I wonder if childhood symbolizes the past and adulthood reflects the present and new. The literary authenticity passes through the belief that the adult represents the past, the old, the history, the stagnation while the child represents the present, the new, the valorization, the

enthusiasm, and the modernity. So, we see literary scholarship had voyaged from classic literature to modern. Early American writers also hypothesized the notion of the old and the new in their literary competency. As Philip Aries observes in his classical text *Aries 1962* "it seems . . . probable that there was no place for childhood in the medieval world" (p.33). As children represent all the cultural attributes such as innocence, savagery, emptiness, vulnerability, freedom, and potentiality, the early American scholastic discourse increased over the dual aspects of the cultural past in its acquaintance with children and adult sensibility.

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote and published almost all his tales for an audience composed of children. These include six books; *Grandfather's Chair* (1840, dated 1841), *Liberty Tree* (1841) and famous *Old People* (1841), which focused on tensions between England and its Massachusetts colonies from the time of the Puritan arrival, to the American revolution; *Biographical Stories for Children* (1842) which sketches the childhood of well-known historical figures.

I rehearse this outline to understand the extended role that writing for children occupied in Hawthorne's life and literary career. He wrote for children when he was both a younger and older author. As the critics argue Hawthorne was fascinated with the old in his youth and with the young in his old age. The "scene of a grown man entering the public sphere hand in hand with a young child" is repeated throughout Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictions (Keren Sanches Eppler, 143). She points to scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*, 'The Artist of the Beautiful' and 'Little Anne's Ramble' as the expression of Hawthorne's desire to "make public . . . his connection with childhood" (143).

Here I would like to depict Hawthorne in a frame of the young and the old in which the child's sensitization evolves with the aged personality, in which Hawthorne's 'purposiveness' positions itself to portray such contradictory aspects of New England and England. American investment in the future and, therefore, in the child who symbolized it and in the sanctity of democratic norms which permeated within a family, granting the child a position of equality were not freak events, but were connected to the history of America and the evolution of modern American nationhood. In his book, *The Classic American Children's Story* (1996), Jerry Griswold tries to throw light on the historical and political configurations that linked the American national identity with the figure of the child and, by extension with children's literature.

Historians have pointed out that, from the beginning of American history through to the nineteenth century, Americans consistently saw their political history in terms of the development of a child. In fact, by 1849, the Southern Literary
A messenger would say, somewhat wearily, "there is no similitude more trite and familiar, certainly there is none more striking and true than that

which likens the origin and progress of nations to the growth and development of children (27).

This persuasive notion “America as a child” shaped the way Americans saw themselves and their history. In its colonial days, America was an infant in a microcosmic family headed by the English monarch. The American Revolution marked a different phase in the growth of this microcosmic youngster. Scores of scholars have shown through the examination of hundreds of diverse accounts (from Franklin’s Autobiography to the political writings of Thomas Paine and Patrick Henry), American writers and thinkers consistently understood and presented the revolution as the story of a child who had grown older and entered into a period of oedipal rebellion” (1996:14).

Hawthorne’s symbolic method, though he himself was among the first to complain of it, is thoroughly in keeping with his historical premise. In *The Scarlet Letter*, people know themselves by means of revelatory “images”, that inform mind and body, and they apprehend other human beings as power “shapes” impinging upon them. The metaphor of the child which stands for an entire civilization was not merely confined to the American political discourse or the historical phase of the American Revolution.

The vision of new birth and innocence associated with a child was enmeshed with the very establishment of the American colonies in the 1620s. The figure of the child seems to define the existential condition of New England. The early settlers might have felt as helpless as children in the new vast continent amidst a hostile nature and wild natives. Richard Lenin in his essay “*Literature and Values*”: *The American Crusoe and the Idea of the West*” demonstrates how Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* could be an American prototype embodying all its dominant cultural values. Lenin visualizes the American Crusoe balancing his legacy of the notion of God with the empirical bent of his mind in order first to come to terms with, and then master the ‘other’ existing outside him, embodied in ‘nature’ and the other groups of people. It has been a difficult rite of passage from the initial innocence and awe and wonder of the child to a technological mastery of the land. This initiation from childhood to maturity is reflected in a major cultural expression like Cooper’s frontier novels, the fiction of Hawthorne and Melville, the poetry of Whitman and Twain’s novels for children.

