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Pearl and Chillingworth, Angel and Devil

At the beginning of the Scarlett Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne, when Roger Chillingworth first discovers Hester's sin, "writhing horror twist[s] itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them." (pg. 63) The simile of the snake, a reference to Satan in Eden, immediately implies that Chillingworth is to play the role of a supernatural being, the devil. Pearl, meanwhile, is also described as a supernatural being soon after her birth, as Hester perceives her as an "airy sprite" "and a "little elf in the flight." (pg. 83-pg.84) Both of these supernatural beings serve as the sole living companions of the protagonist of the novel, Reverend Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne and in effect drive the two sinners to redemption. In this, Chillingworth and Pearl are similar, they use their supernatural perceptive abilities to remind Hester and Reverend Dimmesdale of their sins and they keep them from escaping the path of redemption. Chillingworth keeps Dimmesdale alive, while Pearl prevents Hester from signing her name in the "Black Man's Book." (pg. 101) The major distinction in the roles of these supernatural beings, however, lies in the fact that Pearl guides a confessed sinner, Hester, while Chillingworth guides a secretive sinner, Dimmesdale. In this context if we examine Pearl and Chillingworth, and the main moral of the story "Be true! Be true! Be true!, it is evident that in order to show how much more difficult and painful the path from evil to redemption is when sin is concealed, Hawthorne casts Reverend Dimmesdale's redeemer as a devil and Hester's spiritual guide as an angel. (pg. 199) Evidence of Pearl as a redeeming angel and Chillingworth as a redeeming devil can be seen if we examine the way in which Pearl and Chillingworth are supposed to ultimately redeem the two sinners from the perspective of divine purpose, the way in which Pearl and Chillingworth are described by the narrator and perceived by Puritan society and the means of torture they inflict on the sinners they hold in their charge to redeem them.

From the first chapter devoted to Pearl, it is evident that she is supposed to bring salvation to Hester by bringing her to heaven. At the beginning of the chapter the narrator states:

“God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child, whose place was on that same dishonoured bosom, to connect her parent for ever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven!” (pg. 81)

The quote directly suggests that God sent down Pearl to give Hester the opportunity to be redeemed of her evil and that only through Pearl can Hester accomplish this. The suggestion that Hester will “connect” with mankind via Pearl and the soothing adjectives in the passage, such as “lovely child” in reference to Pearl, and “blessed soul” in reference to Hester, along with the absence of any reference to evil all suggest that Pearl is an angel as opposed to a demon. The quote almost suggests that Pearl will take Hester to heaven. This notion is fully embodied when Reverend Dimmesdale, during his speech in the defense of Hester such that she can keep Pearl, in front Governor Bellingham and the leadership of the Puritan community, states that Pearl’s purpose is:

“to remind [Hester], at every moment, of her fall, but yet to teach her, as if it were by the Creator's sacred pledge, that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child also will bring its parents thither!” (pg. 99)

The quote explicitly suggests that Pearl, if Hester does not lead her to sin, will raise Hester to heaven like an angel, and that Pearl cannot be the devil or his minion as if that was the case she could neither enter heaven herself or bring Hester there. Hester herself perceives that Pearl maybe her angel of salvation as when gazing at Pearl towards the end of the novel she realizes that Pearl may have a “purpose of Mercy and beneficence.” (pg. 145) Thus, Hester, with her sin revealed, is sent an angel by God to help her achieve her reconciliation.

