Hester Prynne's Little Pearl: Sacred and Profane Love

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In his introduction to "Rappaccini's Daughter," Hawthorne confesses to "an inveterate love of allegory," telling us that "he generally contents himself with a very slight embroidery of outward manners,—the faintest possible counterfeit of real life,—and endeavors to create an interest by some less obvious peculiarity of the subject." He at the same time warns us that his works "can hardly fail to look excessively like nonsense" unless "the reader chance to take them in precisely the proper point of view" (II, 107-108).1 In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne seems to further warn us that we shall with difficulty make sense of the history of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne unless we take Pearl in precisely the proper point of view:

In [Pearl] was visible the tie that united them. She had been offered to the world, these seven years past, 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 magician skilled to read the character of flame! (V, 247-248)

Certainly Hawthorne's reference to Pearl as a hieroglyphic suggests that this character of flame will be somewhat difficult to decipher unless the reader, like Champollion, also becomes possessed of the Rosetta Stone. That the Rosetta Stone has not been found accounts, I should say, for the uncertain answers still given by so many critics to the poignant question Hester addresses to Dimmesdale in his dying moments: "Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe!" (V, 303).2

1 Volume and page references to Hawthorne's works are to The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. George Parsons Lathrop (Riverside ed.; Boston, 1882-1883).
Both Hester and Dimmesdale can, however, be placed irrevocably in heaven once the reader recognizes that Pearl’s sole reality is that of an allegorical mirror which multitudinously reflects the intricate tangle of love and passion uniting Hester and Dimmesdale. Sick as they both are “with the plague of sin” (II, 287), neither Hester nor Dimmesdale can be released from “that saddest of all prisons, his own heart” (I, 67), except by what Hawthorne considers the sole remedy for sin—Love, “the flower that grew in heaven and was sovereign for all the miseries of earth” (II, 287-288). Pearl is sovereign for all Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s miseries because she is just such a flower: she is the “sweet moral blossom” (V, 68) which Hester plucks off “the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison-door” (V, 138), and which Hawthorne presents to the reader in order to “relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (V, 68). In short, it is because the love between Hester and Dimmesdale is the oneness of their being that Hawthorne can prophesy their salvation through his comments on Pearl, the allegorical embodiment of that love: “And Pearl was the oneness of their being. Be the foregone evil what it might, how could they doubt that their earthly lives and future destinies were conjoined, when they beheld at once the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met, and were to dwell immortally together?” (V, 248).

Since Pearl is “the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter

*Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Revised ed.; Cambridge, Mass., 1963), also thinks it possible to doubt that either Hester or Dimmesdale truly repented; and he further asserts that “the redemptive love and knowledge that worked the cure of Roderick Elliston in ‘Egotism’ do not enter the picture here” (p. 154).

*We should agree, then, with Marius Bewley both when he tells us that “Hawthorne explicitly presents Pearl as a symbol of [Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s] love in its full play of complex contradictions”; and when he suggests, though very tentatively, that “the emotional transformation of little Pearl as she kneels by her dying father on the scaffold may be read to symbolize a kind of spiritual resurrection for both her parents” (*The Ecentric Design*, p. 173). Mr. Bewley speaks far more truthfully here than he realizes since he himself does not perceive how accurately Pearl dramatizes the vicissitudes of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s misbegotten love. In other words, he recognizes, along with other critics, that Pearl is an allegorical figure; but the language of allegory—Pearl’s antics and words, and the comments which the other characters and Hawthorne himself make about her—this he leaves for the most part untranslated.

