

## *The Scarlet Letter: Nature vs. Nurture*

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**ABSTRACT** The article focuses on the importance of place and how it informs the narrative in *The Scarlet Letter*. Each major place is considered: the town, the governor's mansion, and the forest. Examining the characters of the novel and their response to nature and culture shows how they identify and react to their moral identity. The juxtaposition of characters like Pearl, Hester Prynne, Dimmesdale, Mr. Wilson, and their varied surroundings offers unique critical study. By looking at how we respond to place, we can come to a greater understanding of the contrast and comparison of nature versus culture and ultimately how we define each.

**KEYWORDS** Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, nature, nurture

Studying place and morality in *The Scarlet Letter* is something that is meaningful for contemporary study because of the implications that place can have on how we shape our own personal moral views. I agree with Philip Zimbardo who in his ground-breaking psychological treatise *The Lucifer Effect* sees place and morality as intertwined. While studying the effect that a week-long prison stay had on a group of young students by positioning them as prisoners and guards, Zimbardo found that place had an extreme impact on their morality. Mr. Zimbardo states that the students “did not bring any pathology into the place; rather, the place elicited pathology of various kinds from them.”<sup>1</sup> He uses this example of an experiment thirty years ago to try and understand similar moral enigmas that took place in Abu Ghraib just a few years ago. I contend that this use of moral conflict brought forth by place was illustrated much earlier in *The Scarlet Letter* and that study of this novel can help us understand our natural and cultural influences in order to better shape our moral barometer. Place is fundamental in Hawthorne's morality tale and elicits an important critical question: “Is nature good and culture bad? Or vice versa?”<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne uses this topographical moral barometer to answer this question and define the social order. He contends that the social order is one in which the citizens believe nature to be bad and culture to be good. The result through the novel is that nature is shown to be good and culture is shown to be bad.

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1. Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect Understanding How Good Turn People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), p.236.
  2. Frederick Turner, “The Art of Nature,” *Lapham's Quarterly*, (November 2015) <http://www.lapham-quarterly.org/book-nature/art-nature>.

*The Scarlet Letter* refutes Alison Byerly's implication that the "picturesque aesthetic" toward nature was so easily amalgamated into mainstream American social dynamics in early cultures in The New World.<sup>3</sup> In the novel, the Puritan culture defines nature in the traditional Christian sense, as deftly described by famed mythology expert Joseph Campbell: nature is "corrupt" and views "every natural impulse" as "sinful" and "the Fall" represents "nature" as "corrupt," "sex" as "corrupt," and "the female as the epitome of sex" and the "corrupter" of man.<sup>4</sup> In this sense nature is to be avoided because it's the place that brings forth sin and unhappiness.

Although in Leland Ryker's book on Puritans in early America, he notes that historically American Puritans in the nineteenth-century *did* believe that "God-implanted" natural impulses were wonderful, they also did have a disdain for any natural impulses outside of marriage and the Puritan's *did* believe nature to be "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and men."<sup>5,6</sup> Hawthorne defines the Puritan's in his novel as ones who "rejected" all "joys" as a "sin" and therefore follows Campbell's Christian view of nature.<sup>7</sup> Hawthorne also contends that "it was not an age of delicacy" and that the Puritans in the novel were "of the most intolerant brood that ever lived," which helps us understand that these Puritans are particularly stringent in their moral laws.<sup>8</sup> Although this is a generalization and not completely historically accurate, it does serve a purpose: to represent cultural laws, customs, and attitudes in The New World. This type of reading is important because it shows that morality and culture cannot be independent of nature.

In his article on Hawthorne's sources for *The Scarlet Letter*, Charles Ryskamp believes and rightfully contends that "the place each of action" in *The Scarlet Letter* is "carefully described" and calculated by Hawthorne to produce a setting wherein the dynamics of morality are illustrated.<sup>9</sup> In *The Scarlet Letter*, place is defined as the town, the governor's mansion, the seascape, and the forest.

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3. Alison Byerly, "The Uses of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and The National Park System," N. pag. Rpt. in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks In Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, (Athens: The University of Georgia, 1996) p.36.

4. Joseph Campbell, *Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), p.54.

5. Leland, Ryken, *Wordly Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p.45.

6. William, Bradford *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Book I, Ch. 9 (written 1630-50; first published 1856; reprinted in Sculley Bradley et al., eds., *The American Tradition in Literature*, Vol. I, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition: New York: Norton, 1967), p.5.

7. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Signet Classics, 1999), p.87.

8. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.88, 96.

