Ascending the Scaffold: Knowing and Judging in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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**Abstract:** Reminding students that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* begins with an exercise in public shaming helps them relate to the novel. It is set in the mid-17th century, a long time ago, yet the continuities persist. Hester Prynne is forced to mount the scaffold and expose herself and her child to the citizens of Boston, who want to see her degraded and to learn the name of her partner in moral crime. Today convicted criminals in the American justice system are routinely required to make a similar sort of public display. The desire to know how the battle between good and evil is going in Puritan Boston, Hawthorne says, is something that binds the community together and threatens to tear it apart. Knowing can mean sympathy and compassion, but it can also involve a pernicious desire to trespass in the interior of another's heart. Our exercises in close reading reveal that the desire to "know" someone, as the novel's slow motion "whodunit" clearly shows, can lead to deeper intimacy, or a denial of their quintessential humanity. Analyzing the shaming scenes that organize the narrative means helping students to see more clearly the structure of the novel, the issues at stake in it, and the ambiguities of guilt and innocence that dominate in our meditations on our own lives.

Teaching *The Scarlet Letter* is one of the great experiences in the career of any teacher, for reasons that are not far to seek: it is arguably the most widely read 19th-century American novel; its subject, adultery, still has a magnetic attractiveness for us; and the story it narrates is firmly inscribed in the history of America and its culture. Other reasons for its popularity abound. For one thing, because it turns on a complex range questions and assessments, Hawthorne’s novel implicates its readers in a quite remarkable way. We interrogate it with our importunate demands, but it probes and evaluates us as well. Its central characters are repeatedly questioned and judged, but so are we, in the sense that the novel asks us to re-examine our assumptions about crime and punishment, right and wrong, life and death.

Typically, in the Introduction, Hawthorne even imagines his ancestors, looking at him from their ghostly vantage point, asking questions: "Who is he?" they want to know. On learning that their descendant is, of all things, a writer, they rush to judgment, dismissing him in peremptory fashion, calling him a "degenerate fellow [who] might as well have been a fiddler!" (13). These ancients are worthy but blinkered. *Pace* their contempt they don't "know" what a writer does. They speak with great confidence, but in this context that confidence suggests that they are delusional. Yet their desire to know links them with us and with our
consequent frustrations. As a novel focussed on the difficulties involved in what we mean by saying that we know something, whether it involves another person, ourselves, or a novel set of circumstances, *The Scarlet Letter* depends for its meaning on a series of seemingly irresolvable ambiguities.

In part, this is occasioned by the fact that the novel is essentially about what is involved when any human being attempts to deal with contradictory impulses. For a teacher it evokes a desire to make clear what is unclear to first-time readers and, in contradictory fashion, instils a need to render more nuanced or complex many things in the text that at first seem self-evident. Students studying American fiction also want to be convinced that reading in the 21st century a 19th-century novel set in 17th-century colonial America is worth their time and effort. Of course the 19th century, in which education became secular, compulsory and free, science threatened to destroy beliefs inculcated by a couple of millennia of religious teaching, the attempt to build a nation state became increasingly difficult, and our confidence in the centrality of humankind was disastrously undermined—this era of American history still has a lot to teach us. American fiction reminds us that that century's problems are ours as well. Moral crime is still a subject on which the community has an opinion, particularly when its best known, most revered members are involved. The Puritan society had long since disappeared by the time Hawthorne put pen to paper, but the idea of building a theocratic community, of making America "a city on a hill," dates back to the early days of the 17th century and, beyond that, to Christ's exhortation to his followers in the New Testament.¹

Obviously the best way to show students that Hawthorne's novel richly rewards attention paid to grand designs, human and aesthetic, as well as the minute particulars and felt moments of individual lives, despite all the ambiguities, is to focus on the language and the ideas in significant passages. Making the case for the novel's continuing relevance means constantly revisiting and updating it so that students can understand how the links between then and now continue to resonate. Let us see how such an approach works in practice.

As everyone knows, *The Scarlet Letter* begins with a public shaming. Once they are asked to think about this, students enjoy reflecting on the connections between the scene in

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¹ NOTE: For contemporary politicians: that proleptic endorsement of American exceptionalism occurred quite a bit before President Reagan started using the phrase.
which Hester is forced to stand on the scaffold, with a child born out of wedlock in her arms, and instances of public punishment that are currently a significant part of the American justice system. The issues raised by this public shaming have long been a subject for those who have written insightfully about Hawthorne’s novel. Lauren Berlant, for example, has argued, "One aim of *The Scarlet Letter* … is to investigate the mutual operations of utopian speculation, legal theory, and material legal practices within Puritan/American community" (60). In the same vein, Leland S. Person notes that "Hawthorne has given us a way of thinking about crime and punishment—about the psychology of punishment and the desire we have to know the truth of guilt or innocence with a certainty that warrants such capital (letter) punishment" (67).

