

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

CONTEXT: *The Scarlet Letter*

Answer the following question in a single (paragraph/page). Refer to the events of this story to explain your answer. For page-length answers, attach a separate sheet.

Did the author have experiences that might have made him think or feel a certain way about his subject? What evidence from the story itself supports your answer?

Author Nathaniel Hawthorne hails from Salem, Massachusetts. In the novel's opening Preface, "The Custom House," Hawthorne reveals that this "native place...did possess, a hold on [his] affections..." (Hawthorne 19). He explains that, as his family has resided in Salem for nearly 250 years, his affinity is understandable:

It is now nearly two centuries and a quarter since the original Briton, the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement, which has since become a city. And here his descendants have been born and died, and have mingled their earthy substance with the soil; until no small portion of it must necessarily be akin to the mortal frame wherewith, for a little while, I walk the streets. In part, therefore, the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust for dust. (20)

He feels a visceral affinity for his forefathers.

In particular, the author notes his peculiar interest in one man: “The figure of that first ancestor, invested by family tradition with a dim and dusky grandeur, was present to my boyish imagination as far back as I can remember”(Hawthorne 20). This progenitor he describes as “grave, bearded, sable-cloaked and steeple-crowned” (Hawthorne 20). He references this man’s Puritan traits and identifies him as a “soldier, legislator, judge...ruler in the Church...persecutor” of the Quakers, and father to a son much similar in deeds and renown (Hawthorne 20). This allusion suggests the rulers that executed the historic Salem Witch Trials.

Although he admits this history shames him, he acknowledges that “strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with” his own (Hawthorne 21). It is this natural connection and sympathy as well as his historical discoveries while Surveyor of the Old Salem Custom House that contrived, he asserts, to the creation of his novel. With it, he hopes to exercise his gift as a writer to “recall whatever was valuable in the past” (Hawthorne 36). Among such valuable things, he claims to have found amid the abandoned boxes and packages in the Custom House the highly embroidered, if time decaying, scarlet A that prompted his story. With this emblem, he will salvage what is valuable of his progenitors, who have likewise gradually “sunk out of sight” (Hawthorne 22).

Whether this anecdote is true, or merely a contrived story frame, Hawthorne’s novel attempts to account for the actions and attitudes of his defamed Puritan forefathers, and in so doing, rightly locates its central subject matter in the realm that most animated them: Law and Grace. Thus, through his

novel Hawthorne undertakes to honestly portray his ancestors, not as a revisionist historian might by lampooning them on the one hand, or acquitting them on the other. Rather he characterizes them as they once were – human in their ambitions, piety, earnestness, devotion, fear, foibles, and faith. Rather than discounting their contribution to the ideas for which they lived and died, he remembers and explores these ideas with sensitivity, humor, gravity, and reverence.