Hawthorne’s creation of Pearl has been a controversial issue among critics through the ages. Pearl was called both “an embodied angel from the skies” and “avid little demon”. For some critics, she performs the function of “a symbolized conscience”. But for others, she is only “a darksome fairy”. The other scholarly enterprises postulate her as “a disordered nature torn by a malignant conflict between the forces of good and evil”, “unnatural isolation”, “child of nature”.

“The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*”, Jonathan Arac sums up Hawthorne’s politics in the following words:

Given a political rhetoric, and a national identity, that depend on the blurring together that are ordinarily taken as contraries, we may find in Hawthorne’s style a response to this situation. His prose negotiates the conflicting realities of past and present, the overlays of Puritan, agrarian, commercial and industrial ways of life that he encountered in New England, as well as the tension between American politics as a continuing revolution and politics as “patronage”, mere “rotation”. Hawthorne’s de-realizing style represents objects so that we doubt their reality yet while thus questioning what offers itself as our world, he refuses to commit himself to the authenticity of any other world or way of seeing. (1986: 257-258)

Hawthornean projection demonstrates her as "The frown, the harsh rebuke, the frequent application of the rod, enjoined by Scriptural authority, was used, not merely in the way of punishment for actual offenses, but as a wholesome regimen for the growth and promotion of all childish virtues" (77). Seventeenth-century passed on with allowing the corporal punishment of children to sustain their obedient behavior towards the authority of church and the state. Scriptural support for the use of corporal punishment as a part of the process is found in *Proverb 13:24* as stated:

Whoever spares the rod hates their children,
but the one who loves their children is careful
to discipline them. (New International Version, 1973)

The Puritan fathers did not stop short at recognizing their immaturity and blundering ways in front of an all-knowing and all-seeing God; they set about indoctrinating their children about their rightful position as simple souls waiting for God's reprimand. However, ironically, this excessive concern for the child may ultimately have succeeded in denying a differential ethic to childhood. The puritan child may have been turned into what has been called "miniature adult", with the grim and heavy dose of knowledge about sin, hell and innate depravity of man. The attitudes to childhood of other religious groups like the Anglicans, the Lutherans or the Quakers were, of course, less grim. While the Quakers opposed the Puritanical doctrine of total depravity and believed in childhood amorality, the Anglicans and Lutherans trod the middle path between

two. But all the faiths were unequivocal about introducing complex theological complex like sin, salvation, God, evil, etc. into the thinking of their children.

The colonial child into his battle for righteousness
Was “duty-bound” to God, to his neighbor, and to
Himself by a stern religious code. This varied in
Emphasis in different localities, but everywhere it
Held the child to a high standard of theological
Observance. That not all children attained the
Desired degree of perception was of course
Admitted as the evidence of the depraved state of
Fallen man. In the face of occasional causalities
The war against evil was never relaxed, nor were
The victories of the heroes left unsung (1948:41)

Hawthorne was very much aware of such types of condition in which the appropriate religious fervor came across to people as to what is sin, suffering, redemption, perseverance and God. The religious people’s descriptions of Pearl are often used to show the Puritan ideals and the fact that the mother committed adultery. Even though the child cannot help that she has been labeled as an outcast for the rest of her life indefinitely, Hawthorne posits her citing conscientiously, "Pearl was a born outcast of the infantile world; an imp of evil, emblem, and product of sin, she had no rights among christened infants” (79).

It is significant to notice that Hawthorne served as a ship’s sailor at the beginning of his career as a working young man; and his father captain Hawthorne traveled from the West to the East and returned to New England in early 1800. Captain Hawthorne's journey from West and East Indies brought massive knowledge for Nathanael Hawthorne about the culture, religion, belief, and myth of Eastern countries. This apprenticeship established Hawthorne quite early as a writer of story, prose, novel and other forms of literature. His first published book, *The Twice-Told Tales* (1837), the second volume of which appeared in 1839, was, in fact, providing a platform for his creative writings. But the remarkable and renowned success came after the publication of his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, which recounts the description of sin in varieties of forms, various levels of sufferings including psychological and physical, death, and finally redemption, the ultimate objective of Christian values.

