

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

SETTING: *The Scarlet Letter*

In a single page, evaluate the thematic significance of this story's HISTORICAL or INTELLECTUAL SETTING – that is, explain how the author uses this structural element to emphasize the story's main themes. As always, refer to the events of the story in your answer. For page-length answers, attach a separate sheet if necessary.

Possible student response:

Hawthorne sets *The Scarlet Letter* in the 17th century Massachusetts Bay Colony of Boston. There, Puritan colonists worked to create a theonomic system of government, which functioned according to their understanding of Biblical Law and morality. These leaders understood God's blessings and curses to be attached to their vigilant law keeping; thus, they looked for signs of visible sainthood in their members and punished individual deviations from biblical injunctions to avoid God's wrathful judgment on the colony proper. In the novel's preliminary chapter, "The Custom House," Hawthorne recalls one of these historic efforts in the persons of his forefathers, the Hathornes, who presided over the renowned Salem Witch Hunts. He asserts a family likeness in his own temperament and character, which anticipate and contextualize the story's study of human depravity in the Puritan community.

Throughout the novel, his setting provides opportunities to study the ubiquitous nature of depravity in even pious men. From his portrait of the fallen Reverend Dimmesdale to the vengeful cuckold, Roger Chillingworth, he demonstrates the intrinsic nature of sin. He depicts the hypocrisy that accompanies a ladder-based theology and the fragmentation of community that results. Narrative passages imply the "venerable Puritan minister or magistrate, the model of piety and justice, to whom that age of antique reverence looked up as to a mortal man in fellowship with angels" to have been hypocrites, who hid secret sins behind false fronts. Thus, Hawthorne censures the separation of public sinners like Hester from the rest of the human community (Hawthorne 90).

Finally, his setting allows him to contrast failed earthly attempts at utopia with the prospect of a future divine kingdom, where saints walk in the light with one another, experiencing true community. “Women, more especially—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion—or with the dreary burden of 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” (245). Hester’s empathy and openness anticipate a future fellowship in which men and women alike embrace their creaturehood. Hawthorne, thus, uses his story’s historical context as fertile ground to augment the thematic yield of his narrative: human depravity requires supernatural mercy to produce personal penitence and graceful community.