Anne Marie McNamara, “The Character of Flame: The Function of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter,*” *American Literature, XXVII*, 537-553 (Jan., 1956), limits the value of her interpretation by identifying Pearl merely with divine grace (pp. 552-553). Roy R. Male, *Hawthorne’s Tragic Vision* (Austin, Texas, 1957), also wrongly restricts Pearl’s symbolic function when he identifies her merely with truth and grace (p. 95).
endowed with life” (V, 127), she is an obvious heart-symbol—a diamond “that sparkles and flashes with the varied throbings of the breast on which it is displayed” (V, 272). It is Pearl, the gem on her mother’s unquiet bosom, who throughout the tale betrays to the reader, “by the very dance of her spirits, the emotions which none could detect in the marble passiveness of Hester’s brow” (V, 272)—especially the passionate love for the minister which Hester, of fearful necessity, takes such great care to hide. Indeed, the most important question Hawthorne asks in this tale is whether there is “anything in Hester’s face for Love to dwell upon”—anything in her “bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection” (V, 198). That that something is there we are certain, for in all seasons of calamity “Hester’s nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one” (V, 195). Both this badge of shame and Pearl, its living counterpart—allegorical emblems as they are of Hester’s heart—are intended by Hawthorne to travel through the same range of meanings: “Adultery,” “Able,” “Affection,” and “Angel.” Once, therefore, that Pearl and the scarlet letter can legitimately mean holy Affection, they can also mean Angel; for both Hester and Dimmesdale will have become angelic in the sense that a profane love has become sacred and, in so doing, has led them to Heaven.

The history of little Pearl is, however, predominantly the allegorical history of Hester’s love for the minister. Providence, as we know, “had assigned to Hester’s charge the germ and blossom of womanhood, to be cherished and developed amid a host of difficulties” (V, 200). Indeed Hester’s very salvation is made dependent upon her guiding her child to Heaven—a point that is emphasized by Dimmesdale in his defense of Hester’s right to little Pearl:

“This boon was meant, above all things else, to keep the mother’s soul alive, and to preserve her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her! Therefore it is good for this poor, sinful woman that she hath an infant immortality, a being capable of eternal joy or sorrow, confided to her care,—to be trained up by her to righteousness,—to remind her, at every moment of her fall,—but yet to teach her, as it were by the Creator’s sacred pledge, that, if she bring the
child to heaven, the child will also bring its parent thither!” (V, 141-142)

Since Hawthorne intends the relationship between Hester and her misbegotten child to be the allegorical embodiment of Hester’s misbegotten love for Dimmesdale, Hester’s loving her child “with the intensity of a sole affection” (V, 216) aptly mirrors her all-absorbing love for the minister; and consequently the beneficent influence that Pearl has on her mother’s heart properly mirrors the beneficent influence that Hester’s love for Dimmesdale has on her soul. Loyalty to the logic of Hawthorne’s allegory also reveals to the reader that Hester must bring her love for the minister into accord with God’s will if she is to be saved. Moreover, since, according to the literal story, Pearl is intended by God “to connect her parent forever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven” (V, 113), the child serves the most important function of keeping her mother within the magnetic chain of humanity; and, of course, on the allegorical level this very same function is served by Hester’s attachment to Dimmesdale. At this point, however, we must not forget that Pearl is also Dimmesdale’s child. As his child, she can—and occasionally does—mirror his love for Hester. Indeed, Hawthorne intends any return of affection that Pearl shows either Dimmesdale or Hester to be emblematic of love beneficently at work within their hearts.

Of course, the love that exists between Hester and Dimmesdale cannot lead them to Heaven until they and their love escape the cowardice that is the deepest cause of their impenitence—that cowardice which induces Dimmesdale to lead a life of hypocrisy; and which also persuades Hester to consent, out of concern for the minister’s life and reputation, to that life of destructive secrecy. In other words, The Scarlet Letter essentially presents a battle of the virtues and the vices within the hearts of Hester and Dimmesdale: it is a war that Love and Truth under the guise of little Pearl wage with Cowardice and Falsehood under the guise of old Roger Chillingworth. Indeed the illegitimate child and the vengeful husband, inasmuch as they are the not unnatural consequences of adultery, are ideally situated to assume unobtrusively their roles as the allegorical reflectors of the inner lives of Hester and Dimmesdale.

Because love in some way or other dominates Hester’s heart
throughout the story, the allegory demands that little Pearl be almost always at her side. In truth, Pearl’s birth, her troubled childhood, her deep grief at Dimmesdale’s death, her attainment of womanhood, her marriage, and her subsequent motherhood—all mark allegorically the different stages of Hester’s love for Dimmesdale. Since love, “whether newly born, or aroused from a death-like slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world” (V, 243), it is not at all surprising that Hawthorne chooses the birth of Pearl, the child who has “an absolute circle of radiance around her” (V, 114) and is “all glorified with a ray of sunshine” (V, 249), to allegorize the birth of love within Hester’s heart. It is to this birth that Hawthorne refers when he tells us that “it was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first, had converted the forestland, still so uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne’s wild and dreary, but life-long home” (V, 103); for it is Hester’s passionate love that keeps her “within the pathway that had been so fatal”: “There dwell, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution” (V, 103). Under the guise of little Pearl, therefore, a lawless and passionate love has been born into the world—a love that is able to face hardships and suffering, but that has no home and apparently no way to build one. Indeed the only marriage and home that the moral pattern of The Scarlet Letter can allow our erring lovers is the Eternal Home of Heaven and the spiritual union that this implies for all who enter there.

