

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

WORLDVIEW: *The Scarlet Letter*

Study questions 13a. through 13h. 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 author’s beliefs and the intellectual history of his time resonate with the presuppositions suggested by the text?”

Possible student response:

American author Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1804 and died in 1864. Thus, he was a contemporary of the New England Transcendentalists, many of whom he called friend. Likewise, he participated and contributed to the movement now termed American Romanticism.

The Romantic movement began in Germany but found iterations in every Western society of its time. Marked by emotion, psychoanalytical observation, supernaturalism, and natural landscapes that imaged human events and emotion, Romantic literature transcended continental borders. In America, Transcendentalists conflated Romantic ideals of nature with Eastern and Native American pantheism. These marinated with the local Christianity of the region and the rugged individualism of the colonies to create a uniquely American form of Romanticism.

Coming of age in this period of New England, surrounded by authors and personalities such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott, Hawthorne found himself in the midst of a growing intellectual conversation regarding the nature of man, the world, and society. His novels reflect this dialogue and contribute to it.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne illustrates the fallen nature of both man and creation, calling into question the probability of transcendence through Nature with beautiful profundity. “Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law,

nor illumined by higher truth—with the bliss of these two spirits” (Hawthorne 193). If Nature empathetically reflects and images the emotional attributes of man, it can in no way save him. Hawthorne diverges from his contemporaries in this thought. Man and Nature are fallen. If they are to be saved, it must be by some agent outside creation. His novel offers the Christian God as this agent, His mercy, forgiveness, and grace as the conduit, and conscience as its arbiter and intermediary. Sin then becomes an occasion for man’s salvation as conscience works through it to produce repentance and self-knowledge.

Hawthorne’s novel speaks to the ideal society as well, suggesting that man is saved not by retreating from other men, but by dwelling in truth with them. While Thoreau lives in isolation in *Walden* and Emerson rants against human government and authority in “Self-Reliance,” Hawthorne considers the necessity of society, its errors, and its felicity. To the individualists, he speaks of a corporate unity born not of human divinity and sinlessness, but of burdens truthfully shared.

And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. Women, more especially—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought—came to Hester’s cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. (Hawthorne 244-245)

Ironically, even as she functions as ministering angel to her community, Hester imagines that some stainless prophetess will inaugurate such a kingdom, deigning herself unworthy of the privilege because of her sin. Yet the author concludes with a description of Hester and Dimmesdale’s shared tombstone, noting the scarlet A, outstanding upon its black backdrop, imbuing the image with figurative and poetic significance. The black background figures sinful humanity, a fallen world, and death; however, the bloody A, reimagined throughout the novel to represent not adultery but angel, shines hopefully out of the blackness. This redemptive transmutation Hawthorne offers as true transcendence. He imagines a society of creatures, rather than gods, walking in knowledge and truthfulness,

free from pride and egotism, living in grace with God and each other—a Kingdom still to come.