Richard Posner is probably the best known federal judge to have written extensively on such punishments, but Hawthorne’s novel is very much on other commentators’ minds as well, particularly in law review journals where the words “scarlet letter” have actually acquired a special legal status. Such articles almost always contain a clutch of colourful examples of shaming. Judicial responses to crimes and misdemeanours run the gamut, but are often a bit zany, with an emphasis on the unexpected, with strictures on the brink of “cruel and unusual,” and so on. A woman opts to pass a stopped school bus by driving on the sidewalk and is forced to wear an "Only an idiot … " sign. Two teenagers who write "666" on a statue of Jesus are forced to lead a donkey through the streets. Someone who steals something must allow his victim to take something of equal value from his place in turn. I ask students what they make of such a puzzling mix.

They are quick to suggest many other important similarities between Hester’s shaming and those of her modern counterparts: typically both feature an attempt to articulate the moral grounds for public punishment, those who witness such a shaming respond in quite varied ways, demands for more compassion alternate with ones calling for more severity, emotions in such circumstances tend to run high, the past is invoked as a potential guide for the (backsliding) present, questions about the efficacy of such a punishment persist, the experience features more general musings about human nature, and extensive deliberations are devoted to discussions of how best to protect the community from those who violate its laws.
In an article on the tensions of public shaming, Jon A. Brilliant argues that modern probation conditions "subject the defendant to the same public humiliation and ridicule as did Hester Prynne's Scarlet Letter" (1358). Jeffrey C. Filcik contends that "'Scarlet letter' conditions are consistent with probation's evolving, broadening function as recognized in the new Federal Sentencing Reform Act" (34). Andrew Cowan uses a range of arguments for regulating integrity, risk and accountability in capital markets. Aaron Book focuses on the evolution of society and its response to shaming, cites particular cases to help define the phenomenon, presents the rationale for shaming as a punishment and emphasizes the need for it, given the burgeoning prison population. Ella Miller argues that the punishment received by Monica Lewinsky provides an excellent example of how the Puritans' concerns have manifested themselves in matters where the individual is judged to have been guilty of immorality. Dan Kahan insists that punishment is a form of language, that "social meaning objectively constrains the political acceptability of alternative sanctions" (594) and how the meaning of alternative sanctions can be reformed "in a way that makes shaming acceptable. Hawthorne's crowd of censorious women might not understand a word of that but would no doubt nod balefully at the community's taking up a position justified by their thirst for revenge.²

Sometimes this citation of Hawthorne's novel is a simple verbal convenience, but just as often it is used by those interested in the law to make a point about the current status of such changes in the penal system. Here is Deni Smith Garcia inviting the readers of the Wesleyan Law Review to contemplate some intriguing ironies about using the words "scarlet" and letter" in such a way:

What?!! Is shaming real, or is it fiction? Was Hawthorne a lawyer? How ironic that the legal "real" world would adopt a fictional literary title as its primary legal term for shaming. How interesting those terms within the definition such as "shame" and "stigmatize" have specific, powerful connotations in the psychological world. Why would the legal world choose to adopt a fictional term for shaming rather than, perhaps more appropriately, a psychological one? (105)

Whatever answers we come up with for these and related questions – luckily some of them are rhetorical – the law reviews' musings about Hawthorne-like punishments show how ways of thinking about the novel have evolved. Garcia reminds us that perspective is crucial, that is, the points of view of the community, of the characters involved in the public shaming, of Hawthorne's narrator as he pronounces on events, and of the reader created by the text. But Garcia is asking about something even more important than the psychology of punishment. She wonders semi-facetiously about Hawthorne's being a lawyer because she knows what a lawyer can be expected to know, or he knows that a lawyer can show a jury or a judge evidence enough to make them believe that they know the truth. But Hawthorne's text is, inter alia, devoted to the difficulties involved in the revelation of another kind of knowledge, another kind of truth. With this search in mind, I go on to try to show students how legal knowledge differs from the kind informed by this narrative, one that involves a historical awareness but refuses to be determined by it, and finally a knowledge that forces us to revise downwards our expectations in such matters.