As Hester’s love for the minister develops both in courage and in truth, so there can be seen emerging in the little chaos of Pearl’s character “the steadfast principles of an unflinching courage,—an uncontrollable will,—a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect,—and a bitter scorn of many things, which, when examined, might be found to have the taint of falsehood in them” (V, 216). But until Hester’s love for the minister has been disciplined to recognize and obey the will of God—until “the taint of deepest sin” is removed from “the most sacred quality of human life” (V, 77)—Pearl’s affections must remain “acrid and disagreeable, as are the richest flavors of unripe fruit” (V, 216). It is only
after Hester's repentance that little Pearl's love for her mother, which up to then had "mostly revealed itself in passion, and hardly twice in her lifetime . . . been softened by" tenderness (V, 143), becomes "a continual remembrance" (V, 310) flowing from a fond heart. It is then that the alert reader of Hawthorne's allegory knows that Hester's love for the minister has been redeemed. In other words, Pearl, "an imp of evil, emblem and product of sin, . . . [has] no right among christened infants" (V, 118) until Hester's and Dimmesdale's love for one another—the love that Pearl symbolizes—is christened. It is when Pearl grows to noble womanhood, marries, and bears a child that we learn through allegory that Hester's love for Dimmesdale has borne the fruit of salvation. Then it is that Hester's words to Dimmesdale in the forest—"But the child hath strong affections! She loves me, and will love thee!" (V, 248)—are fulfilled in their deepest sense; for it can then be truly said that little Pearl—the personification of the love that Hester and Dimmesdale have for one another—has loved each of them so wisely that she has led both of them to heaven.

What we are saying, then, is that Pearl, although her aspect has "nothing of the calm, white, unimpassioned lustre that would be indicated by" her name (V, 113), will actually become for Hester the Pearl of Great Price once the impure love within Hester's heart has been converted into the love of God and man. This is why Hawthorne has the Reverend Mr. Wilson say, "Pearl, . . . thou must take heed to instruction, that so, in due season, thou mayest wear in thy bosom the pearl of great price" (V, 138). We must not assume, however, that this love of Hester's is mere earthly passion; and we must remember that Hawthorne distinguishes sharply between pure and immortal love in which "there is no falsehood or forgetfulness" and "an earthly passion" that is "mingled with little that is spiritual, and must therefore perish with the perishing clay" (XII, 73). Although Hawthorne's description of the conception and birth of little Pearl makes clear that Hester's adulterous relationship found its beginnings in merely guilty and lustful passion, it is also this same description that allegorically marks the sudden and unexpected flowering within Hester's heart of something really resembling true love for Dimmesdale; for Hawthorne refers to Pearl both as "the unpremeditated offshoot of a passionate moment" (V, 127) and as "that little creature, whose innocent life had sprung, by the inscru-
table decree of Providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion” (V, 113). Since Hester’s intense love of her child is the living emblem of her love for the minister, Hawthorne can emphasize once again, through the distinction Dimmesdale draws between Hester’s former sin of lust and her present devotion to her child, the difference between Hester’s once mere unhallowed lust and her present passionate and self-sacrificing love for the minister. Dimmesdale, in his defense of Hester’s right to little Pearl, attempts to persuade the other magistrates that there is “a quality of awful sacredness in the relation between this mother and this child” (V, 141); and in so doing he urges that if they were to judge the relation otherwise, they would have to conclude that “the Heavenly Father, the Creator of all flesh, hath lightly recognized a deed of sin, and made of no account the distinction between unhallowed lust and holy love” (V, 141). Those aspects of Hester’s love that might properly be termed “holy” are spelled out allegorically for the reader by the reasons Hester gives in defense of her continued custody of her child: “‘She is my happiness!—she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for my sin?’” (V, 139). To be sure, Hester’s love for the minister is her only happiness. In fact, it keeps her in life, for without it she would long before this have committed suicide. Moreover, Hester’s love for Dimmesdale is endowed with a million-fold the power of retribution for her sin of unhallowed lust because it is only this love that gives her the courage to stay within the limits of the Puritan settlement and bear the public ignominy which has become her daily lot. Indeed, as Hawthorne suggests later through allegory, one of Providence’s merciful and beneficent purposes in sending Hester this love is ultimately “to help her to overcome the passion, once so wild, and even yet neither dead nor asleep, but only imprisoned within the same tomb-like heart” (V, 217). Since, however, such problems as Hester’s vanish only if the woman’s “heart chance to come uppermost” (V, 201), it is important to recall again

