The Cultural Constructions of Gender

In “Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender” T. Walter Herbert, JR. from Southwestern University, brings to light Hawthorne’s own views on gender and the similarities of his own daughter, Una, and the fictional character Pearl from The Scarlet Letter. To make his point clear Herbert uses journal entry’s from Hawthorne’s own journals and actual text from The Scarlet Letter.

There was an idea that in this cultural era those women were supposed to fall into a certain pattern and likewise with the men. The conceptions of gender were made to complement each other and fulfill each other through their own individual roles in womanhood and manhood. When people fell out of this is when Hawthorne began to become frightened and confused, possibly Herbert believes may be the fact that Hawthorne himself had “feminine traits” and was self-conscious. He questioned the idea and the natural foundation of which manhood and womanhood was built upon.

Hawthorne himself began to develop anxieties about his own self and how feminine he was. Hawthorne’s struggle with a resistance to the gender system is evident in The Scarlet Letter. Going back and forth with what the roles of each sex was. He couldn’t decide if a woman was supposed to be strong or willing to listen to a man, he was conflicted. Herbert brings up a direct quote from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a good friend of Hawthorne who made the observation of Hawthorne saying, “to converse with Hawthorne was like talking with a woman.” (285) This could have much to do with the fact that he applied this idea to his character Arthur and his feminine characters Hester and Pearl. Their roles changed from what the norm was, and a way for Hawthorne to experiment.

The development of Pearl was believed to be a way for Hawthorne to fix the problems he saw in his own daughter. Herbert says in his article, “Little Pearl is made to enact the qualities that most troubled Hawthorne in his daughter, and she is eventually delivered from them.” (287) Hawthorne was scared of his own daughter because he didn’t understand why she acted different and wanted her to grow into femininity without helping to guide her. The character of Pearl was believed to be a way that Hawthorne could deal with it and fix the situation. Even though Herbert believes it was Hawthorne’s own fault that she was the way she was because she was raised in his house under his supervision. A fear developed though that Herbert approached that the character of Pearl began to affect Una herself. “It would be an oversimplification to say that Una became merely a creature of her father’s imagination, no more than the embodiment of his gender conflicts, as projected onto her.” (286) Hawthorne wanted to believe that his own daughter would “grow out” of how she was acting and grow into womanhood.

The article further goes into the idea of Pearl and how she only became human again because her parents asserted their own gender. Pearl was redeemed by the idea of “true” womanhood and manhood. In the article it shows the back and forth battle that Hawthorne himself had with the ideas of gender. Pearl, Hester, and Arthur seem to be saved by their acceptance of their gender. “Pearl’s inhuman nature results from the sin of her parents, so the narrative manifestly asserts, and that sin is rooted in distortions of gender. In the story of Hester and Arthur a manly woman and womanly man repair their aberrant characters; they reciprocally unable one another to attain “true” manhood and “true” womanhood, and this fulfillment redeems their child.” (288) This showed that Hawthorne sympathized with both parties. He struggles with the definition of gender and why each party was supposed to be a certain way.

Article ends with the idea that Hawthorne never came to understand his daughter, but he used Pearl as a way to fix the things he felt were wrong with Una. Herbert ends with the statement; “The Scarlet Letter is a powerful book not because it resolves our gender conflicts but because it draws us into them and forces us to deploy our own ways of seeking to manage them.” (295) There is no way to understand a novel without understanding the author and as Herbert believes, “we cannot read it unless we also read ourselves, without any guarantee of what outcomes will result, without any sure way to demarcate what we have seen from what we are, or are becoming, or are seeking to no longer be.” (295) Each person has their own insecurities about themselves and if they are following societies idea of what each gender should act and their roles. Herbert showed that with a background of Hawthorne and the treatment of his daughter and the influences Hawthorne’s own daughter had on developing the character Pearl and the ending to The Scarlet Letter. It is up to people to decide what their role is in this life.