9. Charles Ryskamp, "The New England Sources of The Scarlet Letter," *American Literature*, 31/3 (1959), p.261.

## THE TOWN

The first chapter is aptly named “The Prison Door,” suggesting that the primary focus of the text is a place for culturally correcting moral deficiency. This “heavily timbered” oak door is “studded with iron spikes,” which create the cold and austere manmade structure.<sup>10</sup> The prison is erected out of “necessity,” despite the projection of “virtue and happiness.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Hawthorne foreshadows culture’s failures by indicating that withdraw from a natural state to a state of cultural perfection or virtue is impossible. Around the prison is a “grass plot” that is “overgrown” with “unsightly vegetation” that had found “something congenial in the soil,” the same soil that was the site of a “black flower” of “civilized society.”<sup>12</sup> Nature is thriving around manmade structures, even the most pitiful kind and this does two things: First, it shows the duality of place, and second it shows the uneven structure of nature and culture.

The rose bush is another vital insight into nature vs. culture. In Michael J. Colacurcio’s follow up article on the context of the novel, he cites that “the narrator pays almost as much attention to a rose bush as he does to the appearance and moral significance of Puritan America’s first prison.”<sup>13</sup> The narrator states that the rose bush is “so directly on the threshold” of the “narrative” that he “pluck(s) one of its flowers” and gives it “to the reader.”<sup>14</sup> This gift to the reader is an insight into Hawthorne’s comparison of nature and culture and he unearths more complexities when the narrator ends the section by stating that the rose bush “may serve... to symbolize some sweet moral blossom... or relieve the darkening close of a trail of human frailty and sorrow.”<sup>15</sup> In this passage Hawthorne is directly comparing morality in nature to morality in culture. Morality in nature is a sweet blossom; however, he implies that culture leaves one feeling melancholy and dejected.

The second chapter is an introduction to Hester Prynne that immediately establishes her as a figure of nature and the town’s punishment of her as culture. The “beadle” or subordinate parish officer escorts Hester out of the prison.<sup>16</sup> The parish officer is

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10. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.55.

11. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.55.

12. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.56.

13. Michael Colacurcio, “Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of The Scarlet Letter,” *ELH*, 39.3 (1972), p.459).

14. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1999), p.56.

15. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1999), p.56.

16. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.60.

described as a “personage” that “represented... the whole dismal severity of Puritanic code of law.”<sup>17</sup> He is armed with a “sword” and an “official staff,” clear symbols of culture, while she is carrying a baby, a sign of natural order.<sup>18</sup> The officer puts his staff on Hester’s shoulder and she repels “him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character.”<sup>19</sup> This dramatic and vivid scene shows Hester as the “natural” source of morality and “character,” and this is bolstered later on in the paragraph, when the narrator states that she “stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will.”<sup>20</sup> Hester is a free and wild mother, a manifestation of the natural elements, a somber symbol of nature and biology.

Another important cultural symbol is the pillory scaffold at the end of the second chapter.<sup>21</sup> Hester stands on the pillory with her “scarlet letter” which is “fantastically embroidered with gold.”<sup>22</sup> She tries to imagine another life in England that the pillory reminds her of, but abruptly realizes that she is trapped in “the rude market place of the Puritan settlement.”<sup>23</sup> The pillory scaffold represents not only her past culture, but her present culture and their punishment of her. In fact, her old culture acts as a reprieve to the Puritan law in the New World.

In chapter four, Hester is released permanently from the prison and nature takes on a different role as she again steps out from the “prison door.”<sup>24</sup> This time “the sunshine” is meant “only to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast” and feed her “sick and morbid heart.”<sup>25</sup> Nature is her torture because it reveals culture’s castigation of her own natural desires. The narrator bolsters this argument later in the chapter when he states that “her sin, her ignominy were the roots that struck into the soil.”<sup>26</sup> This passage directly relates her actions to nature. She is bound to nature, in the same way that tree roots are bound to the soil. Nature becomes a more specific place later in the narrative when the “forestland” which is “uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer” becomes Hester’s “wild” home.<sup>27</sup> This clearly identifies nature as undesirable by culture, both by showing that the regular citizen does not want to go there, and also that someone being punished lives there.

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17. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.60.

18. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.60.

19. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.60.

20. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.60.

21. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.64.

22. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.66.

23. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.66.

24. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.82.

25. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.82.

26. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.83.

27. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.84.

In the middle of chapter five, place again illustrates the divide and amalgam of culture and nature. While “gliding through the town” Hester is full of shame, even to the point that “all nature knew of it; it could have caused her no deeper pang had the leaves of the trees whispered their great story among themselves, had the summer breeze murmured about it –had the wintry blast shrieked it aloud!”<sup>28</sup> The pain of her cultural punishment pervades even into her sacred place, nature, or her home. There is an implication that nature is something better than culture and that this permeation of culture into nature is an adulteration.