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4 Some light can be thrown on the redemptive role that Pearl is to play as the incarnation of the love that exists between Hester and Dimmesdale if we compare this quotation with what Hawthorne says of the young couple in “The Ambitious Guest”: “Perhaps a germ of love was springing in their hearts, so pure that it might blossom in Paradise, since it could not be matured on earth” (I, 371).
that Hester's love for Dimmesdale—her little Pearl—is the "sole
treasure" that keeps "her heart alive" (V, 139); for it prevents her
complete isolation from mankind and thereby interferes with her
intellect gaining—as it almost succeeds in doing—an absolute ascen-
dancy within her soul (V, 198-200). Beyond question, then, Hes-
ter's love for Dimmesdale, despite its guilty origin and despite the
impurities imbuing it, is the best and most beautiful part of her be-
ing. It can therefore be truly said that this love which is Hester's
better self can no more remain in being without God's concurring
power than Hester herself can. This is a truth that Hester herself
insists on by way of allegory just after little Pearl denies that God
is her Heavenly Father: "Hush, Pearl, hush! Thou must not talk
so! . . . . He sent us all into this world. He sent even me, thy
mother. Then, much more, thee! Or, if not, thou strange and elfish
child, whence didst thou come?" (V, 124). It is in this fashion that
Hawthorne has chosen, here and elsewhere, to dramatize the inter-
play of light and shadow within the love that was born amiss within
Hester's heart.

Since Hester, by falling in love with Dimmesdale, "has evoked
a spirit [Pearl], but, by some irregularity in the process of conjura-
tion, has failed to win the master-word that should control this new
and incomprehensible intelligence" (V, 117-118); and since she
therefore wanders "without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind"
(V, 201), she and the love within her heart will ultimately have to
turn to Dimmesdale for wiser and better guardianship than she her-
self can provide. Indeed, one of the arguments given by the leading
inhabitants of Boston for depriving Hester of her child underlines
allegorically the need Hester's misbegotten love has for just such
spiritual direction; for these good people felt that "if the child . . .
were really capable of moral and religious growth, and possessed
the elements of ultimate salvation, then, surely, it would enjoy all
the fairer prospect of these advantages by being transferred to wiser
and better guardianship than Hester Prynne's" (V, 125). That this
is the kind of control Dimmesdale will exercise over the love he has
begotten in Hester's heart, we cannot doubt; for Hawthorne has
Governor Bellingham say to Mr. Wilson, "Care must be had . . . to
put the child to due and stated examination in the catechism, at thy
hands or Master Dimmesdale's" (V, 142). Hester herself, with un-
conscious irony, indicates Dimmesdale's future role as a catechist to
the unruly love within her heart when, during her forest meeting with the minister, she says of Pearl, "She is a strange child! I hardly comprehend her! But thou wilt love her dearly, as I do, and wilt advise me how to deal with her" (V, 244). In this way, then, does little Pearl, the allegorical child, enable Hawthorne to prophesy that Hester will find salvation for her soul if she allows her love for Dimmesdale to be instructed by the lessons he will teach through his heroic confession on the scaffold.

