



Claiming Unalienable Rights Through *The Scarlet Letter*

BY KOBI NELSON

Overview

This lesson helps students understand the role of symbols in *The Scarlet Letter* and how they contribute to a deeper understanding of the characters' motives and actions. The activities and conversations throughout will lead students to consider Hester's journey in light of the Declaration's principle of unalienable rights—specifically the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The relationships between Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale will be analyzed as students interpret the ways that Hester's story reveals a deeper understanding of the themes of equality and unalienable rights as perceived by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Students will practice cognitive empathy and critical analysis as they develop an essay that synthesizes their thoughts about *The Scarlet Letter* and the Declaration of Independence.

Note: This lesson is the 3rd in a 4-lesson series.



Essential Questions

- How does Hawthorne use Hester's characterization to explore the principles of "equality," "unalienable rights," and "consent of the governed"?
- How does Hester's journey embody struggles over "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" within restrictive social systems?

Learning Objectives

- Identify key symbols in *The Scarlet Letter* and interpret their significance in relation to Hester and the principles of the Declaration of Independence.
- Develop a clear and defensible thesis statement that conveys an interpretation of Hester's journey and its connection to the principles of the Declaration.
- Analyze text using relevant evidence to support your interpretations and commentary about Hester's journey.
- Consider how Hawthorne's perspective influences your understanding of the themes of equality and unalienable rights within the context of Puritan society.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **CHA 1.A.** Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- **CHA 1.D.** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- **FIG 5.C.** Identify and explain the function of an image or imagery.
- **LAN 7.B.** Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and may establish a line of reasoning.
- **LAN 7.C.** Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.

Materials

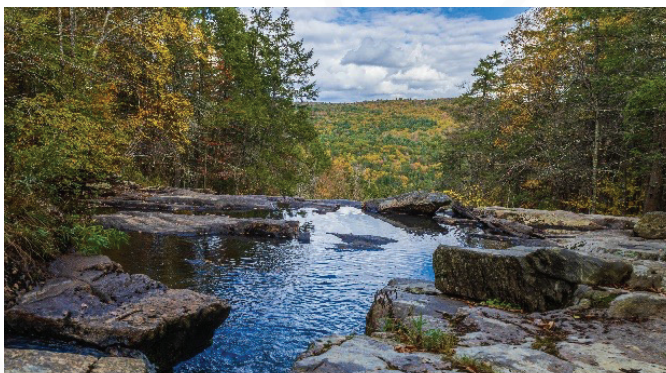
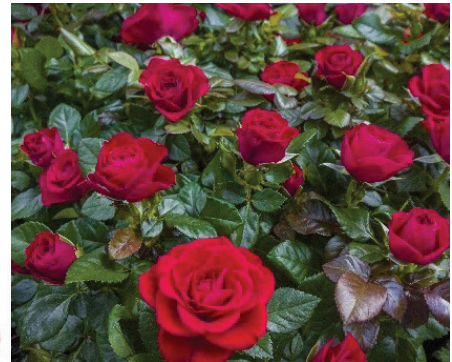
- Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)
- *The Scarlet Letter*
- Printed photos or pictures for the gallery walk
- Rights Table (created by teacher)

Warm-Up

GALLERY WALK

Create stations around the room that feature photographs of the following images or similar ones. Under each image, post a large sticky note or piece of butcher paper. Have students go around the room and write what they think the photograph could be a symbol for.

See the following suggested images:



DEBRIEF

Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions:

- Which symbols do you think are the best representation of a theme in *The Scarlet Letter*? Choose 2–3.

- Why do you think these are the best representations?

After students have had time to share their thoughts in small groups, come together as a whole group. Have a few students share insights from their groups with the whole class.

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING

STEP 1

Tell students that the next set of chapters in *The Scarlet Letter* are going to challenge us to think about the principle of unalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence ("that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"). To spark their thinking, ask students the following questions:

- What does it mean for a person to have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?
- What does it mean for an entire community or society to have these rights?

Ask students to share their thoughts with the entire class.

STEP 2

Prepare and hand out a table like the one that follows.

Rights According to the Founders	Definition	Symbol in <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	Key Quotations/Evidence
Right to Life			
Right to Liberty			
Right to the Pursuit of Happiness			

STEP 3

In small groups, ask students to complete the Definition column of the table. If students are struggling with the definitions, ask them to read (or reread) the "Powers of the Government Derived from the Rights of Individuals" section of Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#).

Student-friendly definitions of the rights are as follows. Note: The following definitions are paraphrased from the [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#).

- Right to Life: Being alive meant you were free and equal. It also meant you had rights to things like self-preservation and pursuing what you believe leads to happiness.

- **Right to Liberty:** This right meant not only being able to do what you needed to do to stay alive but also being able to pursue happiness. For the Founders, liberty was the freedom to act in a way that promotes virtue as opposed to the looser idea of the freedom to act any way you want.
- **Right to the Pursuit of Happiness:** This right was seen as having the end goal of being able to live securely in your rights. Happiness was not guaranteed by this principle. Instead, it speaks to the ability to seek happiness because the government protects your right to life and liberty.

STEP 4

To keep the idea of symbols and imagery fresh in students' minds, return to the images displayed for the opening gallery walk. Ask students to think about these images and discuss the following questions with a partner or in a small group.

