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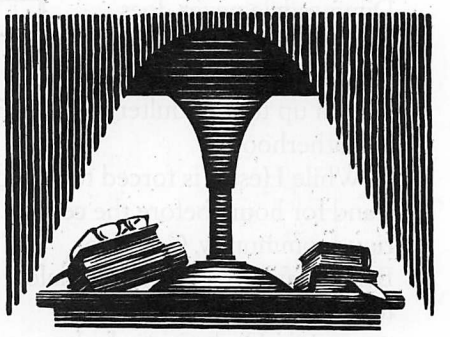
# Sex, Lies, & *The Scarlet Letter*



Once when I was about nine, I wandered into my aunt's kitchen during Thanksgiving to find all the grown-up women whispering, hugging, and crying. When they explained to me what was going on (Auntie Cookie had just found out she was going to have another baby and they were crying from happiness), they confirmed a story I already knew—the one about how babies just happen, and women to whom they happen are considered very lucky. How else to explain the crying? A few years later, when my friend Phyllis told me her parents were "trying to make" another baby, I had the crashing revelation that human actions create babies.

Reading about unwed mothers and welfare these days, I can't help but think the nation is in need of a crash course in sex education. According to an article by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead in the *Atlantic Monthly* last October, we've got lots of public school sex education programs, but they're teaching the wrong thing. Under the guise of "family life education," she wrote, the programs are just ideological bearers of the sexual revolution of the sixties, encouraging anything-goes sexuality for young people. Whitehead thinks there should be more straight talk about the downside of teen pregnancy and illegitimacy, especially for girls, because "girls bear the burdens and penalties of nonconjugal sex."

But Whitehead herself betrays some of the mindset that generates this unequal burden. She describes all the bad consequences for teenage girls who "get pregnant," "find themselves pregnant," and "experience pregnancy." The boys and men in this article "have sexual encounters" and "experiences." She thinks (quite sensibly) it's important to understand what motivates teen girls to get pregnant, but utters not a word about what motivates their male partners to want or not want to make children.

Whitehead's article got me thinking about that great American textbook of sex education, *The Scarlet Letter*. Even those who haven't read it know its central image: An adulterous woman is forced by her community to wear a scarlet letter "A" as a sign of her depravity and a foreboding lesson to other women.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's parable about hypocrisy and punishment is set in the early days of Puritan America, two centuries before its publication in 1850. It opens with one of the most memorable images of social stigma ever printed on the page: Hester Prynne is led from a prison door, carrying an infant and wearing a scarlet "A" she has meticulously embroidered. She mounts a platform in the public square—Hawthorne pointedly calls it a "scaffold"—where she is reviled and remonstrated by the townspeople. Although the punishment might have been seen as mere ridicule in his day, Hawthorne says, in Puritan New England it was "invested with almost as stern a dignity as the punishment of death itself." And indeed, adultery was punishable by death in those days, had the officials really wanted to throw the book at her.

*The Scarlet Letter* is much more than a metaphor for searing stigma. Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl are the archetypal unwed mother and illegitimate child in American social history. Before the story begins, we learn, Hester had been married in Europe to a dried-up, pretentious, academic sort who sent her ahead to America, intending to follow. He got hung up pursuing his fruitless studies, and after a couple of years, everyone, including Hester, presumed he lay dead at the bottom of the sea. Hester and her minister—yes, Puritan minister—Arthur Dimmesdale, had fallen in love and had relations. Hester had Pearl. Mr. Dimmesdale had a crisis of conscience. What Mr.

Dimmesdale never does have as the story progresses is the courage, or necessity, to own up to his adultery or his fatherhood.

While Hester is forced to stand for hours before the censorious community, Governor Bellingham directs Dimmesdale to use his priestly persuasive powers on Hester to make her name the child's father. According to the notes in my edition, Hawthorne's prototype for his fictional governor and upholder of the law was a real Massachusetts governor of the same name. In 1641 Bellingham married a woman already betrothed to a friend of his and performed the ceremony himself in a rush job, so as to avoid going through the required publication of marriage intentions. When asked to step down from the bench during an inquest about his breach of law, he refused.

Thus, Hawthorne shows us "a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical," inflicting a punishment equivalent to death on a woman, through the offices of their minister and their governor, each of whom has transgressed the same laws for which Hester is to be banished from human society.