This is most efficiently done by looking at three shaming scenes in Scarlet Letter, Hester's at the outset, Dimmesdale's night ascent of the scaffold, and Dimmesdale and Hester in the novel's last scene, at high noon, with the whole new world assembled as spectators. These are three events in a sequence that enables the reader to track moral
progress and answer some of the questions sketched in above. For each we need a sense of the difference between the two kinds of knowledge just mentioned: there are elements of ambiguity in both but, as I mentioned at the outset, Hawthorne revels in such ambiguities, whereas figures in the justice system seek to clear them up. Hawthorne continually juxtaposes confident knowledge, knowingness, on the one hand, with the resigned admission that our fellow beings are permanently hidden from us, on the other. Even what seems to pass as total clarity at the end is anything but.

I said that the novel begins with Hester's shaming but that is not quite true. On the first page of her story, before she is exposed to the crowd, Hawthorne makes two claims, one unexceptionable and one a bit more surprising. The less controversial one is that anyone trying to build Utopia, or simply a new settlement, must begin by constructing a prison. This institution presumably incarnates fear of punishment, warns us against our mixed nature, highlights the threat to a young and experimental community – all worthy aims though not exactly cutting-edge controversial. Students readily see (even if they do not entirely agree with) the point concerning human nature and the communities' interest in controlling the desires of its citizenry.

And the second claim? What other structure does the narrator say is immediately required for would-be community builders? Here I tell students to lift their eyes from the text and I conduct a quick straw poll – almost none of them come up with Hawthorne's choice of "cemetery" as the other thing needful, rather than, say, a church, a school, or a town hall. Why is a cemetery the other essential thing? What is the author signalling here? Tough conditions in the 17th century that lead to shorter lives? Higher rates of infant mortality? The need for immortalizing one's beloved on a tombstone? Possibly some combination of these, but Hawthorne's narrator is also commenting on a universal phenomenon, giving us a dictum that presumably applies to the setting up of any town in any era, the incorporation of any collective enterprise.

A partial answer to the choice of "cemetery" here is suggested by the hermeneutic mystery referred to at the outset of the novel. Society, we are told, has two sorts of roses: the black one is the prison, the red one Hawthorne says is from nature and from history, a provocative formulation. The black rose stands for our sad story; the red one blooms at the threshold of the prison from Puritan times. The black rose is death, the red the force that
cemetery seek to deny. This is not the last time nature and history are brought together in this symbolic way: we see it again in both subsequent scaffold scenes. To complicate things further, Pearl announces at one point that she is the rose, the red one that is. Emblem of love and passion, incarnation of purity, testimony to the power of fragility, living bond with nature, Pearl and the rose both take on whole new lives with this comment.

The reaction of the crowd to Hester's appearance on her perp walk and actual ascension of the scaffold is revealing, not only because it anticipates by almost 400 years the reactions of those sentenced to the humiliation of contemporary shaming but because we can identify so readily with it. Here again is the narrator: "there can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature, - whatever be the delinquencies of the individual, -- no outrage more flagrant than...." At this point I again ask the students to pause and think about the different ways this sentence might continue. What would their worst nightmare be? How might they describe it? Here I try to make them see how readily their imagination could conjure up something much more frightening than Hawthorne's does—"no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face or shame" (52)—but that that does not make his formulation any less interesting. A great deal of Hawthorne's fiction turns on this idea of a very public loss of privacy, a violation of the heart, the search for knowledge of another that denatures the more deeply it pries. Knowing something the way that a lawyer does can be not such a good thing too. Shaming a person can have just the opposite of the effect intended: for example, a woman can, like Hester, take perverse pride in her badge of shame, even while she is forced to do what the narrator describes as the worst thing imaginable. So Hawthorne is not talking, or not talking only, about those arrested who wear their coat as a cloak, screening their face, but about a boundary that must not be broken down if we are to retain our hard-won selfhood whatever evil things we have done.

Hawthorne organizes his novel by charting the schema by which the "hermeneutic promise" is fulfilled. This involves "reading" the other two scaffold scenes to discover the secrets they contain. Scene 2 involves Dimmesdale trying to reveal his sin in the darkness. In Scene 3 the two of them unite at the end as they reveal their secret to the assembled multitude. At first blush, these meanings seem obvious enough. Hester has been shamed by the community and in the second scaffold scene, Dimmesdale tries to shame himself, but he cannot repent. Yet Hawthorne's task is to complicate those certainties. As we have seen by
reading the early scenes attentively, those who know for sure in the novel, the men of Boston, the clerics, the town worthies, are among the most ignorant characters portrayed in The Scarlet Letter. Students are committed to knowing by definition but, immersed in Hawthorne's world, they can also learn that seeking to know the secrets of other people, their motives, their hopes and fears can be dangerous for all concerned.

