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SHAME CONFLICTS AND TRAGEDY IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* has much to teach psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. Perhaps no other American novel lends itself so well to an exploration in depth of the dynamics, conflicts, and defenses characteristic of shame. While most commentators on *The Scarlet Letter* have assumed Hester Prynne's pain to be shame-based, and the Reverend Dimmesdale's to be guilt-based, a rather different interpretation is proposed namely, that both are afflicted with shame, but that Dimmesdale's is more unbearable than Hester's because more conflictual, less representable, and less easily used protectively. Dimmesdale's shame is at once deeper and more toxic. What "deeper" and "more toxic" mean in the context of shame conflicts (including conflicts to which feelings of shame give rise) is explored.

> *Be true! Be True! Be True! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!*
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> —NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

A number of prominent authors writing on shame, including Helen Block Lewis (1971) and Leon Wurmser (1981, 1997, 1999, 2004), have underscored the importance of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter.* Many have pointed to the external, social stigma of shame as represented by the "A" Hester Prynne embroidered on her gown. In this paper I will focus particularly on the *internal* shame dynamics and shame conflicts of the Reverend Dimmesdale, which, when compared to the visible "A" of Hester Prynne, shed light on what makes shame unbearable, and on what make shame conflicts tragic. It is worth

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underscoring at the outset that shame does not have to be toxic. When shame can be borne, it creates tolerance, reinforces human bonds, and allows for joie de vivre.

Shorn of the narrator's misgivings and hesitations, which give the book its texture, the basic plot of *The Scarlet Letter* is as follows. Chillingworth, an elderly seventeenth-century English scholar, marries Hester Prynne, a woman much his junior, and sends her to Puritan New England. There she has an affair and finds herself pregnant with her daughter, Pearl. Because she refuses to name the father (Dimmesdale), she is publicly disgraced and sentenced to wear a visible sign of her adultery (the letter "A"). When Chillingworth arrives, he finds her with the baby. Swearing revenge, he disguises himself as a doctor in order better to hunt down the unnamed father. Meanwhile the spectral figure of Dimmesdale must bear the idealization of his congregation, the silence of his station, and the burden of his secret alone, unable to reach out either to Hester or to Pearl. There is, of course, far more to the plot than I have summarized here. At the close of the book Dimmesdale publicly confesses of his own accord after having given his most inspired sermon, and thereby having reinforced the idealization of the members of his congregation. Also, Dimmesdale and Hester find that their plans to run away back to England have been foiled. In short, the most moving and emotionally central issues in the book are symbolized by the embroidered "A" on Hester's gown and the half-seen, half-comprehended "A" seared into the breast of Dimmesdale. Thus, the question of what causes Dimmesdale's death is left open—half-seen, half-defined, and left to the imagination of the reader. Such deliberate evocations of vagueness are essential in the depiction of Dimmesdale's pain, and essential also for an understanding of the novel.

Let me pause here to comment on my psychoanalytic approach to a work of literature. There is much that a book like *The Scarlet Letter* has to teach us, provided we know how to let it do so. At least for me, this means subordinating the concept of analytic interpretation (in which subject and object are distinct and there are two people) to that of open-ended analytic investigation, which includes the use of analytic questions about the nature and functions of psychic conflict and symbolization.[1]

[1]For these reasons, there can be no single thesis in the usual psychoanalytic sense of an interpretation, a claim that a particular theoretical orientation is truer than others, or a logical demonstration supporting a particular point of view. What I am proposing here is a psychoanalytic approach to works of literature which,

So long as the questions I am asking are clinically relevant, and so long as their pursuit can be furthered using a work of literature, what might be "proof" of what is "true" is less important than an uncovering of what is useful, of what allows us as analysts to be more attentive and responsive to our patients and ourselves. In clinical vignettes, when the details of clinical data obscure the feelings of either analyst or analysand, there are inevitably distortions, and the end result can never be fully satisfying. The same holds true of approaching a work of literature with respect to which details of plot can obscure essential dynamics.

What makes Dimmesdale's shame so unbearable? What constitutes "unbearability" seems to me of central importance in all analytic work, and can be related to conflicting superego ideals, to the framework of judgment that individuals bring to bear on their feelings. In this context, shame can be a fundamental reaction to (and a defense against) "wrong feelings," or being helpless in the face of the intensity of feelings, or being flooded by feelings one cannot understand.[2] In addition to these shameful ego-ideal conflicts, the fear of the intensity of feelings itself generates shame, which then produces defenses against shame as an affect whose intensity is threatening. Not only is such shame threatening because of its intensity, but it is threatening also to ego ideals that hold out the promise of composure and self-reliance, since these very ideals make a mockery of what is actually felt: helplessness and internal discountenance.