Hester pays dearly for her and Dimmesdale's love. Unlike him, she cannot conceal the fact of her adulterous sex because she cannot hide her pregnancy. She cannot flee from the fact of her motherhood because the child is in her and issues from her. And she cannot escape parenthood, because no one else is going to take care of the child and child abandonment is frowned upon. Dimmesdale pays, too, but his is a very private penance. He is eaten by guilt and dies near the end of the novel.

> The double standard of *The Scarlet Letter* still prevails.

What about Pearl? She is marked from the get-go, presumed by the Puritans to be the child of the devil. Even Hester absorbs the social view that nothing good can issue from a woman who was in a state of sin when the child was "imbibing her soul." So naturally, Pearl turns into a child who "cannot be made amenable to the rules." She is wild and seems to be part animal, part demon, all of which is to say she is definitely not fully human. She does eventually grow up to lead an apparently prosperous life—but only by escaping from her home and living in England.

So it is today with what is now called the illegitimacy problem: The stigma of nonmarital sex, the identity as biological parent, and the work of child rearing almost always fall on the women. In the absence of an omniscient narrator, the fathers often remain invisible, at least to the public eye. Like Pearl, illegitimate children are regarded as predestined to a life of waywardness. Now, however, we cite statistical probabilities instead of the devil as the cause of their propensity to crime, drug abuse, dropping out of school, going on the dole, and having more out-of-wedlock children.

Many conservatives seem to have adopted *The Scarlet Letter* as a primer on what to do about illegitimacy. Mothers of illegitimate children should be heaped with scorn for neglecting, abandoning, and abusing their children. They are irresponsible and immoral for "getting pregnant," as though they did it all by themselves. (In Hawthorne's Puritan Salem, at least, Dimmesdale would have been held equally responsible and immoral, had he been found out.) The way to deter people from having illegitimate children is to do what Salem did to Hester: prevent the mothers from receiving any social succor. Thus, the Republican Personal Responsibility Act would eliminate AFDC eligibility for young women who bear children outside marriage, and it would preclude any additional monies for women already on AFDC who bear another child.

The double standard of *The Scarlet Letter* still prevails. Both the Republican and Democratic versions of welfare reform pay lip service to holding fathers more accountable, but both treat mothers far more harshly. Mothers on AFDC will be required to work at paid jobs, anywhere from 18 hours a week (Clinton's Work and Responsibility Act) to 32 or 35 hours (the Republican Personal Responsibility Act). Both plans, like Governor Bellingham, talk tough about establishing paternity. Mothers will have to cooperate with the state in identifying fathers and establishing paternity. The Republican bill, strikingly, does not add a thing to existing child support enforcement tools or provisions. Neither bill sets up work requirements, much less job programs, for fathers.

So beyond identifying more fathers, what will welfare reform do to men? At its toughest, it might succeed at getting the courts to order more child support, but whether it will get more money to kids is another question. Nothing in the Republican reforms creates more jobs, more job stability, or higher wages for men. (States would, however, be allowed to use money they would otherwise spend for food stamps to subsidize private sector jobs.) And under the current system of child support enforcement, which both welfare bills would merely extend, all but $50 of any child support paid by fathers goes to the state, not to the mother or children. No matter how much fathers contribute under this system, the financial position of their kids does not improve by more than $50 a month. And perhaps even more important, nothing in the contemplated welfare reforms is addressed to increasing fathers' involvement with their kids. Because most of the father's payments go to the state, the system doesn't even give dads the psychological satisfaction of helping their kids.

Part way through *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester and Pearl have one of those quintessential conversations about where Pearl "came from" that might have been a lesson in family values, had Hester not felt the pressing need to protect Pearl's father. Hester drills Pearl: "Tell me then, what thou art and who sent thee hither?" Pearl demurs, so Hester offers the correct answer: "Thy Heavenly Father sent thee." Pearl is having none of it: "He did not send me. I have no Heavenly Father." She begs her mother, "Tell me, tell me."

Then Hester gets wind of a plan to take Pearl away and put her in the care of the state. Some of the good Christians of the town, it seems, had concluded that "if the child were really capable of moral and religious growth . . . then surely it would enjoy all the fairer prospect of these advantages by being transferred to wiser and better guardianship than Hester Prynne's." Hester takes Pearl to the Governor's mansion to plead her case. There she has an audience with Governor Bellingham, Arthur Dimmesdale, and another minister named Wilson.