Like God provides the true Hester with an angel to redeem her by raising her to heaven, he provides the secretive Reverend Dimmesdale with a devil to redeem him by ruthlessly torturing him until he breaks down and confesses. This is evident when upon his death bed Reverend Dimmesdale in addressing Hester a final time utters that God has given him mercy by “sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture always at red-heat!” (pg. 197) Unlike the passages that suggest why God sent Pearl down to the earth, which carries angelic adjectives, the passages explaining Chillingworth’s presence carries adjectives such as “red heat” and “dark and terrible” that clearly describe him as demonic. Further, the passage as it praises God for sending Chillingworth to torture Reverend Dimmesdale, implies that Chillingworth’s purpose, similar to Pearl’s, is

to help redeem Reverend Dimmesdale. However, as is indicated in the passage, Chillingworth's purpose is not to raise Dimmesdale to heaven, guide him or reconnect him to humanity, which he may not deserve, but to solely torture him until he confesses to the people, regardless of the consequences, and thus breaks his pastoral bond with them. There is no mention of heaven or Dimmesdale's ascension to it; after Chillingworth drives Dimmesdale to confess his sins, Dimmesdale apparently must attempt to achieve his final redemption on his own. Thus, unlike Pearl, Chillingworth must be evil, as his sole purpose is torture and despite the Godly purpose behind his presence, he must be the devil. As one who fails to confess, Dimmesdale receives no guiding angel but a twisted demon.

Pearl as a guiding angel and Chillingworth as a crushing demon both pushing their companion to redemption is also manifested physically. Chillingworth, in driving Dimmesdale to confess, leads him to death after his seven years of suffering and his redemption is uncertain. Meanwhile, Hester, guided by Pearl, survives her seven years of punishment and through Pearl's subsequent marriage and motherhood and her own quiet, pious and community oriented existence reconnects with humanity, overcomes her sin, has a long life and possibly achieves complete redemption.

The descriptions of Pearl and Chillingworth, if carefully separated from the bias of the puritan community, also help cast Pearl as an angel and Chillingworth as a demon. Pearl is often described in the context of light. In introducing Pearl the narrator describes "an absolute circle of radiance around her on the darksome cottage floor" and characterizes her as "a glimmering light that comes we know not whence and goes we know not whither." (pg. 82-84) Further, when Pearl and Hester enter the woods, no sunshine approaches Hester, while Pearl easily catches the sunshine and it appears to Hester that "the child had had absorbed it into herself, and would give it forth again with a gleam about her path." (pg. 147) The description of Pearl as a creature of the light suggests that she is not an imp or a devil, but that she is an angel. The fact that Hester, who is a sinner and is still in her seven years of suffering, cannot catch the light or enter where it is present, suggests that those tainted with sin cannot enter the light and thus reinforces Pearl's purity. Pearl's angelic qualities are also evident in that she is often characterized as beautiful; the narrator describes her as having "native grace" and

“perfect shape.” (pg. 82) More tellingly Pearl also possesses a “bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined, might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them”, a trait opposite to that of the devil. (pg. 144) Pearl also possesses many other qualities, such as “affections” and even limited remorse, which are attributes of an angel. (pg. 145)

It can be argued in response to the argument that Pearl’s qualities are those of an angel, that in many instances in the book Pearl is directly characterized by either Hester or the rest of the Puritan community as being an imp or a demon. However, upon careful examination, Pearl is only described as a devil because of Puritan bias and Hester’s initial inability to grasp Pearl’s purpose. Many of the attributes of Pearl used by the community to suggest she is a demon, when viewed from a different perspective, suggest that she is an angel. For example, the Puritan community and Hester often describe Pearl as demonic because she is beautiful, flighty, spontaneous and possesses temperamental qualities that the Puritans look down upon. If the puritanical bias is removed, which Hester also inherently possesses as a product of living among the Puritans, these qualities either no longer represent those of a demon but those of an angel or represent the behavior of a typical child. The Puritan community also describes Pearl as a demon, regardless of her behavior and nature, due to the absence of her father and her being a product of sin. Hawthorne, through the narrator, condemns the injustice and unfounded nature of these claims and thus undermines these demonic descriptions of Pearl when the narrator states, “nor was Pearl the only child to whom this inauspicious origin was assigned, among the New England Puritans” (pg. 88), a clear reference to the Salem witch trials, which both Hawthorne and probably his desired audience condemned. The final two sources of demonic descriptions for Pearl come specifically from Hester, who believes that Pearl is a demon because she is so antagonistic and fierce and because she constantly tortures Hester over her letter. Neither of these reasons have merit. The narrator often describes that Pearl’s antagonistic nature is solely a product of her isolation from the rest of society. Pearl’s obsession with the Scarlet Letter meanwhile can be interpreted as a constant reminder to Hester of her sin, so that she through her suffering and her avoidance of further sin can be redeemed. It is also important to note that in many instances where Hester sees a demon in Pearl, Hawthorne suggests that she may be seeing it because of her own turmoil. For example, when Hester once believes that she