The color scarlet conjures images of blood, death, childbirth, and life—all of which connote strong feelings. By contrast, the worlds of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are cold, dim, hateful, and lifeless, as their names suggest. Dimmesdale is never able to come forward as a

[2]Wurmser's *The Power of the Inner Judge* (1993) makes this point eloquently and with a wealth of clinical examples; see also Kilborne (2002).

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to my knowledge, diverges from common approaches, whether Lacanian, Freudian, Kleinian, object relations, or interpersonalist. My objective is not to equate in any way the work of literature, its author, or its characters with patients on the couch. There is in that sense nobody to be "analyzed." Nor do I wish to use literature to "validate" theoretical assumptions and positions. Rather, theoretical concepts and ideas can be used in exploratory fashion. For me, this suggests that clinical and literary sources can profitably be used in counterpoint, as I demonstrated in *Disappearing Persons* (Kilborne 2002), so that it becomes rewarding to read works of literature with psychoanalytic questions and dynamics in mind, and to draw upon literature in thinking about clinical questions, conundrums, and dynamics. In this way, clinical work can benefit from literature and literature from psychoanalytic inquiry.

father, never able to value the father-child bond. By contrast, Hester Prynne wears her letter "A" gaudily embroidered, and views Pearl as giving meaning to life—and to shame.

It is suggestive to note that Hawthorne's father died when he was four. He was raised by his mother. When she died in 1849, Hawthorne, at age forty-five, began writing *The Scarlet Letter* and "The Custom-House," which were published together the following year. The former would seem to have emerged from Hawthorne's grief over the loss of his mother, and the contrast between the scarlet world of his mother and his dim world without her. If one bears in mind Hawthorne's personal loss of his mother (and of his father when he was four), the spectral quality of Dimmesdale takes on a biographical valence.

Hawthorne himself was extremely timid and shy, an indication that he was acutely aware of shame. As John Updike (2001) has commented, "For ten years he led a shadow-existence in Salem, living with a mother frozen in mourning and two spinster sisters, concocting for magazines his graceful trifles of antiquarian curiosity. In 1837 he wrote to Longfellow, 'I have seen so little of the world, that I have nothing but thin air to concoct my stories of, and it is not easy to give a lifelike semblance to such shadowy stuff.' Hawthorne presents himself, in the ghostly, penetrating world of his fanciful sketches and stories, as 'Monsieur du Miroir,' a wanderer from the spiritual world, with nothing human except his illusive garment of visibility." An "illusive garment of visibility" is also all Dimmesdale has; it at once protects him and condemns him to unutterable isolation and pain.

To focus on Hester Prynne's shame to the exclusion of Dimmesdale's is, I think, to miss essential dynamics in the book and to miss the sophistication with which Hawthorne handles Dimmesdale's shame and superego conflicts. Some critics have assumed that Hester's "A" can be associated with external, social condemnation; as such, it can be opposed to the guilt and internal condemnation of Dimmesdale. This is, it seems to me, a distortion of the central dynamics of the book, since either shame or guilt can be used in the service of the other, and internal shame conflicts affect the experience of external condemnation.

Finally, it is useful to focus on the quality of Hawthorne's narrative. Although remarkably invisible, Hawthorne's tentative narrator weaves shame reactions into the very fabric of his narrative. There is, I think, an important link between Hawthorne's narrative and shame conflicts

in which looking and not looking express both the longing to be recognized and the terror of being seen. In "The Custom-House," which prefaces the novel, he comments that he is determined to "keep the inmost Me behind its veil" (p. 4). Is he thinking here of what is inmost in Hester Prynne? In Dimmesdale? In his own curiosity about the story?

Hawthorne's narrator proves chary about plumbing the depths of the human heart; he wonders about what will be uncovered, worries about the effect of his intrusiveness, and questions himself about what is really going on. This hesitancy in the narrative, these signs of uncertainty, rhetorically contribute to the sense that there is a secret here whose elucidation is both wished for and feared.[3] As in Greek tragedy, such a device conveys a sense of deep foreboding, and a dread of what might be seen were one to look carefully.

When the narrator, a functionary at the Custom-House, perceives the cloth with the scarlet letter, he picks it up for no good reason. It is a cloth "much worn and faded," a "rag of scarlet cloth [bearing the traces of] time, and wear, and a sacrilegious moth" (Hawthorne 1850, p. 31). The narrator muses that apparently it served some ornamental function. "How it was to be worn, or what rank, honor, and dignity, in by-past times, were signified by it, was a riddle which (so evanescent are the fashions of the world in these particulars) I saw little hope of solving" (p. 31).

