

Is Opal's Diary a Plagiarism of Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter

Portland Woman Finds a Sameness Which She Thinks Indicates Lack of Originality by Precocious Author

Portland, April 2.—(To the Editor.)—In "The Story of Opal" we find a kind of reproduction, more or less exact, sometimes improved, occasionally deformed, of a certain precocious child invented by Nathaniel Hawthorne in "The Scarlet Letter," published some 75 years ago, which story is just about as reasonable as that by Opal.

The latter has a sister Pearl in real life. In the novel there is a child by that name. As that family was born in 1645 (some 275 years ago), perhaps this Opal is a reincarnation of that selfsame spirit of the Massachusetts colony of the first generation. In fact, Opal Whiteley is there right now, in the vicinity of Boston where the original precocious Yankee child was supposed to live.

The story of Opal contains many seeming interpretations of an older head given to perusing novels and, apparently, the writer has read "The Scarlet Letter" and fashioned her diary or journal in accordance therewith. She, too, was a provincial brunette, though named Pearl, and was accordingly called Ruby, Rose, Coral, and even Opal.

Pearl Prynne-Dimmesdale was herself a child of nature, preternaturally bright at the age of from three to seven years. Her "only girl friend was her mother." She had no other children to play with. She was too often wilful and disobedient, chaotic and capricious. The puritanic switching or spanking was an almost every day affair. She scarcely knew her father, and at one time very violently repelled his caresses. She frequented the woods and brooks and talked to them. (Chapter VII.) Hawthorne says that she essayed to communicate her active spirit to a thousand objects about her, "she so loved to be active." A stick or a flower; these became in her imagination endowed with life and understanding and adapted to whatever drama

occupied her inner world. The tall pine trees became puritan elders and the bushes or weeds their children, whom she didn't like very much. The good, old minister, when he met that child at the age of three, asked her name. On being told that it was Pearl, he said, "Pearl? Rather be it Ruby, or Coral, or Opal!" Instead of Opal, some later versions read "Red Rose."

This original American Opal (or Pearl as she was newly always called) at the age of 3½ years when asked the question, "Who made thee child?" replied that she was not made at all but had been by her mother plucked from a bush.

In the forest she would ask her mother "What does this brook say?" and sometimes interpret the understanding soul.

She studied little animals and caught them in her hands. The small denizens of the forest became tamed by her and were moved out of her path. A squirrel in a tree chattered to her and tossed her a nutshell. At her footstep a fox, startled from his sleep, looked up at her and resumed his nap. Even a wolf is said to have made friends with her and showing his nose to her hand offered his head to be pat- ted. (In the Atlantic Monthly it is a pig that met her at the end of the lane.) The flowers recognized her as a friend and "whispered to her."

In going on an errand for her mother in the market place she "pursued a zigzag course" for no apparent reason. (Chapter XXII.) So does Opal Whiteley in her diary when sent by her mother on an errand to a neighbor pursue a zigzag course across the field while picking up little stones or pebbles as did the Boston child at another time—but Opal Whiteley, being a good little girl, does not throw rocks at birds.

Not only does the Opal Whiteley story repeat the same acts at the same

age as the pilgrim child, but she transfers sentences or clauses word for word from the original. Even that singular word "screwteyeyes" is carried along with her zigzag meanderings. The coincidences are very marked. About the only word in the child's part of "The Scarlet Letter" not repeated in Opal's journal is Hawthorne's ever recurring pet term, "aspect." This it seems she did not fall for—we don't blame her.

Not only does Opal Whiteley mention a baby "that came all too soon" (after the manner of the young visitors) but there is a suggestion of that nature in "The Scarlet Letter," and that situation is clearly brought about in a device of doubtful or questionable paternity. The child wondered who her father was, anyhow. And the pilgrim child saw and talked with men from and going to far lands (sailors).

One thing in our western girl's journal not found in the unusual imp of Hawthorne's wit is the ridiculous array of Latin, Greek and French nomenclature and terminology which nobody (not even Hawthorne) could suppose that a six-year-old would employ.

We wonder what will come next. It is too much to hope that anything more coming later can be identified. We should rather not wish to find it.

Strange indeed that such close verbal parallels could be found in the two accounts, if the Oregon girl had not read "The Scarlet Letter" before she revised her diary.

MRS. MARTIN,
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MAY ALLISON

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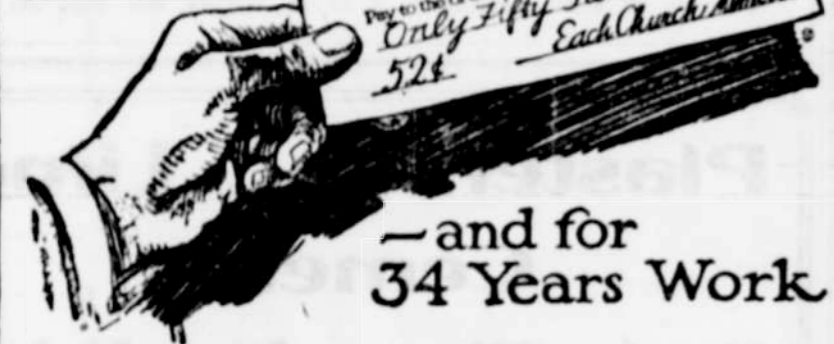
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