

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

BIBLIOSCOPIC DIALOGUE: *The Scarlet Letter*

In an essay of appropriate length, identify and explain this story's **SPECIFIC THEME** and discuss how the author uses this theme to address the idea of **memory**. As always, refer to the events of the story in your answer.

An essay regarding **memory** in *The Scarlet Letter* might expand on the following ideas with relevant textual supports:

With the narrative frame that “The Custom House” and “Endicott and the Red Cross” establish, Hawthorne makes his specific themes of human depravity, law, and grace relevant to his readers. His insightful remarks regarding inherited traits, “intertwined” with his own although “sunk almost out of sight,” make his poignant depiction of America’s Puritan ancestors an imperative and broadly directed caution against hegemony of all kinds (Hawthorne 22). His trenchant critique of the historical abuses in the Puritan experiment coupled with his humane characterization of the earnest piety of leaders like the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale present a sympathetic composite sketch of fallen man’s grandeur and misery.

As Dimmesdale articulates at the novel’s compelling climax, divine Law succeeds in reforming man where human law fails. Hester’s harsh punishment only hardens her heart and isolates her from her fellow sinners. Dimmesdale’s suffering from the affliction of a conscience burdened by unconfessed immorality has a different effect. In him, the divine Law performs its proper function of ferreting out sin and driving him to grace, confession, and fellowship. His eleventh-hour leadership reforms Hester as well, securing her for the community as a minister of grace and compassion.

Casting the most revered member of Puritan society as a hypocritical adulterer, Hawthorne precludes arguments against man’s total depravity. Recurrent implications of various persons’ secret empathy for Hester as well as



the general public vitriol for her indict the rest of the community in this hypocrisy as well. None in the story are guiltless.

The Puritan experiment in theocracy, which required observance of the Divine Law in every particular, placed community leaders in a precarious position as representatives of sinless compliance. Should a community member bear unconfessed sin, the entire community might suffer divine censure. The leaders must represent obedience to the Law both in their personal comportment and in their severe sentencing of lawbreakers. Of course, even as the historic Israelites failed to perfectly keep the Law, so the Puritans would fail in their own iteration of the project.

Yet, the Law would not fail **them**: it would perform its gracious office of drawing them, both individually and communally, to repentance, confession, and communion with one another and with God. Reimagining man's nature and the nature of the Law through story, Hawthorne puts his readers in the way of this grace as well, thereby punctuating the importance of memory.