In this way, piece by piece, and enshrouded with mystery, unfolds the tale of Hester Prynne and her embroidered cloth. It is as though the narrator, having some foreboding of Hester's tragedy, is embarrassed to piece the story together, uncomfortable putting the clues together, and therefore tells his tale apologetically and ashamedly.[4]

In what follows I will proceed from a discussion of Hester Prynne's shame to a discussion of Dimmesdale's and, finally, to a concluding section in which I return to the question of what makes shame conflicts unbearable and tragic.

[3]This device is commonly used by the chorus in Greek tragedy and was not unknown to Freud and Hitchcock. In films like *Rear Window,* Hitchcock aligns himself with the voyeur in us all who imagines what he cannot see, and by reading signs finds the feelings of dread growing more and more pronounced, creating suspense.

[4]Such fears of piecing a story together are characteristic of shame-ridden patients, who split, hide, and avoid rather than knit together a narrative with anything like a hope of using it to express their "inmost Me." (See, e.g., Kilborne 2004.)

HESTER PRYNNE'S SHAME

When first described, Hester is trying to use her baby to shield herself from the gaze of the public. "Wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around her at her townspeople and neighbors" (pp. 52–53). Here Hawthorne observes a quality fundamental to shame dynamics: "one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another." Hester knew that she could not really hide behind her daughter, since Pearl's very existence served as a blazon of shame at having been conceived out of wedlock. However, armed with her "A," Hester can feel protected, haughty, unabashed, and quite capable of looking back sharply at those who accuse her. The scarlet letter, "so fantastically embroidered and illuminated on her bosom" and "greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony," had "the effect of a spell, inclosing her in a sphere by herself" (pp. 53–54).

As Hawthorne notes, in the embroidered "A" Hester has represented her shame both to herself and to others in a defiant manner, making her much the liveliest character in the book. She is not presented as a helpless woman on whom an unfortunate incident has brought crushing ignominy. Quite the contrary. There is an "in your face" quality about her scarlet letter. Like the attributes of martyred saints (e.g., the wheel of St. Catherine, the lion of St. Jerome), Hester's "A" and her baby serve iconographic functions, paradoxically protecting her against public censure, scorn, and cruelty. Rather than succumb in silence to ignominy, Hester turns the situation around, holding out her child as her primary object of value. And the child's name is Pearl.

Hawthorne's narrator feels an irresistible fascination with the scarlet letter before we know much at all about Hester herself, who when we meet her presents to the world first her baby and then, behind Pearl, the scarlet letter, both tokens of her shame. Later in the novel, in fact, Pearl is referred to as "the living hieroglyphic" (p. 207). These two icons were "her realities—all else had vanished" (p. 59). Here again, as throughout the novel, the tentative narrator, hardly daring to look, and unable to see adequately even when he does, is contrasted implicitly with Hester's erstwhile husband, Chillingworth, the very prototype of the ogler, the prying busybody who tirelessly prods Hester.

Chillingworth is the pretending doctor with respect to whom Hester keeps "her place upon the pedestal of shame, with glazed eyes, and an air of weary indifference" (p. 69). What is meant here by "the pedestal of shame"? Since shame is associated with a wish to disappear, how can there be a pedestal to show it off to the world? One partial explanation is that shame embraces both a wish to be recognized and a terror of being seen (see Kilborne 2002).

The cold-blooded, sinister certainty of Chillingworth, whose very name connotes insensitivity and coldness, contrasts with the narrator's wariness; his single-minded, uncomplicated desire for vengeance contrasts sharply with the narrator's many-layered attempts to get at the truth. But, significantly, Chillingworth's aggressiveness crowds out any hint of shame or any hint that he might be sensitive to Hester's shame. And when Chillingworth tells Hester that magistrates had discussed removing the "A," and adds disingenuously that he had implored them to do so, Hester replies: "It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge. . . . Were I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature, or be transformed into something that should speak a different purport" (p. 169).

Hester knows that shame has a nature of its own, and obeys neither magistrates nor the one shamed. She also realizes that her shame, were she worthy to be rid of it, might "speak a different purport." And what might that be? One possible answer involves the expressive functions of shame, which themselves can be seen to provide Hester both her reality and a purpose in life. And her shame also allows her to be defiant to Chillingworth.

There would seem, then, to be an association between Hester's "A" and its purport, on the one hand, and, on the other, various practices used in Mediterranean regions to ward off the Evil Eye. One such practice consists in turning the evil gaze back on the envious aggressor by symbolically holding a mirror before it. Through her attitude and her use of the "A," Hester holds a mirror up to Chillingworth, forcing him to recognize his sadism, before which he recoils, horrified, "as if he had beheld the place of his own image in a glass. It was one of those moments . . . when a man's moral aspect is faithfully revealed to his mind's eye. Not improbably, he had never before viewed himself as he did now" (p. 172). Note here that Hawthorne describes how Chillingworth suddenly sees, not himself, but the *place* of himself, the place of his image. In other words, Chillingworth is incapable of

understanding how void he is, and can only recoil in horror before "the place of his own image in a glass."