The house that Dimmesdale and Chillingworth move into together is a representation of culture that illustrates culture’s inability to handle moral dilemmas. They move into a “house” with a “pious widow” that eventually becomes “the site on which” the “King’s chapel” is built.<sup>29</sup> This designates the grounds that they live on as holy grounds. Also, on one side of the grounds is “the graveyard,” a place that the narrator states is “well adapted to call up serious reflections, suited to their respective employments, in both minister and man of physic.”<sup>30</sup> The combination of the holy ground and the graveyard are near perfect conditions for the demonstration of cultural place and cultural moral law. The holy ground represents the apex of Puritan culture, while the graveyard can be seen as the place where culture honors the dead, and more specifically as the place that Puritans honor those who they believe to be in the afterlife.

Mr. Dimmesdale’s room is the “front apartment” that faces a mixture of sun “exposure and heavy window curtains.”<sup>31</sup> This positions Dimmesdale in the state of uncertainty. The sun, as mentioned before, represents nature and the curtains represent culture’s means to suppress nature. The tapestry is said to be from “Gobelin looms,” a famous Parisian tapestry establishment originally called “*Manufacture royale des Meubles de la Couronne*” or Royal Factory of Furniture to the Crown that produced furniture in early years, but later specialized in highly ornate and realistic tapestries.<sup>32</sup> This detail is pointed out to play on the word ‘goblin’, which is also a mythological creature of fear, and to show the scene printed on the tapestry that mirrors Dimmesdale’s own life. This scene shows the story of David, Bathsheba, and Nathan the prophet.<sup>33</sup> The story of David and

28. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.89.

29. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.124.

30. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.124.

31. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.124.

32. Edith A. Standen, “The Tapestries,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 18/3 (November 1959), p.98.

33. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.124.

Bathsheba is the story of David's transgression into "adultery."<sup>34</sup> David, while walking on his rooftop sees a woman, a woman married to another man named Uriah. She is "bathing on her roof" and David decides that he must have her.<sup>35</sup> David, as the king, sends messengers to bring her and he has sex with her.<sup>36</sup> The sex results in Bathsheba becoming pregnant and David sends her back to her house to deceive Uriah into believing that the pregnancy was his doing. The baby eventually dies, as does Uriah, and Nathan the prophet denounces David.<sup>37</sup> Dimmesdale and Hester mirror this bible tale. They both participated in adultery, Dimmesdale does not take responsibility for his actions, and just like David, Dimmesdale is engaged in "a life and death struggle with his waning years."<sup>38</sup> This struggle is a man caught between nature and culture. In David's case, he is the king and spiritual advisor of his people who defies his culture's laws by sleeping with another man's wife and is tormented for the rest of his life attempting to find a place between the natural and cultural worlds. Dimmesdale is also a spiritual leader who gives into natural desires and sleeps with another man's wife, but his torture is suppressing the recognition of his natural desire until just before his death.

Roger Chillingworth's apartment and relationship to place is much different. His "study and laboratory" have a "distilling apparatus and the means of compounding drugs and chemicals."<sup>39</sup> Chillingworth's room is setup like an "alchemists" and the narrator remarks that Chillingworth arranges his room in a way that would not be tolerable to "a modern man of science."<sup>40</sup> This combination shows Chillingworth as a representation of magical evil. John C. Stubbs in his article on the novel supports this idea by observing that because of Chillingworth's laboratory, he emerges as "in moral terms, an evil sorcerer."<sup>41</sup> Two different and unsuccessful cultural aspects are right across from each other: Puritan religious moral law, which has failed Dimmesdale and Hester, and alchemy, a failed attempt at science, and both arguably, failed attempts at explaining humanity. It is not surprising that these two "learned persons" pass often "from one apartment to another" because they are both failing at their respective explanations of their moral choices.<sup>42</sup>

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34. H. Hirsch Cohen, "David and Bathsheba," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 33/2 (April 1965), 145.

35. H. Hirsch Cohen, "David and Bathsheba," p.147.

36. H. Hirsch Cohen, "David and Bathsheba," p.147.

37. H. Hirsch Cohen, "David and Bathsheba," p.148.

38. H. Hirsch Cohen, "David and Bathsheba," p.145.

39. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.124.

40. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.125.

41. John C. Stubbs, "'The Scarlet Letter': The Theory of Romance," *PMLA*, 83/5 (October 1968), p.1442.

42. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.125.

Passing from one apartment to another allows them to see both the natural and cultural and attempt to reach some moral peace.

