

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

WORLDVIEW: *The Scarlet Letter*

Study questions 12a. through 12c. in the Worldview Socratic List. Answer the questions with respect to this story in your own notes. Then, in the lines below, answer the following question in a single page, using the details of the story to support and explain your response. For page-length answers, attach a separate sheet if necessary.

How do the chronological details of the author's life resonate with the presuppositions suggested by the text?

Possible student response:

Nathaniel Hawthorne lived 1804-1864. He grew up during a time of immense creative output. His American contemporaries include noted New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott. Christian poet laureate Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and U.S. President Franklin Pierce were his college fellows. Hawthorne became acquainted with Herman Melville in 1850. The ideas and subject matter of these men shaped the artistic conversation in which Hawthorne would participate.

Likewise, during his lifetime, great literary works were published by England's Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth. When Hawthorne was only fourteen, Mary Shelley published her Gothic classic, *Frankenstein*, and American Gothic Edgar Allan Poe published his *Tamerlane*; the brooding supernaturalism of the style would augment Hawthorne's own developing narrative sensibilities. Meanwhile, the second portion of German Romantic Goethe's *Faust* was released on the heels of its author's death. Echoes of these Romantic and Gothic authors subjects and styles can be seen in Hawthorne's works, especially *The Scarlet Letter*. Interestingly, the Danish Hans Christian Anderson published his first book of moral fairy tales in 1833, which works likewise can be perceived as influential in the development of Hawthorne's moral imagination.

Among these noted personalities, Hawthorne came to know the American Transcendentalists well, and he questioned their guiding

philosophy regarding the ultimate perfectibility of man. His participation with Emerson and Alcott in Brook Farm, a utopian, transcendental communal experiment, deepened this skepticism. Many of his novels, including *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, speak to these concerns.

Hawthorne's strongest interests lie in the realm of human morality. Issues of the soul prove his primary preoccupation. His novels attempt to try moral ideals and philosophies in the verisimilitude of human circumstance. He wished to discover the probable truth of human doctrines and moral philosophies, and his novels provided a laboratory for this human drama.

The author's ancestral heritage also influenced these intellectual and spiritual interests. Noted Puritan leaders such as a great-great grandfather John Hathorne, who presided as judge over the Salem Witch Trials, and another forebear, who distinguished himself as a great persecutor of the Quakers, peppered Nathaniel's lineage. Hawthorne would wrestle with the ignominy of their religious rigidity; truly it was this shame that led him to change his name with the insertion of the "w" it presently bears. Yet, their single-minded intensity and authentic spiritual faith provoked his admiration. To Hawthorne, they were a study in humanity: principled spiritual men intent on the good who unwittingly participated in evil. Knowledge that he was of their stock and shared their predispositions fueled his imagination and became fertile ground for his moral tale, *The Scarlet Letter*. The author's work in the Salem Custom House during the early 1840s prior to the publication of this novel furnished him with a perfect frame for this work of historical fiction.