In contrast to Chillingworth's emptiness and inability to respond to his wife's suffering, Hester seems full of defiance, of fire, of wildness, and of independence of mind, all of which she uses her shame to express. Despite her pain (or perhaps because of it), she is not at the mercy of the outside world, particularly not the heckling, prying, sadistic, and eviscerated busybody Chillingworth. Hester can use the scarlet letter as a mirror to ward off the evil gazes of those around her, to turn them back on those who wish her harm, and to enclose herself protectively. Paradoxically, the scarlet letter defines a protective boundary between her and the world. And there is enough correspondence between who she is and her attributes that something of her shame, rage, and injury can come out. From behind her scarlet letter she can look out bravely at the world. Her cipher is, as it were, usable in mathematical calculations. Her shame is there for all to read. Not so with Dimmesdale.

DIMMESDALE'S SHAME

When Dimmesdale is introduced, he is described as having "a startled, a half-frightened look—as of a being who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own" (p. 66). Helen Merrell Lynd observes that in *The Scarlet Letter* "the deepest shame is not shame in the eyes of others but weakness in one's own eyes." She adds that more "than other emotions, shame involves a quality of the unexpected"; it overwhelms, surprises, catches us unawares (quoted in Adamson 1999, p. 70). Dimmesdale, who lives in the penumbra, seems waiting to be caught by surprise. This is an important point insofar as shame dynamics are concerned, since shame often results from the intensity and overwhelming quality of emotions, rather than from any particular feeling. In other words, the "surprise" aspect of intense feelings and the helplessness that accompanies such flooding can themselves trigger shame and be felt as shameful. As such, an understanding of shame is essential in understanding trauma.

Hester's shame does not catch her off guard the way Dimmesdale's does. Whereas Hester embroiders her "A" and has a hand in how people perceive her shame—she can use it with intention, can declare its symbol, Pearl, to be what most essentially defines her (her living hiero-

glyphic)—for Dimmesdale shame is unalterable, inexpressible, and unbearable; it squeezes the life out of him. Dimmesdale's shame, silent and devastating, sears deep into the heart of his being. There is a question here: How is it that Hester can experience the letter "A" and her baby as realities, holding them up to the world, whereas Dimmesdale can only withdraw? Perhaps for Hester shame defines what is real; for Dimmesdale, it eviscerates reality. He cannot let on what his truth is, and cannot even begin to show to the world "some trait whereby the worst may be inferred" (p. 260). As the adored minister to whom members of his congregation turn for reassurance, he must conform to his image. He is pilloried by their image of him, locked in the stocks of their admiration: "It is the unspeakable misery of a life so false as his, that it steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around us, and which were meant by Heaven to be the spirit's joy and nutriment. To the untrue man, the whole universe is false,—it is impalpable,—it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist" (pp. 145–146).

How profoundly and irreparably Dimmesdale has been affected by his years of silent, hidden shame is underscored by little Pearl in a telling sequence of three questions: "What does the letter mean, mother?—and why dost thou wear it?—and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?" (p. 182). This is all Dimmesdale has in the way of iconography: a hand over his heart, a gesture that cannot begin to convey the depth or intensity of his suffering. It is a gesture of an inscrutable attempt to hide. Even "to Hester's eye, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale exhibited no symptom of positive and vivacious suffering, except that, as little Pearl had remarked, he kept his hand over his heart" (p. 188). Hester's "A" covers her heart and speaks it at the same time. By contrast, Dimmesdale's lies exposed and invisible, vulnerable and mute, inaccessible and continually damaged by the incomprehension of those around him.

As Dimmesdale says to Hester, "Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! Thou little knowest what a relief it is after the torment of seven years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognizes me for what I am! Had I one friend, or were it my worst enemy, to whom, when sickened with the praises of all other men, I could daily betake myself, and be known as the vilest of all sinners, methinks my soul might keep itself alive thereby. Even

thus much of truth would save me! But now all is falsehood!—all emptiness!—all death!" (p. 192). When the truth of who one is cannot be expressed or represented to others and exists in the dark within oneself, out of reach and unknowable, it can silently but surely suffocate the sense of self.

