

THE BURGUNDY LETTER

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Kirk Shimano



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

The Burgundy Letter is a comedic retelling of the classic novel *The Scarlet Letter* set in a high school and reimagined for a digital age.

Playwright Bio

Kirk Shimano is a playwright based in Vancouver, British Columbia. His works tend to live on the intersection of Gay Street and Nerdy Avenue, having explored the human side of lovesick zombies, overbearing Mesopotamian deities, and insecure robots. A previous resident of San Francisco, he has worked with a number of theatre companies in the Bay Area indie scene.

Synopsis

In an online community, Hester90 is publicly shamed and shunned for a racial slur against another student, but refuses to name her cohort in the hateful conversation. RoChi wants the conspirator found out and humiliated. Climate_Dale wants everyone to come to his annual Earth Day address. How do we strike a balance between holding individuals accountable and having compassion for those who apologize for their mistakes?

Characters

HESTER90 [W]: Once one of the most popular girls in school, now a social outcast. She remains sure of herself even as her outlook is tinged by a deep remorse.

PEARL ❤️👉 [W]: Asian heritage; happiest when immersed in the minutiae of any topic. While those who don't know her see her as solitary, she sparkles with like-minded individuals.

CLIMATE_DALE [M]: Though already a future head of state in his own mind, he is shockingly unaware of who he is today.

ROCHI [A]: Pearl ❤️👉's best friend and fierce defender; a firm believer in justice.

THE MODERATOR [A]: Hot air and not much else.

HAWTHORNE [A]: Our guide through this story.

TOWN SLOWPOKE [A]: Always five steps behind.

TOWN KNOW-IT-ALL [A]: Always five steps ahead.

TOWN WORRYWART [A]: Wait, how many steps are there? Did I miss one?

THE ANONYMOUS [A]: Anywhere from zero actors to a hundred — a faceless body with an unsettling presence, full of judgment and devoid of sympathy.

Themes

Race, relationships, bullying, environmental issues, friendship, gossip, personal responsibility, self-image, technology

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Do you believe in second chances?
- ★ What do you think is an example of “cancel culture” and why?
- ★ Does public shame work?
- ★ When people hear the truth, do they always believe it?
- ★ When someone does something wrong, is it enough for a person to say they’re sorry?

Pre-Read Activities

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is for students to work quickly.

- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to the poem. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
 - » What characters can be derived from the poem?
 - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
 - » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute. Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

The Scarlet Letter Adaptation Exercise

- ★ As a class, read a small section from the original *The Scarlet Letter* text.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will have a copy of the original section. Their first task is to identify characters, locations, and possible lines of dialogue.

- ★ Next, groups are to discuss, decide, rehearse, and come up with a one-minute section of a scene. This is an exploration, rather than an assessed assignment. How do you adapt? What are the challenges?
- ★ After groups present, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Research Project: Author

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of the original text, Nathaniel Hawthorne.
 - » Who is Nathaniel Hawthorne?
 - » What is his background?
 - » When did he write *The Scarlet Letter*?
 - » Did he write any novels?
 - » Was he a “successful” writer?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they’ve learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they’ve learned.

Original Scene: I’m sorry

- ★ Have students discuss and create a scene on the topic of saying sorry. Is it enough for a person to say they’re sorry for doing something bad? What happens when people come across as insincere with their apology? Should someone be shamed if they are sorry?

Original Monologue: I'm sorry

- ★ Have students write an apology monologue. Discuss with the class the event or action that the character is sorry about. Let them decide if they are going to be sincere or insincere.
- ★ Discuss afterward the language of sincerity. How do you know someone is really sorry? Is being sorry enough for some actions?

Shame Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will discuss and create a tableaux series on the topic of shame.
- ★ First, have them discuss the topic: How will you visualize it? What does shame mean? What does shame represent? Is shame helpful? Why or why not?
- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss three images that represent shame. It could be three separate ideas, or it could be a story of images.
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau for each image.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.
- ★ Discuss afterward. What are the similarities and differences in the images that the groups chose?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *The Burgundy Letter*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What is the Field?
3. Why is Hester90 being shamed?
4. What does Hester90 refuse to do?
5. Is Climate_Dale a popular or unpopular character?
6. What is Hester90's punishment?
7. What is one of the facts Pearl knows about whales?
8. What is whale fall?
9. What confession does Climate_Dale make?
10. What advice does Hester90 want from Pearl?
11. What is Pearl's response?
12. What happens when Rochi reveals the colluder?
13. Finish this sentence: "We can tell people the truth, but we can't tell them how to_____."
14. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. What is the symbolism of the “A”?
2. How does the playwright theatrically represent the slur? How would this representation affect an audience?
3. How does the playwright use technology to tell the story? How would the technology affect the audience’s experience?
4. Why is the formatting of the character names important to the world of the play?
5. Now that you’ve read the play twice, in your opinion, how should The Anonymous be costumed to visualize their role in the play?
6. Analyze Pearl’s language and word choice. How would you physicalize this character based on her language?
7. What is the significance of the line, “It isn’t your job to help her!”?
8. What is the significance of the line, “I don’t understand how you can be so nice to me now when you were so mean to me before”?
9. What is the significance of the line, “But we were the people DOING the shaming! That makes us the good guys, doesn’t it?”
10. What is the significance of the line, “I think we should spend less time feeling sorry for people who do racist things and more time thinking about people who are victims of racism”?
11. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *The Burgundy Letter*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about shame? Cite the text to support your answer.