Hawthorne's pedagogy concerns date back farther than his association with Goodrich who churned out those heavily moralistic and undisguised patriotic thematic discourses about the American landscape. We have stated how a concern for frontier geography was a decisive factor in shaping American consciousness. In collaboration with Goodrich, Hawthorne was, in fact, contributing to the American transcendentalist romantic imagination which proved to be the caring

impulse of the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. But being a radical critic of the transcendentalism and the political phenomena of Puritan society, he was surrounded by his Puritan guilt for the transgression of his ancestors in Massachusetts.

Hawthorne's fiction, because of its natural association with myths, offered Hawthorne a more favorable opportunity to inculcate among the young and old this discipline in the "knowledge of contradictions" (Harold Kaplan, *Democratic Humanism and American literature*). It's a common knowledge that Hawthorne articulated a nascent feminism in *The Scarlet Letter*, he was against the radical women's rights activists like Margret Fuller, Harriet Martineau while he was very critical of the founding fathers' injunctions against women, and the law against faithless wives, he had no sympathy for women's rights activists' notion that "feminism" was a social role rather than an inborn female nature. He even visualizes in the success of contemporary female writers a threat to the very notion of art. Similarly, his alternative vision about the race problem and industrialization in America, the fate of literature and children in the mercantile society, was constituted by a delicate balance between his concentrated efforts for social reform and progressive strains in society for equal justice for women.

We have noted how Hawthorne's book in the early American colonial period was an attempt to inculcate the Puritan notion of sin and guilt among the readers so that they may not be overtaken by the evils. In such a progressive idea, he was much closer to the classical myths to incorporate the notion of the indebtedness of the Western and Eastern mythology. The myth of adultery as punishable sin transcends the Biblical (New Testament Belief) belief among the worldwide readers of *The Scarlet Letter*. 'This woman has brought sin upon us' incorporates the Hawthorne vision of "Divine Maternity" and also transmits the Indian Myth. I have earlier mentioned how his fathers' logbooks matured the oriental knowledge of Hawthorne. The narrative framework in which *The Scarlet Letter*, falls where the scene of Hester's punishment was structured on the pattern of *Abhigyanshakuntalam*, one of the masterpieces of Adikavi Kalidas. Although the English translation of *Abhigyanshakuntalam* was done by William Jones in 1789, and captain Hawthorne shipped in the eastern countries in a similar period. Luedtke, in his *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient*, has articulated that "as the realm of humanity most remote in space and time, the East offered a romantic antithesis to the bromidic sameness of the Jacksonian age, and an ancient standard against which contemporary American life and character could be measured. Although Hawthorne presents his Eastern material for its sheer exoticism and entertainment values, he used other articles to satirize western manners and moral or to offer practical lessons for American horticulture and technology" (42).

Hawthorne was himself attached to the Puritanic belief in the Christian religion of redemption and its valorization of wonder; and the Puritan imagination is an affirmation of an

alternative American dream uncontaminated by a regime of religious repression, industry, commerce and materialistic desires that are sustained by Pearl and her mother Hester Prynne.

“So, Pearl-- the elf-child, --the demon offspring, as some people, up to that epoch, persisted in considering her, - became the richest heiress of her day, in the New World. Not improbably, this circumstance wrought a very material change in the public estimation; and, had the mother and child remained here, little Pearl, at a marriageable period of life, might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all. But, in no long time after the physician's death, the wearer of the scarlet letter disappeared, and Pearl along with her” (Hawthorne, 495).

The genre of children’s literature afforded Hawthorne a realm of the past without any need for justifying its credibility. The use of the young and the old contradictory manifestation helped him to develop the American history which helps Pearl to imbibe "her soul from the spiritual world and her body frame from its material of earth” (Hawthorne). In his tales for children, Hawthorne has recorded his reaction to these facts of American life by creating a world of fantasy, where children enjoyed unlimited freedom and a symbiotic relationship with nature.

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