Bellingham commands Wilson to determine whether Pearl has had a Christian upbringing. Wilson quizzes her: "Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee?" Pearl knows the correct answer as well as she knows the rest of the catechism, but she also knows it isn't true. In a moment of impish perversity, she says her mother plucked her from a rose bush. That does it. She is obviously "unsocialized," as the current rhetoric would have it. She will be taken from Hester and put in care of the state. And here's the pain of it: The very lie that Hester has maintained to preserve the authority of church and state and to protect the good name of Dimmesdale becomes the source of Pearl's resistance and the evidence of Hester's unfitness as a mother.

Dimmesdale, true to character, remains silent during this little child welfare hearing—until, that is, Hester rises up in a fury and commands him to speak on her behalf. He has the gall to bring the authority of the church down on Hester once again, this time to her advantage. He speechifies about God's purpose in sending this "child of its father's guilt and its mother's shame" as retribution and even a "torture" to the mother, to remind her of her sin. Hester gets to keep the kid because the church, the minister, and the dad all say punishment is good for her soul.

The great lie here—that bad children were created by bad mothers and that fathers and social policies bear little responsibility—is the same lie that justifies taking children away from their mothers. It's bad enough that these unwed mothers take support from the government. (Never mind, as Katha Pollitt said so eloquently in *The Nation*, that AFDC is merely replacing the cash support the fathers ought to be providing.) But many of them turn out to be bad mothers to boot. Even with all the money we taxpayers give them, they still don't feed their children properly, supervise them, discipline them, or give them quality time. Their kids would be better off in the care of the state. Better an orphanage than a neglectful and abusive mother.

There are, certainly, a whole lot of children who are ill cared for, neglected, and abused, and who would probably be better off in some kind of group home for young unwed mothers or boarding school for kids. But why are their mothers—the ones who do feed them, watch them, and spend time with them at all—the only parents who are bad? In most cases, if unwed

mothers spent as little time with their kids as unwed fathers do, we would call it abandonment. Why do we look for solutions by focusing on the character and behavior of the mothers, while ignoring the fathers?

Lest anyone doubt how lax our norms for fatherhood are, let them look at child support awards among divorced couples. Fathers are generally ordered to pay only a small proportion of their income in child support, and the portion declines as the man's income rises. Around half of fathers who are ordered to make child support payments do not make them after the first year or so, and courts do next to nothing about enforcing the awards. Since we don't hold middle class and affluent fathers to any standard of decent support for their children, how do we expect to convey norms of financial responsibility to the poor? Apparently, through brute force. We have a much more aggressive child support enforcement system for poor men, and we exact a much higher portion of their incomes than we do for middle- and upper-income men in divorce cases.

By the time she is seven, Pearl comes to know on some level that Dimmesdale is her father. Once, Hester and Pearl come upon Dimmesdale in the middle of the night. He is standing on the scaffold where the three of them once stood together. He beckons them to join him, and they all hold hands in a moment of electric intensity. "Minister," implores Pearl, "wilt thou stand here with mother and me, to-morrow noontide?" "Nay, not so," replies Dimmesdale, backpeddling furiously as the import of public recognition hits him. "I shall indeed stand with thy mother and thee one other day, but not to-morrow." Pearl tries to pull her hand away, but Dimmesdale hangs on. She begs for acknowledgment and commitment, for a promise that Dimmesdale will take her and her mother's hands in public. She tries to pin him down to a date. Pushed into a corner, he names "the great judgment day." "The daylight of this world shall not see our meeting," he says.

Near the end of the novel, Hester meets Dimmesdale in the woods and tries to persuade him that the three of them should return to Europe, where they could live out the love that "had a consecration of its own." She tells him he has repented enough, and casts off her patch with the scarlet "A." Then she begins performing that primal task of motherhood—helping members of a family to get along, to care for one another, to love each other. "Thou must know Pearl, our little Pearl," she tells him. Dimmesdale worries that Pearl won't warm up to him or trust him. "She will love thee dearly, and thee her," Hester assures him. But Pearl, summoned now to join Hester and Dimmesdale, goes into a "fit of passion" and refuses to come until Hester dons the scarlet "A" again.

Hester gives a classic speech, the one women always give their children when bringing a new man into the family or when trying to reintegrate a prodigal father: "He waits to welcome thee. . . . He loves thee, my little Pearl, and loves thy mother too. Wilt thou not love him? Come! He longs to greet thee!" Pearl has been burned before. If he really loves her, she wants proof. She wants Dimmesdale to act like a father and husband. "Doth he love us?" she asks, staring into her mother's eyes. "Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?" Once again, the adults tell her a deeper truth that contradicts all their previous words: "Not now, dear child."

