Pearl is a Fairy

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Pearl stands the test of time as one of the most difficult children in the history of literature, gifted with a paranormal intelligence and a mercurial personality; she has long been interpreted as a living representation of the scarlet letter and the symbol of sin. As Eigner suggests, many seek another, deeper interpretation of Pearl and her function in the novel (323). Throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl is called an evil fairy, wicked, wild, capricious and strange. In an era when belief in the supernatural was widespread, Hawthorne’s otherworldly description of Pearl, suggests she may be interpreted as a demon, as real to the Puritans as the black man.

Although the common perception of a fairy today is no more frightening than a toddler in a tutu with glitter on her wings, in Hawthorne’s day a fairy was a sinister, malevolent creature. The Puritan believed in imps, demons, fairies, familiars and witches, all cavorting with the dark man in the forest, all supernatural beings, except for the witches, who were human.

Hawthorne tells us in *The Threefold Destiny*, “I have sometimes produced a singular and not unpleasing effect, so far as my own mind was concerned, by imagining a train of incidents in which the spirit and mechanism of the fairyland should be combined with the characters and manners of familiar life” (*Twice Told Tales* 257). Hawthorne’s imaginative “spirit and mechanism of fairyland” is a theme in *The Scarlett Letter* and echoes the supernatural beliefs of the Puritans he wrote about.

The Puritans came late to the witch persecutions and there was already ample “evidence” by that time that witches, imps, familiars, and demons existed. There were more than a hundred years
history of witch persecutions at that point, and much had been written of the trials in which women and men, often under torture, confessed their relationships with supernatural beings at length (Wilby 283). Many of these were poor, uneducated women and were likely the only members of their class to ever have their words written down, it was so rare for people to read and write. Therefore some of the best evidence of the prevalence of the belief in fairies among common people comes from these witch confessions dating back to the 16th century. Wilby writes that the words fairy, familiar and devil were interchangeable in meaning, The text refers to them as “farey men” or “Browneys.” Wilby suggests that when those accused of witchcraft mentioned fairies, it was not produced by the efforts of their torturers, as they were looking for something else entirely. Thus, this evidence tends to lend even more credence to the idea that the common people believed fairies to be real, as the accused witches volunteered this information (Wilby 283).

It had long been held that fairies, at their best, were cold-blooded and capricious, incapable of such human feelings as compassion (Silver 150). If this describes a fairy, then Hawthorne’s Pearl is one of them. From the first scaffold scene, when the infant, “pierced the air with its wailings and screams” while her mother failed to soothe or sympathize,” she is portrayed as an inhuman creature. (Hawthorne 79)

Folk stories commonly report the existence of “supernatural changelings, substituted for human children and the actual, but unspoken belief that incestuous or "unnatural" unions could produce such monsters” (Silver 6). Pearl, the product of a secret tryst, falls into this category, and she matches Silver’s description of a changeling with eerie accuracy. Fairy changelings are odd creatures, distinguished by a lack of heart, or soul, and a strange, malicious, or ungovernable spirit (Silver 60). Hawthorne writes that Pearl “lacked reference and adaptation to the
world…could not be made amenable to rules…” There was clearly something wrong with Pearl and everyone who met her saw it, from the witch, Mrs. Hibbins, who says her father is the “Prince of the Air (296), to the Indian, who “grew conscious of a nature wilder than his own” (Hawthorne 298). Even the woodland creatures had no fear of her, despite her strangeness. The “mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recongized a kindred wildness” in Pearl (Hawthorne 185).

Hawthorne’s setting is eerie, their “little lonesome dwelling” near the edge of the town, far away from the others, where “a mystic shadow of suspicion immediately attached itself to the spot” (95). Pearl is “a being whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder; or with an order peculiar to themselves, amidst which the point of variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be discovered” (Hawthorne 106)

Both witches and fairies could suggest evil disguised as good; both had the same taboos and rituals used for protection against them; both were accused of the same unnatural crimes… both favored the color red and were identified as wearing scarlet capes; both were thought of as riding …through the air… Both also loved to dance, and the orgiastic ring dancing at the witches' Sabbath and the fairies' circle dances were seen as related (Silver 175). Indeed, Pearl is the only one we see dancing in the mystical forest where she adorns herself in natural splendor, anemones, columbine and violets. She uses rags and sticks for her witch-dolls, and her reflection in the pool when her parents are across the brook is as strong an image as that of any modern day supernatural horror story.