A good and golden year can therefore "pass over the poor old world" of Hester's heart only when Dimmesdale, having cast off the "old man," begins, as a "new man," to rule over Hester's heart, and thereby fulfils his pastoral responsibility to her soul; all of which Hawthorne predicts allegorically when Hester, on the day of Dimmesdale's return to God, explains to Pearl the reason for the holiday (or holy day) in language that is reminiscent of the parable of the prodigal son: "The children have come from their schools, and the grown people from their workshops and their fields, on purpose to be happy. For, to-day, a new man is beginning to rule over them; and so . . . they make merry and rejoice; as if a good and golden year were at length to pass over the poor old world!" (V, 274). Dimmesdale does truly become for Hester the "mouth-piece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love" (V, 174): obedience to God's will, hatred of sin, and trust in God's mercy are the truths he bequeaths her with his dying breath. His last words are without doubt the prayers of a truly penitent man; and since a good man's prayers, as Chillingworth tells us, are "golden recompense" or "the current gold coin of the New Jerusalem, with the King's own mint-mark on them" (V, 268), it is most probable that these words of the minister's will enrich the heart of the grief-stricken woman who listens so attentively to them. Moreover, since the minister's dying words are indeed his Election Sermon in that he elects as the inmate of his heart the God of truth, love, and courage rather than the demon of cowardice and hypocrisy, we can say that his last words affect Hester just as his Election Sermon af-

* Anne Marie McNamara interprets the Election Sermon in almost the same way: "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" ("The Character of Flame," p. 550).
fects the people of Boston: "It was as if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant,—at once a shadow and a splendor,—and had shed down a shower of golden truths upon them" (V, 295). Indeed, another flight to heaven—that of Governor Winthrop at the time of the midnight scaffold scene—looks forward to the kind of inheritance Dimmesdale is to leave Hester. For when the Reverend Mr. Wilson returns home by lantern light from the death chamber of the Governor, Dimmesdale observes him and imagines that he is "surrounded, like the saint-like personages of olden times, with a radiant halo, that glorified him amid this gloomy night of sin,—as if the departed Governor had left him an inheritance of his glory, or as if he had caught upon himself the distant shine of the celestial city, while looking thitherward to see the triumphal pilgrim pass within its gates" (V, 182-183).

Triumphal pilgrim Dimmesdale certainly becomes, for through his heroic confession the weed of falsehood—the black weed that typifies the hideous secret buried within his heart (V, 160)—is uprooted, to wilt and die beneath the meridian sunshine of truth; all of which Hawthorne tells us allegorically when he informs us that very soon after Dimmesdale's death all Chillingworth's "strength and energy—all his vital and intellectual force—seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively withered up, shrivelled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun" (V, 307). Thus, after the death of old Roger Chillingworth—after, in other words, the death of Dimmesdale's falsehood and cowardice—Roger's last will and testament aptly allegorizes those dying words of the minister that are for Hester "a shower of golden truths"; for old Roger bequeaths "a very considerable amount of property, both here and in England, to little Pearl, the daughter of Hester Prynne" (V, 308). And since to know and do the will of God is to come into one's richest spiritual inheritance, then how appropriate it is that Pearl, the living mirror of her mother's inner life, should become "the richest heiress of her day, in the New World" (V, 308). In having Chillingworth thus bequeath his wealth to Pearl—in having Dimmesdale, in other words, teach Hester practically a Golden Rule—Hawthorne is merely reworking an idea that appears in one of his notebooks: "An old man to promise a youth a treasure of gold;—and to keep his
promise by teaching him practically a Golden Rule.” Furthermore, "in the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love" (V, 308); for the detestation that the minister feels for his cowardly and hypocritical self in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth disappears of necessity when he kisses little Pearl and allows holy and golden love to reign in his heart.

It is also at the moment of this kiss that Hester’s love for Dimmesdale—her little Pearl—experiences the grief it so much needs: “a grief that should deeply touch her, and thus humanize and make her capable of sympathy” (V, 221). In other words, it is at this moment that Hester, from whom “some attribute had departed . . ., the permanence of which had been necessary to keep her a woman” (V, 198), receives that magic touch to which Hawthorne refers when he says of her: “She who has once been a woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration” (V, 198). And although formerly there had seemed “to be no longer anything in Hester’s face for Love to dwell upon; . . . nothing in Hester’s bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection” (V, 198), that very bosom now becomes “the pillow of Affection”; for after Dimmesdale collapsed on the scaffold, “Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom” (V, 303). Thus, through the instrumentality of Dimmesdale’s heroic confession and his ensuing death, is broken the “bewildering and baffling spell, that so often came between [Hester] and her sole treasure” (V, 117)—that is, between Hester and her love for the minister: “Towards her mother . . . Pearl’s errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled” (V, 303). Like one of her literary ancestors, the diamond with the evil spirit in “The Antique Ring,” Pearl is purified only “by becoming the medium of some good and holy act, and again the pledge of faithful love” (XII, 55). In truth, Hester, as a consequence of the

