The Character of Flame: The Function of Pearl in The Scarlet Letter

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In discussions of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, little attention has been given to the significance of Pearl, the illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Indifference to her role in the plot is surprising in view of the general assumption that lack of motivation for the confession of Dimmesdale is a radical weakness in the plot. Since it is obvious that neither Hester nor Chillingworth constitutes an external cause for Dimmesdale’s volte face, it seems reasonable to consider the possibility that Pearl may be the agent who effects his unexpected public confession of paternity. If Pearl is a part of the “electric chain” formed as she, Dimmesdale, and Hester join hands in the darkness and stand on the pillory as a family for the first time (p. 174),¹ it may not be illogical to assume that she is as dynamic a force in the plot as are the other two members of the chain.

The narrator’s extensive treatment of the child, his careful delineation of her physical and spiritual qualities, his presentation of her in juxtaposition to both Hester and Dimmesdale, and his use of her in every decisive scene seem to justify an assumption that she is more than a passive link between her father and mother and more than a static symbol of their sin. Above all, his insistence upon the peculiar preternatural quality of the child and his manipulation of this phenomenon in the crucial scenes (the forest scene and the three pillory scenes) must certainly indicate that she is not merely a fantastically decorative “relief” in the somber story but a functional element in the structural design.² It is my purpose to present evidence that Pearl is more than a link, more than a symbol—that she is the efficient cause of the denouement and thus provides the motivation for Dimmesdale’s final act.

¹ References by page or chapter of The Scarlet Letter are to the Random House edition, New York, 1927.
² Pearl is presented in action, mentioned, or discussed in all but four of the twenty-three chapters of the novel proper (i.e., chaps. i, ix, xi, xvii) and in the Conclusion.
Henry James asserted that *The Scarlet Letter* is primarily Dimmesdale’s story, not Hester’s.

The story, indeed, is in a secondary degree that of Hester Prynne; she becomes, really, after the first scene, an accessory figure; it is not upon her the denouement depends. It is upon her guilty lover that the author projects most frequently the cold, thin rays of his fitfully-moving lantern . . .

Agreement with James (and I agree with him) necessitates rejection of Mr. Leland Schubert’s statement that the three pillory scenes are “in every sense the high points of the novel.” Dimmesdale’s story centers in the forest scene. I suggest that the “missing” motivation for Dimmesdale’s confession may be found in this great scene. Without it, the first two pillory scenes would be structurally meaningless and the third would never occur.

If *The Scarlet Letter* is Dimmesdale’s story, it must trace the change within him from the condition of a sinner, a hypocrite, and a weak capitulator to Hester’s plea for flight and resumption of sin, to that of a penitent, sincere and strong enough (and just barely strong enough) to make public confession. But there must be a cause for the change. I suggest that it is Pearl in her “otherworldly” aspect. Since the change in Dimmesdale is in the spiritual order, the cause may be assumed to be in the same order. Pearl is a spirit-child. As such she operates plausibly as an efficient cause within the ambiance of ambiguity which pervades the novel. She causes a transformation in the realm of the spirit; the effect is translatable in the terms of the spirit. Above and beyond the literal reality of her action as Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s child, she moves authoritatively as a regenerative influence on the level of operative symbol. On this level, *The Scarlet Letter* is the story of an extraordinary man redeemed by the extraordinary action of an extraordinary child. The progress of such a redemption in such a realm seems to me to take place in four stages: Preparation (Chapters I-XVI); Communication

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*Leland Schubert, Hawthorne the Artist* (Chapel Hill, 1944), pp. 137-140.

*Hester does not actually change interiorly during the course of the novel. Outwardly she seems to change: she adjusts to her social ostracism and she appears to be repentant. Inwardly, however, she is not repentant, as we see in her bold instigation of Dimmesdale to flee and to undertake a life of deliberate sin with her. She determines to make their “sin of passion” a “sin of principle.” Cf. chaps. v (p. 89), xiii (pp. 187-189), and xvii (pp. 126-128).*
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(Chapters XVII-XIX); Transformation (Chapters XX-XXII); and Revelation (Chapter XXIII).