The second scaffold scene shows us why. It features Dimmesdale's exposing himself to the community's censure, a fate that he escapes only because almost all of them are tucked up in their beds asleep when he makes his public confession. Hawthorne wants us to watch how the desire to tell all is sharply qualified by a resistance to telling all. So when Dimmesdale speaks no one hears; he confesses yet does not make a sound. But what about the letter that appears in the sky? I ask my students. Does not that prove that supernatural powers are at work, guiding the Massachusetts Bay Colony on its path, that God is listening? The narrator assures us that watching the sky for portents is a good thing if one does it on behalf of a community, a people. God is sending the Puritans messages all the time via the firmament, messages that comment on human affairs writ large. Yet, the narrator assures us, for a single individual to read the same sky as conveying a special message to him alone is clearly to betray an advanced form of schizophrenia. A private link between one man and his God? In the end that way lies madness. It is Dimmesdale's secret suffering, the secret that he suffers, that makes him so ashamed. The scaffold he has made for himself is much more torturous than the one in the market square: the shaming of this particular man assumes a new and distinctive shape. On the scaffold itself we are told that, with Hester and Pearl, "the three form an electric chain," and the minister feels a "tumultuous rush of new life, other life than his own, pouring like a torrent into his heart" (134). The human links forged in this drama are ultimately more important than ones revealed by the justice system.

So was there or was there not something message-like in the dark sky over Boston? By now students should be ready for the requisite ambiguity. Here is Hawthorne's wonderfully elusive answer:

We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter—the letter A—marked out in lines of dull red light. Not but the
meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning duskily through a veil of cloud, but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it, or, at least, with so little definiteness, that another's guilt might have seen another symbol in it. (136)

Purely subjective impression, crazy minister, no such thing as an "A" for adultery (or Arthur), case closed. Even if a meteor did shine brightly in the sky at this point, still no question of an "A." And then that wonderful last "Not but..." sentence in which we are invited to contemplate an infinite number of evildoers seeing an infinite number of signs in the sky, each with a particular, personalized meaning. It looks as if the uncertainty about Dimmesdale's guilt, his penance, Hester's love, Pearl's impish self—all will have to be re-examined before the mystery of iniquity can be resolved.

The sky-reading is not quite over, since at the end of the chapter, the sexton reports to Dimmesdale that others this night have seen an "A" in the sky, "A" for Angel, in commemoration of the death of John Winthrop, the Colony's governor. Individual paranoia, communal solidarity, multiple signification, absence of meaning, surfeit of meaning, unnatural natural phenomenon, the urgent desire to protect a fledgling religious colony—all these compel us to play and replay the events, to ponder their meaning, and to resist all beguiling forms of straightforward explanation.

By now, the students are becoming experts at doing the kind of unpacking that the first two scaffold scenes required. The third scaffold scene involves, like the first one, voluntary public shaming, as Dimmesdale literally bares his breast before the multitude and confesses everything. What clearer proof could we have that he is the culprit than this revelation of the fiery red symbol on his skin, not as a piece of imaginative embroidery but as an actual stigma? Nevertheless, all the available evidence proves to be as wayward as the "A" in scaffold Scene 2, up there in the sky but not up there in the sky. In other words, Hawthorne does not make it easy for us. Instead, a casual and lengthy list of possibilities emerges. Some say that the red mark Dimmesdale exposed is self-inflicted, i.e., nothing to be ashamed of. Some take his mention of an innocent babe to reflect well on him and to remind us that babes in the Puritans' world are not innocent, at least not when they are born. Others suspect that Roger Chillingworth has effected such a thing with drugs. Still others
suppose that it is an instance of remorse gnawing its way from inside, and that Dimmesdale's death is a parable. And Dimmesdale's insistence on speaking of himself in the third person ("It was on him!") contributes to the effect. Once again we have, not the clarity that comes with a legal conviction, but a rumour that the mob takes up like a conspiracy theory. The proponents of public shaming are asking for a certainty that does not exist. Feelings are amorphous, elusive, private. Judging them adequately involves assessing the elusive shadows of a moral doubt, which is of course why they are so difficult to apprehend.

When I ask students about winners and losers in the end, the importance of public shaming and its consequences becomes clearer. If my thesis is right, every confident assertion about who has triumphed should founder on the rock of the ambiguous. If we look at the quartet of characters who have just gone through these experiences, what are we to feel about right and wrong as it manifests itself at the very end of Hawthorne's novel? What, I ask my students, are the long-term effects of all that shaming?

In one sense Hester clearly emerges victorious from this terrible trial. She is by far the most interesting character in the story. She loves selflessly. She hopes to be united with Dimmesdale because of the passion that exists between them, not despite it. And she has the last word—"Thus spoke Hester Prynne"—and it is a word that reminds Dimmesdale of his importance as husband and father. But distantly, haughtily, he rejects her hope that they will see each other in paradise.