The final use of culture vs. nature in the town happens in the market place during the procession. When Hester finds out that Dimmesdale has not come for their exit overseas, she follows the sound of the procession in the market place for Dimmesdale's "Election Sermon."<sup>43</sup> Hester and Pearl take their "position close beside the scaffold of the pillory" while the crowd moves into the church.<sup>44</sup> Hester's reveals that her connection to the spot is that of an "orb" of her "life."<sup>45</sup> When Dimmesdale finishes his sermon, the crowd is moving through the square to the "festival" when Dimmesdale stops at the scaffold and stretches "forth his arms" to Hester and Pearl.<sup>46</sup> As he does this he is chastised by Minister Wilson, but he disregards him and Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Hester "approach the scaffold and ascend the steps."<sup>47</sup> Here, place has come full circle. Dimmesdale has recognized his child and his natural desire by standing on the place that represented Hester's punishment by cultural law. At this point, and for the first time in the book, culture and nature are truly one. Dimmesdale, symbol of culture, embraces Hester, symbol of natural desire, while they embrace Pearl the symbiosis of them both.

#### THE GOVERNOR'S MANSION

In chapter seven, Hester and Pearl go to the governor's hall, a symbol of the ineffectiveness of culture through place. Hawthorne takes a great amount of time and space in the novel to describe the governor's mansion. On the outside, it is a "large wooden house" which is "built in the fashion" of "elder towns" which now, the narrator states, "are specimens moss-grown, crumbling to decay, and melancholy at heart."<sup>48</sup> Hawthorne, long associated with his connection to moss, beginning with the publication *Mosses from an Old Manse*, uses moss as a tool to show the vibrancy and resiliency of nature. The fact that those buildings are "moss-grown" illustrates that nature has ultimately dominated culture.<sup>49</sup> The governor still clings to his cultural knowledge of place by

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43. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, pp.220-224.

44. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.227.

45. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.228.

46. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, pp.234-235.

47. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.236.

48. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.103.

49. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.103.

building his home in the fashions of England. The narrator, who is telling the story from present tense about the past, notes that those structures are now considered old, destroyed, and sad buildings. Hester travels to the governor's mansion to deliver a "pair of gloves" that are "fringed and embroidered" and meant to be worn on a "great occasion of state."<sup>50</sup> Hester, the very personification of nature and sin ironically creates these fantastic gloves for a cultural event and brings them to the most powerful place in the culture.

When the narrator comes back to the past present, he notes that the mansion possesses a cheerful aspect brought forth because of its "sunny windows" where, "when the sunshine fell aslant-wise over the front of the edifice, it glittered and sparkled" like "diamonds" and presented a structure akin to "Aladdin's palace, rather than the mansion of a grave old Puritan ruler."<sup>51</sup> The important part of this place is the sunshine, which illuminates this rather dull structure and makes it the spectacle that the narrator describes. It is nature that makes this man-made structure great, not culture.

The "cabalistic figures and diagrams" suggest that the mansion emanates a historical view of culture and religion.<sup>52</sup> A cabala is defined by Hebrew scholar David Godwin as "a form of Jewish mysticism" that is "considered important philosophically and theologically" (Godwin xii-xiii).<sup>53</sup> This reference implies that the culture of this New England town represents culture in a more general and historical sense because of its ties to Judaism, the originators of Bible study and an important link to Puritan Christianity in the New World.

The door of the mansion is also a representation of culture's interpretation of law. The most obvious example is the "iron hammer" that hangs "at the portal."<sup>54</sup> The hammer traditionally signifies culture's laws and progress, while the portal is culture's means of movement.

The interior of the mansion is a microcosm of the nature vs. culture dynamic. The hall, which is "reasonably lofty" and extends "through the whole depth of the house... forming a medium of general communication... with all the other apartments" can be read as the town's Puritan culture and law, being able to reach out and command any of the "apartments" or houses within the town's and governor's reach.<sup>55</sup> The hall is full of

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50. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.101.

51. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.104.

52. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.104.

53. David Godwin, *Godwin's Cabalistic Encyclopedia A Complete Guide To Cabalistic Magick* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications 1994), pp.xii-xiii.

54. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.104.

55. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.105.

“portraits representing” the governor’s forefathers. The forefathers have “armor on their breasts” and “stately ruffs and robes.”<sup>56</sup> The armor is culture’s failure in producing war and the stately robes are its need to impose moral law. “All” of the portraits are “characterized by sternness and severity” and are “gazing with harsh and intolerant criticism at the pursuits and enjoyments of living men.”<sup>57</sup> Culture is criticizing the enjoyment of humanity, the nature of humanity.