The first of these stages consists of a meticulous preparation for the cause-effect relationship between Pearl and Dimmesdale, a relationship which depends upon the capability of the one to initiate and of the other to receive the impetus to regenerative action. For such capability in Pearl and for such susceptibility in Dimmesdale the narrator through sixteen chapters most carefully and elaborately provides. By detailing and dissecting the relationship of each of the two with one of the other major characters, he reveals in both certain peculiar spiritual and psychological qualities which he will juxtapose as he brings them face to face in the crucial forest scene for their first major meeting. Before this central scene, he presents Pearl in relation to Hester, Dimmesdale in relation to Chillingworth. Gradually and cumulatively, he draws first one, then the other, carefully keeping them apart except for four brief but pregnant meetings.

In this preparation for their decisive encounter, in which the intercourse between them will be effected on a preternatural plane, he presents each of them on two distinct levels: the ordinary and the extraordinary, or the literal and the figurative, or the natural and the preternatural. Neither the child nor the man, he shows, is merely an ordinary being. Pearl is not merely an ordinary, playful seven-year-old child: she is also precociously intelligent, bewilderingly subtle, frighteningly independent, and penetratingly wise. A double-natured anomaly, torturing her mother with misgivings of her natural origin, she exhibits even in babyhood an uncanny curiosity concerning Hester's scarlet letter. From early childhood, she displays unearthly inquisitiveness about the minister's habit of placing his hand over his heart. Most significantly, by curious questioning and implication and with a prescience that can only be described as preternatural, she insistently associates these two ostensibly disparate phenomena. Similarly, Dimmesdale is not only a well-loved and devoted minister: he is a godlike figure in the community, admired for his delicate understanding and sympathy and superbly

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6 This is not to say that the narrator does nothing else in these chapters. He does much: he delineates Hester's superficial and real natures (v and xiii); he draws Chillingworth's character (ix); he establishes the Hester-Chillingworth relationship (i-iv).

7 On the pillory (ii); at the Governor's house (vii and viii); from Dimmesdale's window (x); on the pillory at midnight (xii).
endowed with intellectual acumen and spiritual perspicuity. Above all, he is blessed almost beyond human capacity with the gift of communication (p. 160). It is of the utmost importance to observe that in spite of the physical and moral deterioration resulting from his own conscience and from Chillingworth's vindictive ministrations, his profound insight, his acute perception, and his delicate spiritual sensitivity remain unimpaired (pp. 160-162).

With such preparation, the preternaturally endowed child and man are brought together by the narrator in a cause-effect relationship in the great forest scene. I suggest that the second stage in the process of Dimmesdale's redemption takes place in the three chapters which constitute this scene (Chaps. XVII, XVIII, XIX). It is the critical stage of Communication. Everything in the arrangement of details is powerfully suggestive of duality: in the setting, light and darkness, land and water; in the mood, love and disdain, desire and fear, acceptance and rejection, reconciliation and estrangement; in the atmosphere, the real and the preternatural. Against this background, the duality that has already been elaborately established in Pearl and in Dimmesdale begins to operate in a remarkably subtle context of ambiguity.

The double nature of little Pearl functions in this environment on two distinct levels (the natural and the preternatural), in two directions (towards a known and an unknown parent), through two sets of actions (the explicit and the implicit) translatable upon two planes of meaning (the literal and the figurative). She approaches and affects Hester and Dimmesdale in appropriately different ways suited to the capacity of each to receive and understand her meaning. On the natural level she acts on Hester as a real child; on the preternatural level she acts on Dimmesdale as a "more-than-child," an elf-dryad-nymph, a spirit child. In each case, her method of approach is determined by the nature of the desired effect. In Hester the need is for the restoration of the discarded public acknowledgment of adultery, the embroidered scarlet letter. In Dimmesdale the desideratum is the revelation of the private, hidden stigma of the same sin. As a real child, Pearl causes a visible change in Hester by audibly, imperiously, and petulantly demanding that her mother pin the discarded A in its customary place on her breast. Hester understands and obeys, and the estrangement be-
tween the mother and child is immediately mended: Pearl leaps the brook and embraces her mother.