- Which symbol do you think best represents the definition of what it means to have a right to life? Why?
- Which symbol do you think best represents the definition of what it means to have a right to liberty? Why?
- Which symbol do you think best represents the definition of what it means to have a right to the pursuit of happiness? Why?

DURING READING

Have students read Chapters 13–18 of *The Scarlet Letter*. While they are reading, they should identify symbols that are repeated in the book such as the forest, the rosebush, Pearl, light/dark, shadows, and the scarlet "A" that Hester wears. Also, have students note symbols that represent the right to life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness.

Remind students to annotate their text with questions and mark any details that give them new insights or information about the characters or setting of the story.

AFTER READING

Once students have read Chapters 13–18, revisit the table they filled out earlier with the definitions of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Rights According to the Founders	Definition	Symbol in <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	Key Quotations/Evidence
Right to Life			
Right to Liberty			
Right to the Pursuit of Happiness			

CLASS DISCUSSION

Moderate a class discussion (such as a debate, fishbowl discussion, or a [Burkean parlor discussion](#)) where students discuss the application of rights to the character of Hester.

STEP 1

Assign discussion roles/stances to each student. The stances in the table are meant to foster debate, so each row contains two stances about the same topic. If you would like to conduct a more organic discussion, you can read aloud a specific stance as if it were an open-ended question and then have students engage in discussion.

STEP 2

Stance 1	Stance 2
Hester's decision to keep her daughter, Pearl, despite social condemnation, exemplifies her right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.	Hester's decision to keep her daughter, Pearl, leads to more isolation and suffering, which does not ultimately lead to liberty or the pursuit of happiness.
Hester's journey toward redemption shows her courageously asserting her right to pursue happiness despite societal judgment.	As Hester journeys toward redemption, she faces roadblocks because of societal judgment that prevents her from being able to truly pursue happiness.
Hester's internal suffering shows the psychological toll she has taken through societal rejection and condemnation. It has hindered her ability to claim her (and Pearl's) right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.	Hester's ability to confront her feelings of guilt and shame allows her to confidently assert her rights (and Pearl's rights) to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
Hester's right to love and form relationships (specifically with Dimmesdale) is fundamental to her pursuit of happiness.	Hester's affair with Dimmesdale diminishes Hester's ability to assert her rights because it leads to societal alienation.
The complexity of Hester's emotions throughout her experiences ultimately reveals the enduring nature of her rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness amid societal constraints.	The complexity of Hester's emotional experiences ultimately reflects the inability of these rights to exist within the context of Puritan society.

Establish clear norms with students before the discussion and take time to revisit them before beginning. Remind students to use their notes about symbols in the text and use them when appropriate as they discuss. Then facilitate the discussion.

STEP 3

After the discussion, prompt students to reflect individually by journaling about the following questions.

- What new insights did you gain about Hester's character and her struggle for the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?
- How does your understanding of Hawthorne and our previous lesson about equality affect the way you view Hester and her journey?
- How does your own understanding of the principles of the Declaration of Independence deepen your thinking about Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale?
- During the discussion, which arguments resonated with you the most, and why?

DEBRIEF

Ask a few students to share their thoughts with the whole group. Push students to think further about Hawthorne's perspective when writing *The Scarlet Letter*. Ask them if he intended to present Hester's journey as one to be applauded or one to be avoided. This question will bring students back to the previous lesson and the way that Hawthorne wrote the character sketch of Anne Hutchinson. Try to get students to both empathize with Hawthorne (perhaps asking if his perspective had changed between the time he wrote "Mrs. Hutchinson" and *The Scarlet Letter*) and think critically about his portrayal of Hester.

WRITE

Give students the following essay prompt and ask students to write their response on a physical or digital document. *Note: This essay will be a way for you to assess students' abilities to both critically analyze and cognitively empathize with Hester Prynne as a character.

Essay Prompt:

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the character of Hester Prynne grapples with societal judgment and personal identity within the constraints of Puritan society. Drawing on your analysis of self-evident truths, equality, and the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, analyze how Hester's journey reflects, challenges, or gives deeper meaning to these principles.

Instructions

- Develop a clear thesis statement that presents a defensible claim about how Hester's characterization and experiences illustrate or complicate the principles of self-evident truths, equality, and the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

- Use relevant and sufficient textual evidence from *The Scarlet Letter* to support your interpretation. Identify specific quotations that support your point of view.
- Explain how Hester's choices and actions reveal her complexities as a character.
- Analyze the function of key symbols and imagery in the text, such as the scarlet letter, the scaffold, and the forest. Discuss how these symbols relate to the concepts of self-evident truths and contribute to your understanding of Hester's rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- Establish a logical line of reasoning that connects your evidence back to your thesis statement.

Considerations:

- Think about how Hawthorne's personal history and societal influences shaped his ideas.
- Consider specific language from the Declaration to uncover the writers' intentions and beliefs regarding the unalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
- Reflect on your own experiences and how they inform your understanding and interpretation of both *The Scarlet Letter* and the Declaration of Independence.

Closing

In closing, point out that we have spent a lot of time discussing Hester's journey in *The Scarlet Letter*. Although it is crucial to consider the character of Hester as an individual, note that it's also important to look at the effect of governance on Hester and her story. Ask students to reflect on this effect and the ways that justice played out for Hester in a society where only certain voices were allowed to be heard. If there is time, allow a few students to share their thoughts with the class.