3. What is the playwright trying to say about racism? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is going to happen next to Hester?
5. Can you understand Pearl's perspective in the play, even if you don't share it? Why or why not?
6. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?
- ★ After reading the play, what are your thoughts on shame and cancel culture?
- ★ Is it enough for a person to say they're sorry?
- ★ Would you end the play differently? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

Adaptation Compare and Contrast

- ★ In the pre-read section, you adapted a section of the original text into an original scene. Now, compare and contrast your adaptation to how the playwright adapted the same moment.
 - » What are the similarities and differences?
 - » Infer why the playwright made some of the choices he did with his version of the scene.

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Playwright Process

Playwright Kirk Shimano talks about his process of writing and adapting The Burgundy Letter. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

Why did you choose to adapt this novel?

One of the most exciting and terrifying aspects of social media is its promise of new interactions that humanity has never experienced before. But at the same time, we're still people, so some of the challenges we face really aren't that new, after all.

I thought that using a classic work of literature as a framework for examining a modern problem would be an interesting way to put an emphasis on the human side of our world and give us an old perspective on a new problem.

Why did you choose these particular characters to tell the story?

When we see someone ostracized on the Internet, our attention is often focused on the act of public shaming and a person's immediate downfall. In the original *Scarlet Letter*, the story starts with Hester's shaming and takes us through the aftermath. I was interested in exploring the life of a character that accepted responsibility for their actions and tried to find the next step.

In telling this story, though, I wanted to make sure that we didn't lose sight of the harms of the prejudice that colour Hester90's original offense. So it was important to me that Pearl ❤️👊 was drawn as a full person with her own conflicts reconciling an urge to help someone in need with standing up for her own sense of self.

But not everyone on the Internet gets treated the same way, particularly when gender politics are in play. So Climate_Dale's progression is an important contrast to both Hester90 and Pearl ❤️👊, giving us a chance to examine just who gets targeted for the most scorn in the first place.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

I struggled a bit with deciding how closely to follow the original source material. There were earlier drafts that had an exact correspondence between the scenes of the play and the chapters of the novel, though I eventually ended up condensing some of these scenes to improve the pace of the play.

The character that is now known as Rochi started as a much more direct analogue to Roger Chillingworth, embodying the same spirit of venom. Fortunately, a playwriting colleague of mine observed that Pearl ❤️👉 deserved to have at least one friend, and that led me towards a version of the character which I find much more interesting.

However, I always knew that my ending would differ in one crucial way from the novel. In the book, Hester is often cast as a passive character. I wanted to make sure she was given a key decision about whether to pass her shame onto somebody else so that we could see how her experience had changed her.

Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

I always enjoy rewrites more than first drafts. When I'm writing the first draft, I'm often unsure of whether everything will fall into place. I find myself stressing over whether I have enough material to cover the topic that I want to explore.

When I'm rewriting, I at least have a structure to start from and know that my story has a beginning, middle, and end. I like focusing on a single issue with each rewrite and feel like I can make concrete progress with each new draft.

What is your writing process like? What engages you about playwriting?

Usually I like to start with some sort of research. For this play, in addition to a close read of *The Scarlet Letter*, I spent some time reading from accounts of both people who were publicly shamed on the Internet and from people who had been the victims of harassment. I also read about the qualities of a sincere apology and (for obvious reasons) a bunch about whales.

When I'm writing, though, what most engages me is the interaction between the characters. I'll often look back to my research to pull a significant fact or two, but the rewrites are always focused on what each character wants and how they interact. I really enjoy the process of imagining how a specific character sees the world and

realizing that view through the specifics of their language and their actions. Then, ultimately, the biggest reward is seeing how all of the creative forces behind a dramatic production bring this all to life!