

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

WORLDVIEW: *The Scarlet Letter*

Study questions 3a. and 3b. 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.

***Do the story's answers to these questions
tell the truth as the author saw it?***

Author Nathaniel Hawthorne investigated 19th century American Transcendentalism during his early life. His participation in the Brooks Farm communal experiment with Bronson Alcott and other renowned Transcendentalist thinkers, however, confirmed his skepticism regarding the ideology. Much like his Puritan ancestors, Hawthorne suspected a darker nature governing man. He explores nature and man in his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, depicting both as fallen.

In Hawthorne's novel, even the renowned religious leader is flawed. Though eager and pious, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale hides his sin and acts duplicitously.

He had striven to put a cheat upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but had gained only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame, without the momentary relief of being self-deceived. He had spoken the very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood. (Hawthorne 141)

Even so, throughout the narrative, he struggles against his sin to find redemption and freedom.

One pivotal scene takes place in the forest, a place where nature reigns, untouched by civilization. He depicts it as sympathetic, bathed in sunlight, its privacy shrouding the outcast lovers Dimmesdale and Prynne from the prying eyes of condemning man as they plot their escape:

And, as if the gloom of the earth and sky had been but the effluence of these two mortal hearts, it vanished with their sorrow. All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine,

pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the gray trunks of the solemn trees...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)

In the untouched wilderness, the two are tempted to flee society and law to live freely in their forbidden love. Nature acquiesces to their natural lusts and longings.

Hawthorne sets his readers up in this sun-drenched landscape, an image of Thoreau's wilderness renewal, and seems to condone the lawless evasion which the lovers project. Yet, a closer reading suggests a ruse on Hawthorne's part. His own narrator refuses this view: "Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth..." (193). This Nature did not reflect higher truth. It was heathen, unreformed. Furthermore, young Pearl, portrayed just as wildly passionate and natural as the forest, refuses to recognize her mother or Dimmesdale without their honest admission of the truth before the eyes of men. She rejects her mother without her scarlet badge and will not kiss Dimmesdale, lest it be in full view of society upon the public scaffold. Nature does not provide a transcendent law. Hawthorne portrays it like man, unreformed.

True to his Puritan roots, Hawthorne portrays a fallen world and fallen man in his novel. His contemplation of depravity provides a fine opportunity to envision divine mercy and grace, which become the major thematic ideas in his story. Rather than the performance driven government of Puritan New England, he imagines a world without pretense, in which fallen men and women extend the mercy they have received to other fellow sinners, empathetically salving the wound of fallen human experience with enacted divine grace. In her return to the colony at the narrative's conclusion, Hester prefigures this world, and weary, heart-sick sinners beat a path to her door.