sees a demon in Pearl, the narrator qualifies it with the statement that “or, whether it peeped or no, her mother so imagined it.” (pg. 87) Thus, the novel bears many descriptions of Pearl implying she is a demon, however, few of these have merit.

Chillingworth on the other hand bears solely the qualities of the devil and is described as such in way that is difficult to attribute to bias or misunderstanding. In contrast to Pearl, Chillingworth is often associated with the dark. His facial features are often described as such, as after Hester’s sin his face is described as being “darkened with some powerful emotion” (pg. 63), later he is described as having a “smile of dark and self-relying intelligence”(pg. 72) and even further in the novel Hester is startled to perceive his “dark complexion.” (pg. 97) Darkness is an attribute of the devil and the fact that Chillingworth is often described with it clearly suggests he is one. A more revealing aspect of Chillingworth is the revelations of his eyes. The narrator describes them as “burning blue and ominous, like the reflection of a furnace” and as containing “the awful fire that darted from Bunyan’s awful doorway.” (pg. 109) Hester also perceives this, observing, “ever and anon, too, there came a glare of red light out of his eyes, as if the old man's soul were on fire.” (pg. 137) Chillingworth’s eyes with their red and blue blaze clearly suggest that he has become Satan. The fact that it is the eyes that convey the awful fact, suggests the validity of his fall, as in literature eyes are traditionally known to involuntarily reflect the true state of the soul.

However, the most damning descriptions of Chillingworth that render him as the devil come from two scenes. In the first, Pearl tells Hester to “come away, or yonder old Black Man will catch you! He hath got hold of the minister already.” (pg. 113) Pearl is not privy to the bias of the Puritans, is super perceptive and possesses the innocence of a child. Pearl clearly demonstrates through the book the ability to pick up on small gesticulations by various characters that reflect the state of their soul such as Dimmesdale’s involuntary placement of his hand on his heart. Thus, when she calls Chillingworth the “Black Man”, clearly another word for the devil, her characterization of him as thus can be seen as the revelation of his true nature. The second noteworthy revealing description of Chillingworth occurs after he tears open the shirt of the slumbering Dimmesdale. The narrator writes that “had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how

Satan comports himself when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom.” (pg. 116) In this passage Chillingworth’s character is explicitly revealed.

As previously described, Pearl and Chillingworth both guide their companions to redemption through torture, with Pearl’s ultimate purpose, of which she is unconscious, being the elevation of the true Hester to heaven with her and with Chillingworth’s ultimate purpose, whether he knows it or not, being to simply bring so much suffering upon the secretive Dimmesdale that he confesses his sin. If we examine the way in which each supernatural being inflicts the torture, it further solidifies one supernatural being as a guiding angel and the other as a punishing demon.

The primary manner in which Pearl tortures Hester is through her obsession with Hester’s A. In every instance in which Pearl brings attention Hester’s letter, Hester feels agony and suffering in being reminded of it. However, the induced, suffering in the manner in which it is inflicted by Pearl clearly has a redeeming purpose, and Hester realizes inasmuch, when she contemplates in reference to Pearl’s “tendency to hover about the enigma of the scarlet letter” (pg. 145):

“That Providence had a design of justice and retribution, in endowing the child with this marked propensity; but never, until now, had she bethought herself to ask, whether, linked with that design, there might not likewise be a purpose of mercy and beneficence. If little Pearl were entertained with faith and trust, as a spirit messenger no less than an earthly child, might it not be her errand to soothe away the sorrow that lay cold in her mother’s heart, and converted it into a tomb? --and to help her to overcome the passion, once so wild, and even yet neither dead nor asleep, but only imprisoned within the same tomb-like heart?” (pg. 145)