Dimmesdale would seem to condemn himself for having to hide. He is hiding not only from external observers (e.g., Chillingworth); more important, he is hiding from what he imagines such external observers want to see. He is hiding from himself, since he has betrayed his ideal of himself, represented externally by his profession as clergyman and by the respect he is held in by his congregation. Dimmesdale implicitly condemns himself: for being false to himself and others; for being both an absent lover and an absent father; and for being unable to preserve a connection with anyone at all. By contrast, Hester, who does not have these crippling superego conflicts, can use her shame to express and protect who she is, and can also put forward for all to see the importance of her connection to Pearl. She can take pride in her ability to love and nurture her child, and can derive strength from her honesty and confidence from her ability to protect Pearl—all qualities one would expect in a clergyman, but which Dimmesdale lacks.

This theme of toxic shame and deceit together threatening psychic viability comes up over and over in work with patients. Dimmesdale feels falsehood, emptiness, and death because his selfhood is profoundly threatened and he is unable to make connections with anyone. A patient of mine once explained a similar conflict: "It's a matter of identity. You must identify with the person you're connecting with. You have to see something in you that you see in them. Every relationship has some form of identification. I want to see similarity. What is so painful for me is that I rarely find it. You could say that you are without an identity when you can't recognize in others what you can't see in yourself. Without an identity you can't make a connection" (Kilborne 2002, p. 32).

Such patients feel ashamed that they have no choice but to be deceitful, to be double, lest they reveal their emptiness and unacceptability to the world.[5] At the same time, they assume that other people will judge them harshly and cut them off should what they attempt desperately

[5]For an exploration of the dynamics of deceit and shame and a discussion of the psychodynamics of spies and double agents, see Kilborne (2004).

to hide from themselves be seen or exposed. Although they feel hopelessly isolated, it is often less uncomfortable for them to rely on others to exclude them rather than bear the weight of their shameful, self-imposed solitude. When prolonged, such duplicity, such doubleness, causes profound confusion and pain: "No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true" (p. 216). Such bewilderment vitiates the sense of reality, so all that is left is falsehood, loneliness, emptiness, and death.

Conrad speaks of "moral solitude," shame and emptiness that strangle the life of the self. In *Under Western Eyes* (1911), the protagonist Razumov, who will betray his friend, leaves the unsuspecting Haldin. Aimlessly, Razumov wanders out into the winter night. He is in a desperate and highly conflictual situation. If he aids Haldin, he becomes an accomplice in a criminal act; if he betrays him, he betrays not only his friend but also himself. "He longed desperately for a word of advice," Conrad tells us. In a reflective aside he continues: "Who knows what true loneliness is—not the conventional word, but the naked terror? To the lonely themselves it wears a mask. The most miserable outcast hugs some memory or illusion. Now and then a fatal conjunction of events may lift the veil for an instant. For an instant only. No human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad" (pp. 30–31).

Hester can show off her "burden of ignominy" to the world; by contrast, the minister can reveal nothing but "the hollow mockery of his good name!" (p. 195). For Hester, "the scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss. The minister, on the other hand, had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws . . . " (p. 200).

Hawthorne here suggests that what makes Hester strong are shame, despair, and solitude. He goes on to note how narrow and airless has been Dimmesdale's world, since he has never been able to get beyond his reliance on the appearances and the approval of those around him, on his acceptance of the given "scope of generally received laws." Hawthorne suggests that Dimmesdale lacks a "passport"; he cannot reach beyond this scope because, unlike Hester, he cannot bear his shame, emptiness, solitude, and despair.

In the final scene, when Dimmesdale confesses, he refers to Hester's scarlet letter as "but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and that even this, his own red stigma, is not more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart!" (p. 255). The full import of his cry from the heart is only partly perceptible at this moment in the story. Then, as the reader strains to imagine what Dimmesdale looks like, where he is, what is happening to him, he is told that suddenly Dimmesdale "tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation" (p. 255).

This rhetorical device—to pull back and withhold physical descriptions in order to leave events to the imagination of the reader— creates suspense. But it does more than that. It allows the reader in fantasy to feel shame for the protagonists and so struggle with the desire to look harder; it creates conflict in the reader, who both recoils and longs to know. What was revealed? How would it have been irreverent to describe what was at last visible? What are the implicit links between reverence and shame? The story continues, leaving all questions unanswered.

"Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER,—the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne,—imprinted in the flesh. As regarded its origin, there were various explanations, all of which must necessarily have been conjectural" (p. 258).

SHAME, CONFLICT, TRAGEDY, AND REPRESENTATION

Hawthorne writes that Dimmesdale was subject to "more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart." How does shame "sear the heart"? And what does Hawthorne suggest are the causes of Dimmesdale's death? We return here to the question of what "deeper" and "more toxic" mean when applied to Dimmesdale's shame.