But the estrangement between Pearl and Dimmesdale is not a temporary condition, induced by one overt act and dissipated by another. The offense of her father against her is the deliberate and guilty concealment of parenthood during her whole lifetime. The healing of this serious breach (divined by the elf-nature but not by the child-nature in Pearl) cannot be effected as was the other, immediately, visibly, audibly, objectively. The spirit child communicates her disapproval in another way, one exquisitely appropriate to Dimmesdale’s sensibility—through a silent, indirect, subjective language. In the entire scene at the brookside she does not speak to him with her human voice at all. She addresses him indirectly through her persistent rejection of his advances and through actions ostensibly directed towards her mother. When Hester, restored to Pearl’s favor, entreats the child to greet the minister and assures her that he loves her, Pearl phrases in two succinct questions the only terms on which the alienation may be terminated: “Doth he love us? Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?” (p. 244). Public revelation of the real relationship among the three is to Pearl the only means of reconciliation. She ignores her mother’s request that she love the minister. She is not cajoled by the promise of a future home in which the three will be together and in which Dimmesdale will love her dearly. Her only reply is again a question: “And will he always keep his hand over his heart?” (p. 244). She clearly implies that guilt will plague Dimmesdale even if he succeeds in the plans for escape which he and Hester are now formulating. Her mother, not sensing the profound implications of her questions, lightly evades them. Consequently, stubbornly refusing to show any friendliness towards the minister and grimacing with disapproval, Pearl receives his embrace only at her mother’s insistence and immediately bathes her forehead in the brook to wash away all vestiges of his “unwelcome kiss” (p. 245).

Pearl’s actions at the brookside nettle her mother and produce immediate and tangible results. They work differently on Dimmesdale. For him they have more than their superficial meaning. His fancy that the brook flowing between Pearl and her parents is a boundary between two worlds may suggest his awareness of the double level of Pearl’s action. His comment is eloquent: he says
that the brook separates Pearl from Hester; he does not say that it separates Pearl from him (p. 240). On the other hand, when Hester is about to call to Pearl to join her and the minister, the child’s distance from them is judged differently by the two. To Hester, Pearl is “not far off,” but to Dimmesdale she is “a good way off” (p. 234). Does he mean that she seems to be in another world from which she is reaching out to him? Do his observation and insight suggest knowledge of the commencement of the “other-worldly” influence of his child upon his spirit? Does his incipient realization prepare him for an extraordinary meeting of their extraordinary minds? He is nervous and anxious as she mistrustingly delays her approach. He is afraid as the child’s penetrating glances apparently at once seek and divine the relationship between Hester and himself: his hand involuntarily steals over his heart—and over the mark of that relationship. He is deeply disturbed as Pearl bursts into passionate cries and gesticulations of protest and demand. Her insistent designation of the cause of her displeasure—the absence of the scarlet letter from her mother's breast—unnerves him. He seems aware that her agitation is more than a childish tantrum, for he uses the word *preternatural* to describe it (p. 242).

Although Pearl’s outburst at the brookside is directed towards her mother, it affects Dimmesdale traumatically. This hypersensitive man experiences almost simultaneously the extremes of exaltation and depression—Hester’s plan for the resumption of their love affair and Pearl’s adamant rejection of his affection. His unacknowledged daughter tells him in her wordless language that his acquiescence to Hester’s will to escape is a false answer to his problem and is distasteful to her. She will not enter into arrangements which involve a continuance of his concealment of sin. No wonder that the minister who leaves the elf at the brookside is a minister in a maze.8

The narrator’s final comment on the forest meeting characterizes it as “fateful” (p. 245). This statement is valid and acceptable on both the natural and the supranatural levels: the interview is fateful as the time of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s decision to enter deliberately upon a life of sin; it is fateful as the silent impetus to the agitated minister’s subsequent action on the day of the Governor’s inauguration.

8 Cf. the title of chap. xx.
Three passages in a previous chapter entitled "The Interior of a Heart" (Chap. XI) lend credibility to the perspicuity which I have imputed to the minister at this forest meeting. The first prefigures the major action of Pearl at the brookside, her insistent pointing at her mother's breast; the second illustrates Dimmesdale's power of perception—however dim at first—of a subtle influence unperceived by others; the third foreshadows the peculiar ability of Dimmesdale to interpret Pearl's meaning.