The positioning of the room with two completely different places shows nature and culture as opposing forces. On one end of the hall is the spacious room which is “lighted by windows,” the representation of light and nature, while the other end is “muffled” by vaulted windows that block out the light.<sup>58</sup> The side of the room that blocks the light or the culture side of the room has a single “deep and cushioned seat” where a very heavy and large book is sitting, one which the narrator postulates is “the Chronicles of England” or some other “substantial literature.”<sup>59</sup> The chair, probably never sat on, in natural terms is impractical, along with the heavy useless book that is also never read, as noted by the narrator, who states that even the “casual guest” may only glance at it briefly.<sup>60</sup> These two items are manifestations of culture and its irrelevance in the face of daily living and/or in making moral choices.

The furniture is comprised of “Elizabethan” family “heirlooms” and on the table as a singular object of “the sentiment of old English hospitality” is a “large pewter tankard.”<sup>61</sup> The furniture is a representation of culture’s social hierarchy by mentioning one of England’s longest reigning queens and the pewter tankard represents the fallibility of culture, with its’ “frothy remnant of a recent draught of ale.”<sup>62</sup> Here, Hawthorne is telling us that the Puritan culture is making the same mistakes that they ran away from in England, and is cautioning us to be aware of culture’s deficiencies as we seek to find a moral medium.

Another important place in the governor’s mansion is the garden. While Hester is waiting for the governor, she takes Pearl to the window to see if they can see “flowers there” that are more beautiful ones than” the ones they “find in the woods.”<sup>63</sup> What

56. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.106.

57. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.106.

58. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.105.

59. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.105.

60. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.105.

61. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.105.

62. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.105.

63. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.107.

Hester and Pearl find is “a hopeless effort to perpetuate” the “English taste for ornamental gardening.”<sup>64</sup> Culture’s attempt to tame nature in its own ideal has failed, but nature, not to be ignored, has an answer for culture: a pumpkin. The “pumpkin vine,” which was “rooted at some distance” grew all the way across the yard and “deposited one of its giant products directly beneath the hall window.”<sup>65</sup> This pumpkin grows defiantly in front of the hall and is a testament to the obstinacy and merit of nature in the face of culture. Pumpkins not only symbolize nature, they also symbolize Native American’s cultural influence, North America, and are appropriate literary signs, because they “demonstrate” characteristics of nature like “fast growth, extreme size,” and “morphology.”<sup>66</sup> Pumpkins are also characterized by archeologists as “coarse and strongly flavored fruits,” that have lasted in the Americas for thousands of years and through and alongside multiple cultures, even helping them create basic tools and means of sustenance, a testament to nature and its longevity and importance to human existence.<sup>67</sup>

The garden also harbors “a few rosebushes” and “a number of apple trees.”<sup>68</sup> The rosebushes are a continuation of the aforementioned natural moral symbol, mentioned in “The Prison Door” chapter and the apple trees represent ties to Hawthorne’s mention of the Garden of Eden and the fall of man. The placement of the apple trees could also imply the development “of an allegory... of the knowledge of good and evil in mankind” or an invitation for the reader to decipher what is evil and good about the garden and the mansion.<sup>69</sup> The apple “expresses itself in choice, direction,” and “activity” which are all tenets of Hester’s moral life and in general the “power of moral choice.”<sup>70</sup>

Another important use of place is the juxtaposition of culture and nature in Mr. Wilson or the elder minister’s interaction with Pearl in the mansion. When the elder minister first enters the mansion, Hester falls “under the shadow of the curtain” and is “concealed.”<sup>71</sup> This use of place shows Hester’s powerlessness in the face of culture. Then, Pearl is brought to Mr. Wilson’s attention, and he directly refers to Pearl as a “bird

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64. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.107.

65. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.107.

66. Gregory M. Shreve, “Nature and Language: A Semiotic Study of Cucurbits in Literature,” *American Anthropologist* (March 1983), p.200.

67. Hugh C. Cutler, and Thomas W. Whitaker, “History and Distribution of the Cultivated Cucurbits In The Americas,” *American Antiquity*, 26/4 (1961), p.469.

68. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.107.

69. W. A. Murray, “What Was the Soul of the Apple?,” *Review of English Studies*, 10/38 (May, 1959), p.146.

70. W. A. Murray, “What Was the Soul of the Apple?,” pp.148-149.

71. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.109.

of scarlet plumage.”<sup>72</sup> In literature, “a bird is a fairly obvious and appropriate symbol for the disembodied soul,” because, as James L. Allen, Jr. points out, this bird/soul connection is listed in Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* in “twenty-eight different references” including “works on Ireland, Iceland, the Slavic countries, Finland, Siberia, Egypt, Israel, Japan, India, and Africa.”<sup>73</sup> This shows that the symbol of the bird as a disembodied soul is a widespread and known symbol. Because of Mr. Wilson’s comparison of Pearl and the bird, she can be read as a symbol of the soul without body, or the nature of the soul.

