

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**SCORE/GRADE:**

**CHARACTER:** *The Scarlet Letter*

In a single (sentence/paragraph/page), evaluate the thematic significance of this story's ANTAGONIST – 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:

Hester Prynne longs to be free from the judgment and isolation her sin has elicited from her community and her conscience. She needs mercy and grace. Unfortunately, the doctrines of visible sainthood that animate her colony require shame inducing public penance, which marks her as a scapegoat. Isolation results. This ostracism hardens Hester's heart, impeding her true penitence. She works to expunge her sin through public displays of service and sainthood, yet her conscience continues to prick as her daughter, the living scarlet letter, mercilessly fingers her crime. Her husband too, having elicited her secrecy, relentlessly works in anonymity to expose her secret lover, compounding her sin by complicity.

Hester finds antagonists in the harsh and hypocritical Puritan leaders, her leering husband, her beloved daughter Pearl, and even in herself. Neither her good works, her faithful mothering, or her martyr-like determination to bear her shame alone successfully free her from guilt and shame. Neither do they restore her to community. Hester cannot redeem herself, but needs help from outside. Bound by her sinful nature and goaded by the unconfessed sins of those around her, she suffers torment and isolation. These man versus man, man versus society, and man versus self conflicts alike underscore the theme of human depravity, calling attention to man's ubiquitous need for divine mercy and forgiveness.