The first of these significant foreshadowings occurs in the detailing of Dimmesdale's relationship with Chillingworth after the latter's discovery of the secret stigma. Diabolically playing upon his victim, Chillingworth seeks to overpower him through the agony of fear. In the figure of speech chosen by the narrator to describe the physician's evil plan, the elements of unearthly power and of finger-pointing are adumbrations of the incriminating knowledge and the accusing gesture of Pearl at the brookside. The importance of this association grows as one recalls the triple pattern in which these two elements are found in the forest scene. Three times the narrator repeats the pattern: the child stands on the farther side of the brook, authoritatively pointing her finger at her mother's breast, while beneath, mirrored in the brook, is her image, imperious and beautiful, pointing in the same accusing way. If Dimmesdale had been startled with sudden fear by a "grisly phantom. . . , a thousand phantoms . . . all flocking round [him] and pointing with their fingers at his breast" (p. 159), may he not react similarly to see "the bright-apparelled vision" (p. 234), of Pearl, "now like a child, now like a child's spirit" (p. 234), using the same condemnatory gesture? True, the gesture is not made directly at him by Pearl—since her method of approach to him is indirect—but its repetitive pattern commences immediately after a passage which shows Pearl's uncanny divination of the lovers' relationship and the minister's involuntary, guilty reaction to the suspicious knowledge in her "wild, bright eyes" (p. 240): "his hand . . . stole over his heart" (p. 240). May not the thrice-repeated pattern of her direct communication with Hester and her indirect communication with Dimmesdale suggest a real child-Hester relationship but a spirit child-Dimmesdale relationship? The image of the child in the pool, the narrator says, is "more refined and spiritualized than the reality" (p. 239). Moreover, the finger-pointing of Pearl may recall to Dimmesdale
his agonizing vigil on the pillory at midnight when, his eyes fixed on
the blazing A in the night sky, "he was, nevertheless, perfectly
aware that little Pearl was pointing her finger towards old Roger
Chillingworth, who stood at no great distance from the scaffold. The
minister appeared to see him, with the same glance that discerned
the miraculous letter" (p. 177). As the real child on the edge of the
pool points accusingly at her mother's breast, silently reproaching
her for discarding her A, Dimmesdale is aware of the image-child
in the pool, pointing reproachfully in the same way (pp. 240-241).
If the meteor which Dimmesdale saw in the first instance "kindled
up the sky . . . with an awfulness that admonished Hester Prynne
and the clergyman of the day of judgment," as the narrator points
out (p. 177), may not the same fear of doom be generated in Dim-
mesdale's sensitive mind by his association of the A and the finger-
pointing of the one instance with the same phenomena in the other?

The second of these foreshadowing references not only offers
ground for Dimmesdale's receptivity to subtle influences but also
obviates the objection that the lack of immediate perceptible evi-
dence of Dimmesdale's understanding of Pearl's meaning at the
brookside renders suspect the assumption that she is the cause of his
ultimate confession. In the narrator's explanation of Chillingworth's
method in his plot to break the resistance of his patient, he says
that the evil work "was accomplished with a subtlety so perfect that
the minister, though he had constantly a dim perception of some evil
influence watching over him, could never gain a knowledge of its
actual nature" (p. 159). May not Dimmesdale, then, be said to have
at the brookside the first "dim perception" of the redemptive in-
fluence of Pearl?

The final foreshadowing concerns the metaphor of the Tongue
of Flame. Ascribing Dimmesdale's prestige among the townspeople
to his heavenly gift of sympathy for human nature, the narrator uses
the Pentecostal Tongues of Flame to symbolize the supernatural
penetration and love which distinguished the clergyman in his un-
derstanding and expressing the feelings of the human heart (pp. 161-
162). The juxtaposition of this passage with that which describes
Pearl as the enigmatic symbol of the lovers' secret—the "living hier-
oglyphic"—shows that the same figure has been used again. "She had
been offered to the world . . . as the living hieroglyphic, in which
was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide,—all written in
this symbol,—all plainly manifest,—had there been a prophet or
a magician skilled to read the character of flame!” (p. 238). In the
Bible narrative, tongues of flame were the symbols of the power of
eloquence given by Heaven to men who were chosen to understand
and reveal truth in order to effect the salvation of others. In the
imaginative narrative with which we are concerned, the narrator
interprets them as symbols “not of the power of speech in foreign
and unknown languages, but that of addressing the whole human
brotherhood in the heart’s native language” (p. 161). The scarlet-
garbed child—“The character of flame”—addresses an unspoken
truth to a man capable in mind and heart of comprehending it.
Dimmesdale is the only one of the clergymen of the town marked
with “Heaven’s last and rarest attestation of their office, the Tongue
of Flame.” His burden of hidden sorrow gave him sympathetic
understanding and the gift of expressing “highest truths through the
humblest medium of familiar words and images” (p. 161). The
first use of the figure, therefore, is a foreshadowing of and a prepara-
tion for the second, and the second recalls the context of the first and
lends credibility to the silent communication at the brookside.9

