

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

CONTEXT: *The Scarlet Letter*

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

When did the author live? What significant events took place during the author's lifetime? Did he know about them? Was he involved in them? How do these details make themselves apparent in the story? Do these details help us understand the story's themes?

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was born in Salem, Massachusetts. He descended from Puritan ancestry, in particular a John Hathorne who was intimately involved in the notorious Salem Witch Trials of the 17th century. Shame of this connection caused Nathaniel to leave his birthplace and to change the spelling of his surname to reflect the present "w" addition. His return to Salem for an appointment in its Custom House in 1845 revived his thoughts about his family history and provoked his meditations on the nature of man and grace in his best-selling novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. He admits as much in the novel's preliminary chapter, "The Custom House:" "Such are the compliments bandied between my great-grandsires and myself, across the gulf of time! And yet, let them scorn me as they will, strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine" (Hawthorne 21). In spite of their differences, Hawthorne felt akin to his ancestors. His novel explores that kinship.

Hawthorne's association with members of the Transcendentalist community and his participation in the Brooks Farm communal experiment likewise colored his life and work. This experience soured him on the possibility of man's native goodness, reaffirming the darker perspective of man's nature that his Puritan ancestors both taught and demonstrated. Depravity colors every character in his novel. Both the law keeping Puritan leaders and the lowly villagers in the story betray this instinct: The good wives depicted at the story's beginning wound Hester with their gossiping tongues. The spiritual leader of the community, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, hides his complicity in Hester's sin, his cowardice causing her and her daughter to bear their punishment

alone. Hester's rightful husband, Chillingworth, likewise hides his identity, working revenge in the shadows as his wife suffers public shame as a scapegoat. Hawthorne notes villagers who likewise bear undiscovered sin and the governor's own sister, who practices witchcraft openly.

Transcendentalist philosophy itself creeps into his narrative. He allows himself a diversion in Chapter 18, "A Flood of Sunshine." Herein, he portrays the transcendental perspective of nature, sinless and good, full of sunshine and freedom. However, he portrays this atmosphere as a deceitful temptation away from the only respite the protagonists would discover. Hawthorne spurns the Transcendentalist idea of unfallen nature in the story's subsequent plot. His main characters refuse to circumnavigate law and justice to engage in what was natural: sin.

Man's proclivity to sin, however, is not Hawthorne's sole subject. His novel studies the source of man's restoration. If man could not transcend the realities of his darker self by nature, where was he to find relief and rescue? Here, Hawthorne returns to his better roots, depicting Christian doctrines of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the climactic moments of his plot. Dimmesdale's decision to embrace the scaffold reinforces Hawthorne's theme of redemption through repentance, forgiveness, and mercy. Consequently, he offers, like the wild rose by the prison door in his initial chapter, a vision of divine grace to his readers.

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