Hester can fancy as such, because of the manner in which Pearl torture her. To start Pearl tortures Hester openly. Hester knows who is bringing attention to her letter and can thus contemplate the reason for her torture and to try to understand it. Further, Pearl always brings attention to Hester’s letter in a light playful manner. For example, in one instance Pearl brings attention to the Scarlet letter by “gathering handfuls of wild flowers, and flinging them, one by one, at her mother’s bosom” (pg. 87) and in another instant she fashions for herself a letter that is “freshly green instead of scarlet.” (pg. 143) The playful and light manner of the attention that is brought to Hester’s letter, clearly implies that Pearl’s sole purpose is to remind Hester of the letter and to cause her to consider its meaning, not to cause her harm or break her. It can even be interpreted that Pearl is making light of the letter so that Hester can be relieved of its burden. Thus, as Pearl is guiding and redeeming Hester, it can be interpreted that she is an angel.

Chillingworth, like Pearl, is there to torture his companion and thus, inadvertently, force him to confess and thus redeem him. But the manner of torture that Chillingworth inflicts upon Reverend Dimmesdale has no resemblance to the torture that Pearl's inflicts on Hester. To start, Chillingworth's torture is covert. This is evident when in describing his torture of Dimmesdale, Chillingworth tells Hester that "--he knew that no friendly hand was pulling at his heartstrings, and that an eye was looking curiously into him, which sought only evil, and found it. But he knew not that the eye and hand were mine!"(pg. 139) The fact that Dimmesdale cannot identify his torturer, suggests that the Chillingworth is not there to be his guide, as a rightful guide would readily identify himself, but to simply torture Dimmesdale. Further, whereas Pearl's personal motives in her torture of Hester are left ambiguous, perhaps on purpose, the narrator clearly describes that Chillingworth's sole motive is to exact vengeance on Dimmesdale by torturing him. Chillingworth's torture of Dimmesdale is described as a task to which "the avenger has devoted himself" clearly illuminating the fact that Dimmesdale is solely committed to the torture and that it is based in vengeance. (pg. 118) This is more clearly explicated in the conclusion when it is stated that that "The unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise of revenge." (pg.199) Further, Chillingworth singularity of purpose is revealed when upon Dimmesdale's death he is described as having "shriveled away and almost vanished from mortal sight." (pg.199) It is also evident that Chillingworth is not in any way working to slowly redeem and rebuild Dimmesdale from the miserable state he enters after his sin, as when Hester asks Chillingworth if he has "tortured [Dimmesdale] enough", Chillingworth replies that "He has but increased the debt!" (pg. 139) Thus, the characteristics of Chillingworth's torture, in a similar way to which the characteristics of Pearl's torture point to her being an angel guiding the confessed Hester, point to Chillingworth as being a devil tormenting the non-confessed Dimmesdale.

Ironically, with Hester being guided by an angel and Dimmesdale being guided by a devil, it is Hester who develops the non-conformist thoughts that maybe considered to be outside the bounds of Puritanism. Dimmesdale is described as having "never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of the generally received laws" and it is stated that "by the fretting of an unhealed wound, he might have been

supposed safer within the line of virtue, than if he had never sinned at all.”(pg.159)

Meanwhile, Hester because of her extended isolation and the fact that due to her confession her wound slowly heals, is described roaming in a “moral wilderness” and “criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church.” (pg.158)

Thus, by redeeming Hester with a angel, despite her thoughts which would be deemed satanic by the puritans and punishing Reverend Dimmesdale with a devil despite his strict adherence to the Puritan code, Hawthorne maybe suggesting that what is sinful is not any violation of the Puritan law or religious law, but the failure to confess one’s sins.

Hawthorne emphasis of this is evident, if we examine the entire quote of which we mentioned only a brief snippet in the introduction: " Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister's miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence: - -Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" (pg. 199).

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