In other references in Chapter XI, the narrator emphasizes the
“preternatural activity” of Dimmesdale’s intellectual and moral per-
ceptions, his power of experiencing and communicating emotion,
and his predilection for the autonomy of truth (pp. 160-162). It is
obvious that the narrator has taken great care to establish Dimmes-
dale as a fit recipient for Pearl’s cryptic message of truth.

The three chapters which follow the communication in the forest
constitute what may be called the phase or stage of Transformation
in the process of Dimmesdale’s redemption. In the context of
ambiguity, the title of the first of these chapters, “The Minister in a
Maze,” may imply a double effect in the minister as he leaves Hester
and Pearl. On a literal level, he is reeling with the physical excite-
ment of plans for escape from Chillingworth and for resumption of
his love affair with Hester. On the figurative level, however, he may
be stunned and reeling from the spiritual blow dealt him by the elf-
child, the meaning of which he as yet only imperfectly realizes.
Through her act of rejection she has communicated to him the ne-

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9 Appropriate to the whole artistically ambiguous patterning of the novel, the frame
for both uses of this eloquent trope is a conditional clause. By this device of indirection
the narrator achieves suggestiveness consonant with the general tone of the novel.
cessity for public declaration of sin as a prerequisite of forgiveness. "So great a vicissitude in his life could not at once be received as real" (p. 246). Now a vicissitude is a change. The term is capable of double translation: the obvious one, the projected change of his status and environment by escape to Europe; and the subtle one, the incipient interior change of his attitude towards his concealment of guilt. So strange has the experience been that it seems to him to have been a dream. Yet he knows that it was not: he sees Pearl happily dancing along at Hester's side, now that he (the intruder on one level, the hypocritical sinner on the other) has left them. The "indistinctness and duplicity of impression" which the narrator says "vexed him with a strange disquietude" (p. 246) may well be the conflict in his sensitive mind between the two effects of his forest interview: the possibility of freedom (evil seen as good) and the necessity of bondage (good seen as evil). The contention between the two forces for mastery over the soul of the minister is set in motion in this tremendously meaningful chapter, all of which (with the exception of the first three paragraphs) has to do with the element of change.

This chapter develops the motivation generated in the forest scene for the minister's confession in the final chapter. It is in perfect harmony with the ambiguous pattern of the whole. Internal change manifested only in the final chapter is suggested here in an account of the minister's strange sense of external change in familiar objects on his homeward walk. In a long passage of eight pages, "this importunately obtrusive sense of change" is developed (pp. 249 ff.). The woods seem wilder; in the town, familiar landmarks seem namelessly but noticeably changed; people are unaccountably but certainly different; his own church seems unreal and dreamlike. The narrator's interpretation of this passage adumbrates the ultimate use to which he will put this provocative material: "This phenomenon in the various shapes which it assumed, indicated no external change, but so sudden and important a change in the spectator of the familiar scene, that the intervening space of a single day had operated on his consciousness like the lapse of years" (p. 249)."  