What are fears of shame made of? And how do such fears lead to repression, which in turn drives shame deeper and contributes to making it more toxic? In the context of anxiety, and of psychoanalytic theories of anxiety, shame can serve as a signal, calling up unconscious fantasies of failure, abandonment, and total extrusion from the social order (see Lansky 1997, p. 334). Such fears of ostracism can join forces diabolically with superego evaluations, such that the exclusion one

fears for what is shameful becomes a justification for feeling utterly alone; others are right in wanting to withdraw. In these ways, shame can trigger ruthlessly repressive defensive reactions, which, in combination with superego condemnations, drive shame experiences and fantasies from consciousness, sending them underground where they fester in the dank and dark, eating away at the sense of self.[6]

Such experiences are to be associated with the dynamics and conflicts that contribute to the tragedy of Oedipus. For the Oedipus of Sophocles, blindness, failed competition, defeat, humiliation, and utter isolation—combined with Oedipus's reliance on being idealized by his people—conjoin in the final act of *Oedipus Rex*. When Oedipus and Dimmesdale are shown publicly to be altogether other than they have been believed to be, when they cannot be held up as models of power, accomplishment, and protection, their deep self-loathing is unleashed. In this way, reliance on idealization in the eyes of others can function as a defense against shame and self-loathing. Oedipus blinds himself, exposing himself as he is to the eyes of the people, and thus severing his visible ties with the world; Dimmesdale, too, dies of a self-inflicted wound, one reminiscent of Sophocles' Philoctetes.[7]

It is often thought that one of the primary functions of analytic work is to help patients represent their feelings and thoughts, both to themselves and to the analyst through the talking cure and free association. The characters of Hester Prynne and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale afford us a chance to explore afresh what "representation" means, how symbolization functions, and how they are related to trauma, shame conflicts, idealization, and masochism.

Hawthorne suggests that there is a scarlet letter burned in Dimmesdale's flesh. What can we as analysts learn from the distinction he makes between Hester Prynne's letter, so gaudily embroidered on her clothes, and that of Dimmesdale, which, in the final scenes, proves lethal?

[6]Frequently, in clinical situations generally and in analysis in particular, shame defenses and reactions can be mistaken for paranoia. When mistrust is pathologized and the agony of shame suffered alone is misconstrued, it is possible to see aggression and paranoia without the underlying despair and rage over being inaccessible, and the resenting of others who make one aware of this. Not infrequently when I have presented cases, material I have worked with as shame-laden has been taken by members of the audience to indicate classic paranoid defenses.

[7]The shame of Dimmesdale can be related also to shame over confusion about body image, as we can see in the powerful vagueness of Hawthorne's account of his death—what part of his body was afflicted and why was it left significantly undescribed? Volumes have yet to be written on shame and body image. A good beginning can be found in the work of Paul Schilder (1950, 1972).

Hester's shame is visible, and one of its manifestations is her bond with her daughter, Pearl. By contrast, all Dimmesdale has to mark his shame is invisibility and the absence of real ties. The mask he wears, that of the concerned and revered minister, only hides more deeply his despair and shame. Hester manages to use the accoutrements of shame (the embroidered "A") expressively, and to derive a sense of power from them; Dimmesdale, by contrast, knows he is ashamed, but can only present to the world a mask that is a badge both of his shame and of his inability to use it expressively, his feeling that nobody must know, and that what people must not know condemns him ineluctably to isolation and, ultimately, death. In other words, representation as considered in the light of the contrast between Hester and Dimmesdale leads for her to truth and strength, and for him to unbearable falsehood, weakness, and pain.

Shame stands at the boundaries between self and others. When it cannot be borne, there is greater anxiety that the "inmost me" will be seen "without the veil."[8] Such anxiety leads to secrets, deceit, and lying. The central shame conflict between the longing to be recognized and the terror of being seen (Kilborne 2002)[9] strikes root in the inability to make a vital connection with anyone, together with shame also over omnipotent wishes organized in response to a fear of never being seen

[8]Psychoanalysts have often followed Freud's lead in prioritizing guilt over shame. As I have attempted to explain elsewhere (Kilborne 2002, 2004), Freud tended to avoid shame conflicts, sometimes hiding them behind the concept of guilt. We know that he took his father's comment "this boy will come to nothing" seriously, and, having felt the sting of its contempt, resolved to prove his father wrong. In *The Interpretation of Dreams,* disguises and the extent to which they are defensive have been a subject of considerable interest for generations. Strikingly, dreams Freud identifies as his own—or dreams which others (e.g., Anzieu, Grinstein) have attributed to him—can be seen to have been instigated by shame reactions and anxieties about lethal looks. Typically, Freud hides his "inmost me" with shame defenses, many of his dreams being driven by humiliating experiences, which his dreams attempt to defend against by reversal. Consider, for example, Freud's "Non vixit' dream (1900), in which he gives "P. a piercing look," in response to which P. "turned pale; his form grew indistinct and his eyes a sickly blue—and finally he melted away" (p. 421). A second telling dream of Freud's is the one in which Old Brücke dissects Freud's pelvis, yet Freud feels nothing at all (pp. 452–453). In these two examples of Freud's dreams we can see defenses against shame at work. In the "Non vixit" dream, positions in reality are reversed (Freud's humiliation before P. becomes P. who melts away in the dream); in the dream of Old Brücke, feelings of shame are significantly evacuated and the dreamer feels "nothing."