*The American Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. Randall Stewart (New Haven, 1932), p. 102. My interpretation of Chillingworth’s last will and testament is not altogether original. It is partly anticipated by Roy R. Male, Hawthorne’s Tragic Vision, p. 97; and Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York, 1960), pp. 512-513. Both Male and Fiedler, however, wrongly claim that Pearl’s allegorical role ceases after she becomes a wealthy heiress; Male can be permitted to speak for both Fiedler and himself when he asserts that, “as Dimmesdale ascends, [Pearl] moves down from her allegorical function and into fully temporal existence” (p. 97).
last scaffold scene, could have legitimately addressed to Dimmesdale those words that Hawthorne wrote to Sophia Peabody on October 4, 1840:

Thou only hast taught me that I have a heart—thou only hast thrown a light deep downward, and upward, into my soul. ... Indeed, we are but shadows—we are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest substance of a dream—till the heart is touched. That touch creates us—then we begin to be—thereby we are beings of reality, and inheritors of eternity.  

It is well to note here that Dimmesdale's Election Sermon, allegorical embodiment as it is of Dimmesdale's dying words, is an expression of love as well as a catechetical lesson; for it breathes "passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated" (V, 289). Through his response both to repentance and to Hester's love the minister converts the "atmosphere ... into words of flame" (V, 294): the fire not only of truth but also of love—God's as well as man's. He thereby gains in its fullest measure the power "of addressing the whole human brotherhood [and Hester Prynne in particular] in the heart's native language"; not lacking, like his fellow ministers, "Heaven's last and rarest attestation of their office, the Tongue of Flame"—the gift "that descended upon the chosen disciples at Pentecost" (V, 173). Indeed it is in harmony with this New England holiday (or holy day) that during Dimmesdale's Election Sermon the influence of the Holy Spirit, who is the infinite love that exists between God the Father and God the Son, "could be seen, as it were, descending upon him, and possessing him" (V, 294-295); which is why inspiration had never "breathed through mortal lips more evidently than it did through his" (V, 294) on this day. Hester's attitude toward the Election Sermon is that of Dimmesdale's flock toward his other sermons in that she listens to his dying "'words as if a tongue of Pentecost were speaking'" (V, 229). In truth, she is affected by Dimmesdale's heroic confession—by his Election Sermon—in the same way as some of his parishioners were affected by the sermon he preached the day after his midnight meeting with Hester upon the scaffold—a sermon, therefore, that was also delivered under the

influence of the “vital warmth” (V, 186) of Hester’s love. This discourse “was held to be the richest and most powerful, and the most replete with heavenly influences, that had ever proceeded from his lips. Souls ... were brought to the truth by the efficacy of that sermon, and vowed within themselves to cherish a holy gratitude towards Mr. Dimmesdale throughout the long hereafter” (V, 191).

And just as one of these souls, a young girl, was won by this sermon “to barter the transitory pleasures of the world for the heavenly hope, that was to assume brighter substance as life grew dark around her, and which would gild the utter gloom with final glory” (V, 262), so too is Hester won by the minister’s Election Sermon and comes to cherish “a holy gratitude towards Mr. Dimmesdale throughout the long hereafter.” And just as this same young girl enshrined Dimmesdale “within the stainless sanctity of her heart, which hung its snowy curtains about his image, imparting to religion the warmth of love, and to love a religious purity” (V, 262), so too will Hester’s remembrance of the holy death of Mr. Dimmesdale, enshrined as he already was within the not-so-stainless sanctity of her heart, impart to her love a religious purity, and to her future religious devotion the warmth of love. It is in this way that Dimmesdale’s last “‘footsteps ... leave a gleam along [his] earthly track, whereby the pilgrims that shall come after [him] may be guided to the regions of the blest’” (V, 175).