The significance of this comment cannot be overestimated. It states and emphasizes the sudden and radical character of the alteration of perspective induced in the minister and strongly looks forward

10 Italic mine.
to the sudden and radical *volte face* which results in his confession. The narrator's explanation of the transformations as the result of "the minister's own will, and Hester's will, and the fate that grew between them" fits into the ambiguity of the pattern first by suggesting the conflict between Hester's strong will to perpetuate his falsehood and his own weak will to tell the truth, and second, by implying concreteness in the vagueness of its third element, "the fate that grew between them." There is nothing to preclude the conception of this "fate" as Pearl. The explanation may be so construed as to suggest a double meaning in the term *transformation* and to include a double set of agents operative in effecting the change: Dimmesdale's and Hester's plans transforming Dimmesdale into a new and spuriously free man; Pearl's rejection transforming Dimmesdale into a really free man. In this second sense, there is nothing to preclude the operation of Pearl as an efficient cause of the change effected in Dimmesdale between the moment of his meeting Hester and the child in the forest and the moment of his voluntary mounting of the pillory to declare his guilt to the world—"the same minister returned not from the forest" (p. 249). Ostensibly, a morally worse minister returned. Actually, as the final pillory scene shows, a morally better minister returned.

The course which the narrator takes in the development of the important "transformation" or "change" scene in this chapter provides for the objection that if Pearl were the efficient cause of the minister's inner change, the *manifestation* of the effect in him would have come either at the moment of rejection at the brookside or immediately on his arrival in the town among the people whom he had so long deceived. By a series of carefully plotted incidents on his homeward walk, we are made acutely aware that as yet this sensitive and intelligent but weakened and confused man does not know exactly what is happening within him. The evidence for this lies in his behavior during the six chance encounters occurring between the edge of the town and his own abode (pp. 250-253). His actions, described by the narrator as "impulses," carefully identified as "at once involuntary and intentional," and presented as happening "in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse" (p. 250), indicate a man in whom opposing strengths are striving for mastery as he looks on, bewildered by the fight and uncertain as to the outcome. In the first encounter his
impulse to speak blasphemously to a deacon causes him to fear that the strength of the bad impulse will prevail without his consent (p. 251). In the second encounter he is impelled to utter an argument against the immortality of the soul. Later he cannot account for overcoming that evil inclination. In the third his impulse to pervert innocence is thwarted only by mighty effort. In the fourth only his sense of good taste and decorum—not his devotion to principle—prevents his corrupting the young and swearing with the disolute.

In a passage which concludes the homeward walk, the narrator emphasizes the lack of self-understanding which marks this stage of the transformation in Dimmesdale. In passionate self-address, the tormented man questions himself as to the possibility of his being mad, or leagued with the devil, who now demands evil deeds of his victim (p. 254).

At this point ostensible corroborations of these fears seem to be presented in the unexpected scene between the tortured man and Mistress Hibbins, "the reputed witch lady." The significance of this scene, however, must be evaluated within the context of ambiguity. By twice discounting the authenticity of the meeting, the narrator carefully provides for antithetical interpretations: simultaneous affirmation and denial of the fear that he has succumbed to the bondage of the devil. In the frame of ambiguity his seemingly hypocritical replies to the old woman's malicious insinuations may signify that he is not the lost soul that he seems to be, that he is indeed sincerely interested in salvation.

If these scenes with the deacon, the widow, the maiden, the children, the seaman, and the witch show anything, they show the moral ambivalence of a sensitive, suffering soul startled by the war in his "interior kingdom"—that between attractive evil proposed by Hester and repulsive good proposed by Pearl—and by the exterior manifestations of the conflict in his "profounder self." In every case the evil impulse had been thwarted by an unaccountable power within him. If these scenes look forward to anything, they look forward to the moment after the Election Sermon when, with every human motive urging him on to flight and love, this same man will

11 "Old Mistress Hibbins . . . is said to have been passing by" (p. 254), and "his encounter with old Mistress Hibbins, if it were a real incident, did but show his sympathy with wicked mortals and the world of perverted spirits" (p. 255). Italics mine.
yield to the good impulse to turn aside from the procession, to mount the pillory—again "in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse" (p. 250).

The final section of this chapter which, in overtly tracing the minister's physical journey homeward from the forest, subtly suggests his spiritual journey to peace from a moral wilderness, presents him in his own dwelling, his "refuge" and his "shelter" from the world. Even here there is now the strangeness of change. Yet, it is still the place that it was, the place of his study, his writing, his penance, his prayer, his agony. It is still familiar: he sees his Bible, his unfinished Election Sermon on the table. May not his gazing at his Bible, in its "rich old Hebrew, with Moses and the Prophets speaking to him, and God's voice through all" (p. 256), figure the dawning of his full comprehension of the cryptic action-language of Pearl, the preternatural child, at the brookside? She was telling him to abandon sin, to confess, and to repent. May not his "unfinished" Election Sermon, with "a sentence broken in the midst" be a figure of an imminent break with the past? The very word Election may operate above its conventional meaning and take on the significance of the Calvinistic connotation of divine predestination.