Mr. Wilson continues his appraisal of Pearl by noting that he has only seen “such figures when the sun” was “shining through a richly painted window and tracing out” images across the floor.<sup>74</sup> Here, place is used to describe Pearl’s enrichment or the light’s enrichment of culture by having the minister compare her to a shape made from the sun that penetrates the human-made windows and floors.

It is at this point in the narrative that Mr. Wilson compares Pearl to an elf or fairy that was “thought to have” been left behind with the “Papisty, in merry Old England.”<sup>75</sup> The “Papisty” or Roman Catholic Church is associated with Old England, as are mythical and mythological nature manifestations like elves and fairies. These comparisons of Pearl to England show that Mr. Wilson, the very embodiment of New World culture and tradition in the novel, believes the oppressive qualities of the church to align themselves with the mysterious qualities of nature. Elves, according to J. S. Ryan, in “the medieval world” traditionally represent a vehicle for man to “be more...themselves,” as an elf is an “imagined being” that “has his inside on the outside.”<sup>76</sup> No character represents the inside on the outside more than Pearl, the embodiment of Hester and Dimmesdale’s natural desire. Ryan also remarks that an elf’s soul “is a visible one” and Pearl is the most outwardly visible character in the novel.<sup>77</sup> Pearl is showing Mr. Wilson and the town that her nature refuses to stay silent and that morality is something that is not solely based on culture.

The minister’s comparison of Pearl to England as a fairy is another representation of how nature has upended the New World’s morality laws. K. Briggs article on English fairies in *Folklore* states that defining English fairies is difficult because “fairy beliefs are

72. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.109.

73. James L. Allen, “Yeats’s Bird-Soul Symbolism,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 6/3 (October, 1960), p.118.

74. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.109.

75. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.109.

76. J. S. Ryan, “German Mythology Applied: The Extension of the Literary Folk Memory,” *Folklore*, 77/1 (Spring 1966) p.47.

77. J. S. Ryan, “German Mythology Applied: The Extension of the Literary Folk Memory,” p.47.

extraordinarily complex.”<sup>78</sup> This complexity comes from a long-standing tradition of fairies in England. Briggs notes that fairies are said to have lived “under water or on an invisible island.”<sup>79</sup> Relegating Pearl to the status of another mythological character is an opportunity for the minister to deposit the defects of culture into an epithet of wildness and fallibility associated with the Roman Catholic Church in England. The minister compares Pearl to England as a means to explain her nature, so that he does not have to admit that her nature was cultivated from a mixture of the Puritan culture and living in the wilderness in exile because of culture.

“Good Master Wilson” seats himself “in an armchair” and attempts to “draw Pearl betwixt his knees.”<sup>80</sup> Pearl escapes “through the open window” and stands on “the upper step, looking like a wild tropical bird of rich plumage ready to take flight.”<sup>81</sup> The bird image is invoked again and the minister, representing culture’s moral laws, fails to reach out to Pearl, a clear symbol of nature and freedom. Pearl represents nature’s soul, free and above the cultural laws of the minister. His myopic views do not allow him to touch Pearl in any way which show that his status as culture’s leader inhibits his growth in the natural realm.

The narrator continues this comparison, when the minister asks Pearl “who made thee?” and Pearl answers that “she had not been made at all, but rather had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door.”<sup>82</sup> This implies that Pearl is a direct product of nature and that she grew despite culture’s best efforts to conceal her mother’s act. The narrator also believes Pearl says this because she is near to “the Governor’s red roses.”<sup>83</sup> This links Pearl to the rosebush outside the prison, and to its resiliency, growing outside of culture’s black shadow. This shows how place moves along the story and how important it is as a source for characters to draw inspiration and interpret morality.

When Hester and Pearl leave the mansion their encounter shows nature’s stigma in culture as place of witchcraft and fear. As they “departed from the house” and “descended the steps” the “lattice chamber window was thrown open, and forth into the sunny day was thrust the face of Mistress Hibbins.”<sup>84</sup> Mistress Hibbins is the governor’s “bitter-

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78. K. M. Briggs, “The English Fairie,” *Folklore*, 68/1 (March, 1957), p.270.

79. K. M. Briggs, “The English Fairie,” p.273.

80. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.111.

81. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.111.

82. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.111.

83. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.112.

84. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.116.

tempered sister” that the narrator mentions is “executed as a witch” a few years after this encounter.<sup>85</sup> Hibbins invites Hester to “the forest” to communicate with “the Black Man” or presumably the devil.<sup>86</sup> Here, Hawthorne shows the Puritan witch, an important figure in Puritan culture, meant to have congregated in the forest. In Brian Levack’s book on New England Puritan culture and witchcraft, he remarks that the forest becomes a place for Puritan New Englanders to “define and maintain social boundaries.”<sup>87</sup> Levack rightly contends that this desire stems from “their overriding attention to constructing and preserving social hierarchy.”<sup>88</sup> The forest and the witch were places with which the early American Puritans could relegate natural desire and phenomenon and preserve this hierarchy.

#### THE FOREST

In Chapter sixteen, entitled “A Forest Walk,” the text defines the natural setting of the forest as a place of moral truth. The “road” to the forest is a “footpath” which is narrow, “dense on either side,” and only allows for “imperfect” glimpses of the sky (175). It reminds Hester of “the moral wilderness in which she had long been wandering.”<sup>89</sup> This footpath, a creation of man that occludes the sky, but is still close to nature as a footpath to the woods, illustrates Hester’s struggle between her natural desires and cultural mores.

After entering “sufficiently deep into the wood” Pearl and Hester sit down on a “luxuriant heap of moss” as mentioned before, this is a symbol of nature’s dominance over culture and seems to be at the heart of the forest or at the heart of nature.<sup>90</sup> In this fertile “dell” where Hester and Pearl sit, there is a “brook” with a “leaf strewn bank” that represents Hester’s natural desire and her movement through culture and nature.<sup>91</sup> The bank is the depository for the brook or Pearl and the leaves represent Hester’s current state of disarray, caught between the mainland or culture and the trees or nature.

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85. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.116.

86. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.116.

87. Brian Levack, *Gender and Witchcraft (New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology, Volume 4)* p.291.

88. Brian Levack, *Gender and Witchcraft*, p.291.

89. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.175.

90. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.177.

91. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.178.

The narrator states that if the eyes were to follow the stream, they would find the “reflected light from its water at some short distance,” but that if they kept following the stream, they would see that it loses all “traces” of light “amid the bewilderment of tree-trunks and underbrush” and a “huge rock covered with gray lichens.”<sup>92</sup> The reflected light represents the truth, which can only be seen in the forest, but the farther it gets away from Hester and toward the town, the more the forest hides the truth. The narrator remarks that these “trees and boulders” feared that the brook would tell “tales out of the old forest” with its “voice” or “mirror its revelations on the smooth surface of a pool.”<sup>93</sup> By having the forest acquire human attributes, Hawthorne is using its place to tell Hester’s story. The light or the truth is protected by the forest represented by Hester and more particularly Dimmesdale’s fear. The voice of the river can be seen as a vehicle for the truth, or more directly as Pearl, a signal for the truth and the physical token of Hester and Dimmesdale’s natural desire. Pearl asks the brook “not to be sighing and murmuring” and not to be in low spirits, but the brook “had gone through so solemn an experience that it could not help talking about it and seemed to have nothing else to say.”<sup>94</sup> This solidifies Pearl as “the agent who effects “Dimmesdale’s public confession of paternity.”<sup>95</sup> Annie Marie McNamara in her article on Pearl’s function in *The Scarlet Letter* defines this forest scene as “crucial” in defining Pearl as “more than a link,” but rather “a functional element in structural design.”<sup>96</sup> Further evidence is later in the forest scene when Pearl is asked by her mother to “keep where” she can “hear the babble of the brook.”<sup>97</sup> Pearl “singing” follows “the current of the brook” attempting to sooth its “melancholy voice.”<sup>98</sup> Pearl’s attempts are in vain and the stream is “not comforted, and still” keeps “telling its unintelligible secret of some very mournful mystery that had happened-or making a prophetic lamentation about something that was yet to happen –within the verge of the dismal forest.”<sup>99</sup> The allusions refer to the moment when Pearl is recognized by the minister in chapter nineteen, as the only child that has ever been “kind” to him,

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92. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.178.

93. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.178.

94. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.178.

95. Anne Marie McNamara, “The Character of Flame: The Function of Pearl in The Scarlet Letter,” *American Literature*, 27/4 (January, 1956), p 537.

96. Anne Marie McNamara, “The Character of Flame: The Function of Pearl in The Scarlet Letter,” p 537.

97. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.179.

98. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.179.

99. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.179.

100. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.196.

assuming there that she is in fact his child.<sup>100</sup> The forest reflects this image when Dimmesdale is “gazing” at Pearl from the “mossy tree trunk” he sees that where she pauses to cross the brook a small “pool” forms that reflects “a perfect image of her” that includes “the adornment of flowers and wreathed foliage” and also the Pearl’s “refined” and “spiritualized” nature.<sup>101</sup> Through the pool, Pearl is the combination of natural and cultural elements. She is a perfect example of humanity, both bound by natural and cultural influence.