Hester will, therefore, eventually bring the love within her bosom to God as her most precious offering; and in so doing she will very much resemble those virgins of Dimmesdale’s church who were so influenced by his sermons as to become “victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment that they imagined it to be all religion, and brought it openly, in their white bosoms, as their most acceptable sacrifice before the altar” (V, 174). Mutatis mutandis, the closing lines of Hawthorne’s “Graves and Goblins,” spoken as they

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*Hawthorne’s description of Hester and Dimmesdale during the midnight scaffold scene, with little Pearl between them and the light of the meteoric A surrounding them, is prophetic of that “noon of ... solemn splendor” when they will be redeemed through love: “And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart; and Hester Prynn, with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between those two. They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendor, as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all who belong to one another” (V, 187). Here Pearl and the scarlet letter in the sky are very obviously both symbols of the love that exists between Hester and Dimmesdale; and this love of theirs is the light that is to reveal their secret, and the daybreak that shall unite them in heaven.
are by a young man's ghost, aptly describe the influence Dimmesdale's dying words will have on Hester's heart:

But where is the maiden, holy and pure, though wearing a form of clay, that would have me bend over her pillow at midnight, and leave a blessing there? With a silent invocation, let her summon me. Shrink not, maiden, when I come! ... in death, I bring no loathsome smell of the grave, nor ghostly terrors,—but gentle, and soothing, and sweetly pensive influences. Perhaps, just fluttering for the skies, my visit may hallow the wellsprings of thy thought, and make thee heavenly here on earth. Then shall pure dreams and holy meditations bless thy life; nor thy sainted spirit linger round the grave, but seek the upper stars, and meet me there! (XII, 77)

Indeed the spiritual fatherhood that Dimmesdale assumes in regard to Hester just before his flight to Heaven is foreshadowed in the first scaffold scene when Hester declares that Pearl must seek a heavenly Father because she will never know an earthly one. It is, of course, no less true that only when Dimmesdale becomes a loving father and religious guide to the love he has begotten in Hester's breast can Pearl, the personification of that love, find a Father in God.

Hawthorne, however, is too acute an observer of the human heart to allow Hester to achieve religious purity immediately after Dimmesdale's death. Only after she meditates for many years on Dimmesdale's last catechetical lesson is the wild, rich nature of her love for him—the wild, rich nature of her child—"softened and subdued, and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness" (V, 309). Only then is Hester able to return to New England, the place of her sin and sorrow, and where is "yet to be her penitence" (V, 310). In thus resuming the scarlet letter, she obeys Dimmesdale's loving injunction: "The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts!" (V, 304). It is through Hawthorne's final remarks on Pearl, however, that we learn with certainty that Dimmesdale's heroic example has made Hester heavenly on earth by hallowing the wellsprings of her thought and blessing her life with holy meditations. Indeed, some of the benefits which in this life, according to the Westminster Catechism, either accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification—"assurances of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end"—find their

allegorical embodiment in the gifts and letters that Pearl sends her mother during Hester's last years in Boston; which is, in truth, the kind of allegorical finish that is almost necessitated by the ripening to maturity of the allegorical child who, at the age of three, "could have borne a fair examination in ... the first column of the Westminster Catechisms" (V, 138). The letters with strange armorial seals that come to Hester from "some inhabitant of another land" (V, 309) are therefore no other than Hester's assurances of God's love—her "spiritual communications with the better world" in which her redeemed love for the minister now dwells. For Hester, in "the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years" (V, 310) that make up the end of her life, is very like those "true saintly fathers, whose faculties had been ... etherealized ... by spiritual communications with the better world, into which their purity of life had almost introduced these holy personages, with their garments of mortality still clinging to them" (V, 173). Moreover, the articles of comfort and luxury in Hester's cottage, "which only wealth could have purchased, and affection have imagined for her" (V, 310), can be construed as the religious consolations that Hester's love—the richest heiress in the New World—purchases for her. Just as the loss of loved ones by the oldest of Dimmesdale's parishioners, "which would else have been such heavy sorrow, was made almost a solemn joy to her devout old soul, by religious consolations and the truths of Scripture, wherewith she had fed herself continually for more than thirty years" (V, 261), so too is Hester's heavy sorrow after Dimmesdale's death converted into a solemn and religious joy by her never-ending meditation on the truths of Scripture that he so effectively taught her.