Does that make Dimmesdale the one who is ultimately victorious? He celebrates his trial by successfully imposing his narrative, by telling his audience how to read the sign on his chest. He gets the last word too. Nevertheless, this hardly makes him triumphant, this invitation to the mother of his child to rise above such paltry emotions. Is Dimmesdale Hester's ideal spiritual guide here, reminding her censoriously ("Hush, Hester, hush! The law we broke!", etc.)? Those exclamation marks give away a lot. So the answer obviously depends on which Dimmesdale we are talking about. The narrator offers us numerous candidates, as we just saw, and he implies that this is the sort of knowledge we cannot definitively claim to have.

What about Chillingworth? Can we argue that his cool, jealous, cunning approach fools both the principals until the very end, too lost in their selfish emotions? As an example of scientific expertise and repressed emotions, he wins out over those whose desires are not
powerful enough to help them shake off the burdens of society and freedom. Yet if that is the case, why does Chillingworth just shrivel up and disappear at the end? Surely this detail is included to confirm the sense that he has lived his life in vain, or rather, that he has not really led a life at all, but simply incarnated an evil that has now been defeated by the forces of good.

And finally there is Pearl. Surely she, bankrolled by her father Chillingworth (such an intriguing detail!) and keen to shed the constraints of the old world planted in the new, escapes all this petty bickering in a way that some part of Hawthorne approves. She knows who her biological father is as well and, giving him a kiss, acknowledging him in public, frees her to be a woman in the world, as the narrator tells us in one of the most remarkable lines in this extraordinary conclusion. Pearl's "last word" is to leave America, to make her escape from those who formulate rules, who refuse to see her as a rose, as a symbol of the love and beauty that exists in the world alongside all its torments.

Once again, the more students think about knowing as an amorphous entity, the more they will see how speculative our attempts to mediate between these positions finally are. Hester's triumph, the indomitable spirit that makes her such a famous character, is a sad one. A better explanation of the links between suffering and love, the knowledge of suffering and the knowledge of love, can help explain why. In a book called Love's Knowledge, Martha Nussbaum begins by quoting Proust's contention that knowledge of the heart must come from the heart. For Nussbaum, this means that the suffering occasioned by the absence or death of a loved one is "not simply a route to knowing; it is knowing... knowledge of our love is not the fruit of the impression of suffering, [but rather] the suffering itself is a piece of self-knowing" (267). If suffering equals self-knowledge, then one can ascribe to all four principal characters a modicum of the knowledge they seek throughout The Scarlet Letter. Each of them loses someone important: Hester a husband, Chillingworth a wife, Dimmesdale a lover, Pearl two fathers. That is what they know, that is what they have suffered.

Armed with such knowledge, students are better equipped to confront, if not resolve, the largest questions that The Scarlet Letter forces us to ask. In another famous passage, Hester wonders about what she knows... about life, about men, about being a woman, about humankind's capacity for change. Her meditation is occasioned, we are told, "in bitterness of heart" (144). Once again, sorrow and knowledge come together. Hester's thoughts lead her
to wonder about the most profound, wide-ranging revolution possible, namely the one that would give women their full rights as human beings. Speculation makes women sad, says Hawthorne, and we groan inwardly a little, thinking that he is going to ask us to accompany him on the gloomy road built of stereotyping and cliché. Then comes the surprise: "As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before women can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position" (144). This is strong stuff, the strongest stuff in the novel, it might be argued. True, Hawthorne immediately undermines it by dragging out that hoary old notion that women are meant to feel rather than think, that wearing the "A" hasn't made Hester as meek and compliant as she should be, that maybe she should kill her daughter and herself and face her Maker. That said, the fact that Hester's shaming has not worked should tell us that Hawthorne is more radical than even he knows. For he has shown that, among the effects of such public display, is the shaming of the prurient shamers.

Thinking about what makes a book a classic, Frank Kermode points out that they are all about permanence and change. They fulfil the "hermeneutic promise" they make at the outset but, as he goes on to point out, in order to do this classics change over time: their "internal probability systems survive them in altered and less stringent forms," making it possible for us to "read more of the text" than their original readers could. Making this clear to students involves showing them how they are part of something larger than reading simply to pass the time or to get a credit. Kermode concludes by pointing out that "the only works we value enough to call classic are those which, and they demonstrate this by surviving, are complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities" (121). By this criterion, Hawthorne's novel will continue to tease as out of thought for a while yet, confirming and subverting our attempts to know about love and suffering, public shaming, and the self-inflicted kind.
Works Cited


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