Barbara Whitehead says that a "truly fact-based approach" to sex education would have to teach some hard truths. Schools would have to teach that unwed teenage parenthood is often bad for kids, that "not all families are equally capable of caring for children," and that love cannot make up for a lack of long-term commitment, responsibility, and sacrifice on the part of parents. Whitehead glimpses the dilemma here: how to teach such lessons without stigmatizing children who do grow up in broken homes or in unwed teenage families?

The dilemma is much more profound than Whitehead imagines, though, because the facts are far more cruel than she acknowledges—and crueler than children ought to bear. Are we really willing admit to ourselves, let alone teach our kids, that some parents are less fit than others? That poor and less-educated parents are not as capable of giving their kids a good life as those in a higher socioeconomic station? That all children are not born equal? That some adults beat their kids and are terrible

parents in this and other ways, but they're allowed to have kids anyway?

We can't teach children these lessons, not so much because they would stigmatize some kids, as Whitehead says, but because they would challenge some fundamental liberal principles about equal opportunity and about the sacrosanct privacy of the family. But we can, I think, try to teach adults a few things.

**Lesson One:** Children are not (*pace* Dimmesdale) to be used, or worse, brought into existence, as punishment for their sinful parents and object lessons to other errant souls. Unfortunately, this seems to be the premise behind state laws requiring pregnant minors to get parental permission for abortions. If we think minors are too immature to make a good decision about whether to have a child, they are surely too immature to be a good parent. So why make them have a child, if not to teach them a lesson? ("She made her bed, now let her lie in it," is an all-too-frequent adult answer.) If we truly want parents to make commitments and take responsibility for their children, why do we place so many obstacles in the way of abortion for young girls and women who know they and their children's fathers can't be responsible parents?

**Lesson Two:** Supporting and caring for children are two different things, and in many ways incompatible. One requires earning money to buy food, clothing, and shelter. The other requires cooking and feeding, doing the laundry, cleaning the floors, never letting an infant out of your sight, cooing and cuddling, and numerous other activities not calculated to get you in good with your employer. We have historically had a division of labor in two-parent households because it's pretty near impossible to be out earning money and in minding the kids at the same time. Working moms make a go of it nowadays only by farming out much of the caring part of the job to someone else—their mothers and sisters, preschools, day care, and nannies. But we fault poor single mothers for not doing either thing well—supporting or caring—when doing both well is next to impossible and when middle-class and married mothers don't do it all themselves anyway.

Work requirements are counterproductive to welfare reform's professed goal of improving parenting. Moreover, giving poor mothers a little help with child care is not, as many Republicans would have us believe, going to undermine Western civilization, or even motherhood.

**Lesson Three:** DNA does not a father make. Current welfare reform proposals would beef up state bureaucracies for producing more DNA tests, more paper paternity acknowledgments, and more paper designations of fathers' wages as child support. This system creates no incentives for biological fathers to act like fathers. We need to restructure the child support system so that mothers, fathers, and kids all know and see how fathers' economic contributions help the kids. This may mean letting fathers' contributions make an AFDC family much better off if they have a contributing father (or two) than if they don't. It might mean giving fathers credit for time they spend with kids, as well as for the cash they contribute. (Perhaps once they recognize the value of men's caring time, legislators will be forced to credit women for caring time, too.) And it might mean sacrificing some of the budget relief provided by the current system of siphoning off fathers' payments for the state. But if the theory of economic incentives that now drives so much of welfare reform is applied with equal rigor to mothers and fathers, we will have to make these changes.

As it stands, the Personal Responsibility Act encourages states to spend money on mandatory parenting and money management classes for mothers. A welfare reform bill that was serious about repairing the fractured family would also encourage states to spend money on programs to teach responsible fatherhood. Such programs would have to emphasize the personal satisfactions that come with knowing and raising your children, instead of preaching a financial obligation devoid of personal relationships. They would also have to confront honestly the problem of domestic violence, since violence is a major reason why many mothers want neither time nor money from their children's fathers.

**Lesson Four:** Babies don't just happen. It takes a male and a female. . . . In the search for people whose motivations we might better understand, and whose character and behavior we might reform, there are two places to look. ❑