Not even yet, however, has the allegory come to an end: the baby garment that Hester, with "a lavish richness of golden fancy" (V, 310), embroiders for Pearl's child indicates, as we have suggested earlier, that Hester's love for Dimmesdale has become religiously fruitful—has borne the fruit of salvation. Consequently when Hester tells the women who bring her all their sorrows that she recognizes "the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow" (V, 311), her words have for us an irony to which Hester in her holiness and humility is oblivious; for we know that "the divine and mysterious
truth" of the redemptive power of love has become the very substance of Hester's life. The irony becomes more marked when Hester tells these women that "the angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end!" (V, 311). Indeed, sacred love has made Hester an angel and an apostle to those in sorrow and trouble; and it has made her wise by converting her dusky grief into a solemn joy through her religious consolations and her meditations on the truths of Scripture. In short, Hester has shown how sacred love can "make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end." Moreover, it is well in accord with the indirectness of Hawthorne's style that Hester should speak these words about sacred love in the last line of the story's next-to-last paragraph, and that she should thereby unwittingly summarize her life and Dimmesdale's by correctly interpreting the living hieroglyphic—the Tongue of Flame—that we have known as little Pearl.

Hester had therefore been right in thinking that "perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom" (V, 104). In the eyes of the reader as well as in the eyes of the townspeople, the scarlet letter should now have "the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom," imparting to Hester "a kind of sacredness" (V, 197). There is now something in Hester's relationship to her child to remind us—and no longer merely by contrast—"of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world" (V, 77); for it is no other than Pearl, the incarnation of Hester's love, who has redeemed the world of her mother's heart.

Since Hester's love for the minister has survived his death and followed him to heaven, we must agree with the gossips who believed "that Pearl was not only alive, but married, and happy, and mindful of her mother, and that she would most joyfully have entertained that sad and lonely mother at her fireside" (V, 310). Thus we may legitimately say of little Pearl—the infant who "was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden; worthy to have been left there, to be the plaything of angels, after the world's first parents were driven out" (V, 114)—what Hawthorne says of her literary ances-
tor Lilias Fay: “The chill winds of the earth had long since breathed a blight into this beautiful flower, so that a loving hand had now transplanted it, to blossom brightly in the garden of Paradise” (I, 502). Truly, Hester, now that her love for Dimmesdale is purified, has achieved a spiritual union with him that blesses only the rare marriage. Earlier in the story, she had deemed herself connected in a union with him, “that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution” (V, 103). Her last words to him, “Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe!” (V, 303), show that she is finally able to hope that the bar of final judgment will become their marriage altar for a joint futurity, not of endless retribution, but of eternal happiness. Our reading of Pearl’s allegorical role ratifies Hester’s hope and rejects the possibility that Dimmesdale suggests with his dying words: “It may be that, when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other’s soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. God knows; and He is merciful!” (V, 304). God has been merciful: we have seen that throughout Hester’s long years of penitence the light of faith has been guiding her to where her love for Dimmesdale already dwells—to what is to be her Eternal Home and Fireside. Hester and Dimmesdale could well have made their own the words that the elderly Mr. Smith in “The Wedding Knell” speaks to his bride, the widow Mrs. Dabney:

“Yes; it is evening with us now; and we have realized none of our morning dreams of happiness. But let us join our hands before the altar, as lovers whom adverse circumstances have separated through life, yet who meet again as they are leaving it, and find their earthly affection changed into something holy as religion. And what is Time, to the married of Eternity?” (I, 51)

There is no doubt, then, that Hester and Dimmesdale are among the few who, “we are glad to say, made earnest efforts to exchange vice for virtue, and, hard as the bargain was, succeeded in effecting it” (II, 374). Love, finding its personification in little Pearl and its symbols in the scarlet letter, the red rose, and the Tongue of Flame, has ultimately defeated Chillingworth, the “black flower” (V, 68)
of Fate and the incarnation of Cowardice, Shame, Egotism, Falsehood, and ineffectual Remorse (V, 180). Because the love of Hester and Dimmesdale for one another—"their infant commonwealth"—has been "under a celestial guardianship of peculiar intimacy and strictness" (V, 188), they have made their own the "high and glorious destiny" that Dimmesdale, in his Election Sermon, prophesies for "the newly gathered people of the Lord" (V, 295).