[9]This conflict is picked up movingly by Ellison (1952) and Pirandello (1904, 1926, 1952).

or found.[10] Sometimes anxiety over bearing or dealing with these anxieties and shame/exposure conflicts becomes overwhelming. In such cases, individuals will have trouble forging human bonds. A crucial analytic task in such instances is to analyze these shame conflicts.

Dimmesdale's mask represents despair over ever being able to connect with another human being, and deep shame and despair over such a basic flaw or fault. In this sense, of course, his mask or persona is an evocation, a representation, and a symbolic expression. However, it also expresses precisely what Dimmesdale fears might be seen. Also, masks denude their wearer of reality. Hester's embroidered "A" is a part of the fiber of her being, as is Pearl. By contrast, Dimmesdale's persona freezes out his identity, and bleeds out of his life any sense of what is real and true.

Analysts are familiar with the French tradition, in which what is "mentalizable," the process of "mentalization," is given far more import than it is accorded in the American tradition.[11] Contemporary writers are also familiar with Bion's approach to the unrepresentable (1959), which he called "beta elements." But what is often missing in the analytic literature is the extent to which the unrepresentable can be felt shamefully to be the *only* reality, thus creating severe obstacles to analytic work. By "unrepresentable" here I mean unable to be evoked, thought, imagined, or responded to.

To apply this idea specifically to Dimmesdale, it would seem that what seems most real to him (because he fears it most) is his ignominy, shame, and isolation; he brings about the very outcome he struggles so hard to avoid through idealization and through reliance on the perceptions of others (the members of his congregation). Dimmesdale

[10]In other words, the fear of never being found or recognized—together with feelings of helplessness and isolation—triggers omnipotent fantasies of, for example, being able to see everything, or fantasies of being a spy (and hence able to change the world by being unseen and unrecognizable, the invisible mover), or fantasies of being able to control and/or change others by one's thought processes (i.e., one can edit out what is undesirable and airbrush in what one wants to see). These fears and wishes, often revolving around wishes and fears of looking and being seen (and not looking and not being seen), seem to me to be directly related to linking and to object relations.

[11]In the French tradition I include Lacan (1966), whose writings on the mirror stage might have led him to a more thorough exploration of shame conflicts. Clearly, he was on the trail, as was Kohut (1971). However, both stop short of pursuing the pain of intense shame conflicts, and of describing phenomenologically the defensive measures typically used to fend them off. Another perspective on shame conflicts can be found in Sartre (1943, 1975, 1983); particularly in his explorations of the relations between being looked at, looking, and shame.

fears being identified as the father of Pearl because it would bring him ignominy and show up the emptiness of his reliance on idealization in the eyes of the congregation. Therefore, what he can "represent" or "symbolize" must hide what is essential about his identity, making him long for truth without being able to reach it. "Be true! Be True! Be True! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" (p. 260).

The point that Hawthorne makes so powerfully with Dimmesdale is that what Dimmesdale cannot express, evoke, reveal, or represent (whatever produces the wound in the shape of the letter "A") can, in the mind of the reader, be thought to kill him by being burned into his flesh.[12] This is not to say that Dimmesdale does not realize he is ashamed and is suffering. Rather, Dimmesdale's conviction that his suffering is doomed to be borne in solitude bleeds the reality from his life, drains it from the inside, and leaves him helpless to express who he is. This implies that his only reality is the one shown at the end of the book: a man dying of a wound he cannot but hide, a man whose

[12]Given current debates about symbolization and mentalization, it would be desirable to review both the historical context of such debates and the role of shame dynamics. However, it might be useful here to make a few comments in the hope that the larger questions will soon receive the attention they deserve. Those who view mentalization as the end point or terminus of thought processes, their final destination, distort and restrict the scope of thinking, since this implies that thought is not then acted on by feelings, and can be stopped, as it were, in its tracks. It was a stroke of genius for Freud to have described thinking as a process coterminous with life itself. And in conceptualizing thinking as a living process, he needed the unconscious as a kind of reservoir for thinking. By contrast, when the "unmentalizable" becomes analagous to Mary Douglas's famous definition of dirt as "matter out of place" (what is unmentalizable is "matter out of place"), then only what is in place (i.e., mentalized) can be viewed as "clean" and therefore acceptable. Such an emphasis tends to negate the essence of Freud's notion of the unconscious, and to introduce in its place a sort of positivism.