On the literal, factual, narrative level, this account of manifestations of change in Dimmesdale is pejorative. But on the figurative level, the opposite interpretation is possible and valid in the light of both antecedent and subsequent action. "Another man had returned from the forest. . . ." It may be a man enlightened by subtly communicated knowledge of "hidden mysteries which the simplicity of the former could never have reached" (p. 256). This knowledgeable man may well "stand apart from that former self [i.e., the pious hypocrite] eyeing it with scornful, pitying, but half-envious curiosity" (p. 256).

The final scene in this remarkably suggestive chapter crystallizes the change in Dimmesdale. He confronts Chillingworth with one hand on the Hebrew Scriptures (the voice of God in a cryptic tongue) and the other spread upon his breast (over the hidden sign of his hidden sin) and engages in a conversation which suggests the choice that he will make. To Chillingworth's observation that his paleness indicates that his "journey through the wilderness" had

*Italics mine.*
been "too sore," he replies that the sight of the Apostle Eliot, whom he had gone to visit, has done him good. He says that he does not now need any more drugs from Chillingworth for "heart and strength" to preach the Election Sermon (pp. 257-258): he does not need the physician’s ministrations to maintain him in his deception and to try to keep alive his broken body and his scarred soul. Has he determined upon his own cure, his own way of salvation? Has he determined to be worthy of "election"? Affirmative answers to both these questions may be read in Chillingworth’s reply to the minister’s offer to requite the physician’s "good deeds" with prayers: "A good man’s prayers are golden recompense! Yea, they are the current gold coin of the New Jerusalem, with the King’s own mint-mark on them!" Intended sarcastically, these words of the evil leech may suggest the minister’s real state, unknown to Chillingworth and probably until this moment not completely known to Dimmesdale himself: he is a worthy minister by reason of his strong interior desire to do the deed that will restore him to the favor of the King whom he serves and that will open to him the way to the New Jerusalem, salvation.¹³ But to this final remark of the old physician, Dimmesdale makes no verbal reply. Instead, as the old man leaves, he acts with unaccustomed alacrity. Calling for food, he eats "with ravenous appetite," and "flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire," he forthwith begins another, which he writes with "such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion" that he fancies himself inspired (pp. 258-259). The complete destruction of the first Election Sermon, conceived and written in deceit and hypocrisy, may be significant of a complete break with the past that produced it. The fluent composition of a new one may figure the tremendous vitality of the soul freed from the shackles of sin and operating under the flow of divine grace. As his physical appetite is satisfied by his ravenous eating, so the appetite of his soul now seems to satiate itself in ecstatic composition that continues unabated throughout the night and ceases only when the morning sun throws a golden beam into the study and lays it "right across the minister’s bedazzled eyes" (p. 259). The sun image recalls the forest scene. Is it a figure of the new light that shone

upon the darkened soul of the sensitive minister as he saw his little daughter standing in a shaft of sunlight in the gloomy forest—the only ray of light in that wilderness—and recognized in her, however obscurely at first, the prophet of his transformation and redemption?