### THE SEASCAPE

Hester makes her home “within the verge of the peninsula” in a “small thatched cottage.”<sup>102</sup> The cottage is surrounded by a copse of “scrubby trees” and faces west “looking across the basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills.”<sup>103</sup> This is a near perfect definition of pastoral and further evidence of Hester Prynne as a mix of nature and culture. Pastoral is important here because as Paul Alpers put it in his article on defining pastoral and its practical uses in criticism, pastoral and its “central fictions and conventions” are essentially purposed to explicate “certain views of and recognitions about human life, its nature, power and pleasure.”<sup>104</sup>

The sixth chapter on Pearl furthers the nature vs. culture theme by presenting Pearl as a natural being born in nature, in fact a being worthy of Puritan cultural praise, but also born into the cultural constructs of her mother and the outlying town. The narrator describes Pearl as “worthy” enough to “have been brought forth into Eden” and to thrive there long “after the world’s first parents were driven out.”<sup>105</sup> This clever passage by Hawthorne uses the Puritan culture’s first and most holy place, the Garden of Eden, to deconstruct the Puritanical moral hierarchy. If Pearl was conceived by an act of sin, how is it that she can be so sinless that she stays in “the mythological dreamtime zone of the Garden of Paradise” after even God’s first children are sent out?<sup>106</sup> Joseph Campbell contends that Adam and Eve were thrown out of this “Garden of Timeless Unity” for the simple reason of “recognizing duality,” something that the Puritans in the novel not only

101. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.197.

102. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, pp.84-85.

103. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.178.

104. Paul Alpers, “What is Pastoral?” *Critical Inquiry*, 8/3 (Spring 1982), p. 460.

105. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.92.

106. Joseph Campbell, *Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), p.106.

do, but by forcing judgment on Hester, presuppose and assume the action of God. So they are both the serpent, by acknowledging the knowledge of the act, and God by passing judgment on the act. By placing Pearl in the Garden of Eden as a resident that outstays Adam and Eve, she is surpassing the cultural law.

Natural and manmade place collide when although according to the narrator, Pearl is a being of “nature” and the “wild,” she is dressed by her mother not in “rustic weeds” but in “the richest tissues that could be procured.”<sup>107</sup> This creates a spectacle when an “absolute circle of radiance” lights up “the darksome cottage floor.”<sup>108</sup> Pearl, the natural being, lights up the only manmade object still left from Hester’s departure into the woods. This assumes that nature’s laws are more powerful than that of any manmade structure. However, her adornment causes culture and nature to perfectly align. The narrator accomplishes this by stating that Pearl was not only one child, but “many children, comprehending the full scope between the wild-flower of a peasant baby, and the pomp, in little, of an infant princess.”<sup>109</sup> While nature seems to still be the stronger of the two elements, being compared to the spontaneous beauty of a wild flower, culture’s laws and power are still present in the created beauty of a princess.

In chapter nine, Arthur Dimmesdale’s walks show nature as a recognizable truth, where Dimmesdale can begin his internal deconstruction of culture’s morality. While gathering “plants with healing balm” for “the minister’s health” Arthur and Roger Chillingworth “took long walks on the seashore or in the forest.”<sup>110</sup> When Dimmesdale is on these walks, the narrator states that “it was as if a window were thrown open, admitting a freer atmosphere” than the “musty fragrance, be it sensual or moral” that emanated from Dimmesdale’s study.<sup>111</sup> By designating nature as a place of freedom from the moral atmosphere of Dimmesdale’s ministerial study, Hawthorne invites us to read nature as a place of moral truth that supersedes culture’s truth. Dimmesdale is able to see and feel the freedom of truth while outside, but when he is faced with the morality that his position demands, he is miserable.

There is ultimately no reading of place that does not include culture and nature, or a reading of culture and nature that does not include place, nor can there be and *The Scarlet Letter* is no exception. Hawthorne has given us a text that through place explores

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107. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.92.

108. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.92.

109. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.92.

110. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.121.

111. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p.122.

many of the facets of morality in nature and culture and how they clash and finally come together. I agree with Sacvan Bercovitch who believes that, in the end, Hawthorne's "fusion of process" results in the "reconciliation... of nature and culture, sacred and profane, light and shadow."<sup>112</sup> One gets the sense that Hawthorne's vision of the New World was one of hope. It is evident that he believed that early Americans could shed the bureaucracy and caustic social hierarchies of Europe and eventually realize that to have strong ethics and be truly human you need to embrace both your natural and cultural influences.

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112. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of The Scarlet Letter* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), p.xiii.

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