In part because he could rely on the concept of the unconscious, Freud maintained that thought is far larger than language, and that the boundaries between the normal and the pathological are far more permeable than many of the advocates of the concept of mentalization (see, e.g., Fonagy et al. 2002) would seem to assume they are. These advocates (both in England and in France), in keeping with the tradition of linguists and structuralists, appear to believe that there is no reality outside of what is "mentalizable," as though language alone (or any symbolic code) dictates what is real, and thereby once again empty Freud's concept of the unconscious of the importance he gave it. Also, it seems to me that a philosophically grounded debate on the merits of the term *mentalization,* as it can be distinguished from theories of thinking or cognition, might be useful and timely. The tradition of theories of language, thought, and reality (and the ways in which the three can be related) reaches back to the beginning of philosophy and permeates theological debates. It would be a pity if current controversies over "mentalization" were cut off from such a wealth of pertinent sources.

feelings so overshadow what he can possibly put into words or symbols that the external world shrinks into unreality and his feelings acquire a sort of unimaginable hyperreality, a situation that condemns him to unutterable isolation and pain.

Like Oedipus, too, Dimmesdale, because he overvalues his own powers and undervalues his relationships, has no way of tolerably representing his shame to anyone: it is a reality (perhaps his only reality) the hiding of which defines him. His shame cuts him off from any hope of being recognized for the person he is. Worse, the esteem in which he is held by all, their admiration and idealization, seals his fate, and deprives him of imagining how he might "signify" feelings of failure and pain and so acquire some means of breaking loose from his isolation and falsehood.[13] Dimmesdale's congregation need to believe he is someone he is not. Dimmesdale's self-idealization—reflected by his congregation's idealization of him, combined with the inability to imagine shameful feelings to be representable, cleaves him in two, alienates him from himself. Fear of not living up to his own standards and those he upholds in the eyes of others leads Dimmesdale to withdraw into the "dim" world of deceit, where identity becomes no more than a specter. Dimmesdale's deceit becomes a badge of his shame that must then be hidden all the more assiduously. Like many of our shame-prone patients, Dimmesdale is fated to marshal idealization and shame-laden defenses against mourning the loss of (among other things) an ideal of himself, a loss that pulls the rest of him down with it.[14]

In short, Dimmesdale's idealization of himself through the eyes of his congregation seals his fate and condemns him to intolerable shame and unbearable isolation. Like Oedipus, his fear of being seen as less than strong and brave leads to shame, which leads to deceit, which drives the idealization and contributes to making the shameful feelings unbearable.

When shame stands for a loss of connection to others, a loss of any possibility of connection to others, it signals unbearable isolation

[13]For Sartre, hell is other people. One important element in all shame conflicts is the individual's *fantasized* observer (which is internal), and the ways in which the individual uses external humiliations in the service of internal condemnation. See, for example, the chapter on "The Look" in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1943) and Kilborne (2002).

[14]In *The Scarlet Letter,* as in *Oedipus Rex,* what is recognizable becomes ipso facto what one is not blind to (blindness being such a profound theme in Sophocles). In this respect, both Oedipus and Dimmesdale refuse to recognize themselves, a refusal and defiance that brings them unbearable ignominy in their own eyes and leads ineluctably to their death.

leading to death-like self-condemnation for being unfit for any human company, a kind of extrusion from the social body, an ostracism from all human society. This conjures up the desperate isolation and tragedy of Sophoclean heroes, who must die rather than submit to fated ignominy, and for whom seemingly the only play of their free will brings about their self-destruction.

The Scarlet Letter shows us the way to a variety of interrelated themes pertaining to shame dynamics, shame conflicts, and the tragic situation. These include shame and idealization, shame and mentalization, shame (when symbolized or mentalized) as protection, and shame as mirror (holding up one's own shame so as to shame others). They include also the shame of Oedipus, tragic shame, the shame of those who, in desperate attempts to avoid fated shame, build themselves up in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, only by so doing to remove themselves beyond any hope of recognition. They thus bring down upon themselves shame in its most annihilatory forms, which, in turn, marks them as unrecognizably human and leads to ostracism and, finally, death. Thus, the shame conflicts of Dimmesdale—together with the anxieties and pain they cause—are fundamentally similar to those at the heart of Greek tragedy and also, it seems to me, of human tragedy. It is the daunting task of analysis to render them both less unrecognizable and less unbearable.

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