The answer lies in the final scene at the pillory on Election Sermon Day, the scene for which the narrator has provided through the artistic device of ambiguity in three stages, those of Preparation, Communication, and Transformation. They have led inexorably to the fourth—Revelation. As the minister moves in the procession towards the church, it is evident that he is a changed man. In his gait and air he seems invigorated with physical and spiritual energy. Hester Prynne, standing in the crowd of townspeople, feels depressed as she sees him. She hardly knows him. He seems unsympathetic, unattainable, withdrawn from her world (p. 275). If the visible change in Dimmesdale is the result of capitulation to sin and anticipation of the spurious freedom it will bring, would there not be at least a glance, a meeting of the eyes, between the two lovers? There is none. The minister’s thoughts are not on Hester and a new life with her and Pearl in some European city. They are on the Election Sermon which he is about to deliver, the theme of which, as the narrator later reveals, is the Providence of God upon this settlement in the wilderness and the glorious destiny that it will achieve in His hands (p. 286). The application of this theme to the personal problem of the minister is obvious. Through the Providence of God his moral wilderness will be transformed into glory: the change in him is one of spiritual reformation, not one of sinful capitulation. Equally obvious is the narrator’s placing of Hester outside the church, separated from the minister. She cannot hear the words that he speaks, but she catches the spiritual sense of the sound of his truly wonderful voice: “the complaint of the human heart . . . telling its secret . . . to the great heart of mankind, beseeching its sympathy and forgiveness” (p. 281). The opening paragraphs of the next chapter (Chap. XXIII)—those in which the narrator describes the general effect of the sermon—suggest that the sound conveyed to her the sense of an ending and a beginning: the ending of their plans for escape (indeed, she already knows that Chillingworth has outwitted her, although Dimmesdale does not know it)
(p. 270) and the beginning of a new phase in the minister’s life, not that which her will has planned, but another over which she has no control, for it involves his death.

Hester is well aware that she is seeing and hearing a Dimmesdale who is radically different from the Dimmesdale of the forest. She does not know the cause of the change in him. But I suggest that Dimmesdale now knows. It is Pearl. From the moment of her dramatic rejection of him in the forest, he has moved in bewilderment and agony at the conflict within him towards this moment when he will identify her as his daughter to the world. Refusing all human aid except that of the woman who wears the sign of his sin, he stands at the foot of the scaffold and, at the very moment of confession, summons Pearl, his child. This time she does not refuse. Her worried question of the morning, when she had asked Hester why the minister had kissed her in the forest but would not recognize her in the town, is about to be answered. She senses that revelation is at hand. She runs to him. She clasps her arms about his knees. Is it an accident that at this moment of imminent revelation she accepts him with the same gesture which she had used in her reconciliation with her mother in the forest, when Hester had restored the sign of guilt (p. 243)? As the minister mounts the platform of disgrace, supported by Hester and clasping Pearl’s hand in his, he thanks God for leading him through “grace” to this moment (p. 291). In that word Pearl is at last identified: she is grace, the instrument of his redemption, a powerful but hidden force urging him to good. When the “dreadful witness” of his sin, his scarlet letter, has been exposed, it is to Pearl that the dying man speaks. He asks her for a kiss, the sign of reconciliation that she had refused him in the forest. Her response is immediate and wholehearted. She kisses his lips (p. 294), as she had kissed the lips of her mother when she had restored the scarlet letter to her bosom in the forest. Moreover, the effect of Pearl’s major gesture in the direct communication with her mother and in the simultaneous indirect communication with her father in the forest scene.

14 It is interesting to observe that in a Theater Guild adaptation of The Scarlet Letter for radio presentation, the text was distorted to give Dimmesdale knowledge of Chillingworth’s plan to sail for Europe on the same ship with him. This distortion provided motivation for Dimmesdale’s confession. It is significant to observe further that Pearl was omitted entirely from the play.

15 Cf. supra.

16 Cf. supra.
is here fully elucidated in Dimmesdale's passionate disclosure (made almost against his will)\textsuperscript{17} that both the angels and the Devil "were forever pointing" at the "brand of sin and infamy" (p. 293)—the hidden wound of the scarlet letter on his breast. Pearl and Chillingworth have probed that wound for seven years, the one for the angelic purpose of redemption, the other for the satanic purpose of damnation. Pearl has won. The subtle power which the minister has called "grace" has moved him to confession and salvation.

From the very beginning the narrator has made clear the nature of Pearl's mission to her mother: she had been sent as a blessing and as a retribution to remind Hester of her fall from grace and to teach her the way to heaven (p. 128). Her mission to her father, however, has been a hidden one. The narrator has chosen to suggest rather than to present it. It has been my purpose to try to elucidate it as another mission of redemption, to show that Pearl, the elf-child, as a figure of grace and through appropriately subtle means, is the cause of Dimmesdale's \textit{volte face}. It is unthinkable that an artist of the stature of Nathaniel Hawthorne should fail to motivate the central action of his most distinguished and most admired work. There must be a cause for Dimmesdale's confession. It is Pearl in her preternatural aspect.

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. \textit{supra}.

ANNOUNCEMENT

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Clarence Gohdes
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