Some of the best evidence that we may examine to suggest an interpretation of Pearl as an evil fairy or changeling comes from her mother, who from Pearl’s infancy, sees something wrong
with the child and is often afraid of her. “She looked fearfully into the child's expanding nature, ever dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity” (Hawthorne 105)

In Pearl’s eyes, Hester sees an elvish cast” and in place of her own reflection in them she sees a face, “fiend-like, full of smiling malice… as if an evil spirit possessed the child, and had just then peeped forth in mockery.” Haunted by this image, the lonely Hester lives in fear that her child is evil, but there are benefits to kinship with fairies, and there are many legends that tell of people who made bargains with supernatural creatures. In many of these ancient stories the price paid by the human is great, sometimes their life. Many enter into the contract unwittingly, accepting help from their “familiar” unaware of the price. Implicitly, or explicitly, a fairy will promise “freedom from want” or an easy life, which generally means “enough to get by,” which is exactly what Hester had, her skillful sewing keeping her and Pearl in comfort. (Silver)

“Lonely as was Hester's situation, and without a friend on earth who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred no risk of want” (Hawthorne 94) In fact, little Pearl was clothed in elegant finery done up in a rich red cloak like royalty. But the payment always comes due with a fairy bargain and one could speculate that the price Hester paid for her comfort was paid for by Dimmesdale. All of Pearl’s interactions take on a new meaning when she is given the lens of an evil fairy making bargains with ignorant humans.

Dimmesdale is afraid of Pearl. Even as he appeals to the magistrate for Hester to keep the child, he calls her peculiar, saying “God gave her the child, and gave her, too, an instinctive knowledge of its nature and requirements,—both seemingly so peculiar,—which no other mortal being can possess” (Hawthorne 137). His shame is evident, as he hides in the curtain. Pearl holds his hand, which seems to be an overture on her part, and then he looks around to make sure no one is
watching before he kisses her forehead. She laughs and runs away, the spell broken, the moment lost. If Pearl is a fairy, he seals his doom with that kiss.

On the scaffold in the night, she asks him three times to take her hand in public and he denies her.

“When the scarlet letter blazes across the sky, There was witchcraft in little Pearl's eyes, and her face, as she glanced upward at the minister, wore that naughty smile which made its expression frequently so elvish. She withdrew her hand from Mr. Dimmesdale's, and pointed across the street. But he clasped both his hands over his breast, and cast his eyes towards the zenith. (Hawthorne 187)

Pearl connects with her parents, and the scarlet letter lights up the sky, and then, as if showing Dimmesdale his enemy, she points to Chillingworth, eerily illuminated, watching them, and she whispers words he does not understand in his ear.

If Pearl is cast as a real demon, the scene in the forest is truly haunting. She stands across the brook from them in the distance, lit by sun, then shadowed. She has adorned herself with flowers and the forest, which is her natural element, seems magical and strange. She is distant from her parents and stands with her reflection in the pool, a second child, as if to represent the changeling’s duality, both pointing accusingly and not speaking a word. She will not touch the letter A that has been cast off. She will not acknowledge her mother until she put the scarlet letter back on. “Doth he love us?” said Pearl, looking up, with acute intelligence, into her mother's face. “Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?” She knows the answer to this and makes horrible faces at Dimmesdale, washing off his kiss in the stream (Hawthorne 283).
Dimmesdale is so affected by his encounter with Pearl, he exclaims “What is it that haunts and tempts me thus?” cried the minister to himself, at length, pausing in the street, and striking his hand against his forehead. “Am I mad? or am I given over utterly to the fiend? Did I make a contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood?” If Pearl is a fairy, he sealed it with a kiss, and in his public confession he seals his death with the third and final kiss on the scaffold, breaking the spell, releasing him, Hester and his uncanny daughter from the spell. Hawthorne says, “The spell was broken…” (Hawthorne 313)

The death of Dimmesdale and the fall of Chillingworth set Pearl free, and Hester as well. Hester also gained an ability to think beyond the scope of the society and the age that she lived in, the gift of freedom of thought. Hawthorne tells us about the comfortable life she experienced, traveling to “the Old Country” with Pearl and beginning a new life, then returning back to Salem. Hawthorne hints of a happy family for Pearl, somewhere with an unrecognizable postmark, perhaps Fairy-land.
Works Cited


