

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

CONTEXT: *The Scarlet Letter*

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

What did the author believe? Was he a member of a religious tradition, political party, or other organization? Was he associated with a social cause or movement?

Was he associated with a particular intellectual school or mode of literature?

How do these details make themselves apparent in the story?

Do they help us understand the story's themes?

Example of student answer follows:

Historical sources note that Hawthorne changed his name from Hathorne to Hawthorne to distance himself from Puritan ancestors of Salem Witch Trial fame (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). He purportedly surmised that his early childhood poverty and misadventures must have been a divine retribution for his ancestors' harsh legalism. His novel, however, assumes a Christian world, complete with laws, sins, justice and injustice, the latter of which he distinguishes between that of man and God. Although his Puritan ancestry made him cringe for their harsh judgment of sinners, he never truly forsook their Christian doctrine. Rather, he understood it in light of divine grace.

Hawthorne befriended noted American Transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott, even spending some time in the historic Brook Farm Community. This enterprise solidified his distaste for Transcendentalist speculation regarding man's better nature. He sided with contemporary Herman Melville, whose own Puritan ancestry grounded his understanding of human nature as dark and suspect.

Hawthorne's style was that of American Romanticism; so, it is in keeping that his novel pits the noble savage ideal against the Christian doctrine of original sin. Though the nature imagery he paints resembles that of Thoreau and Emerson, his plot line and narrative commentary stand in opposition to their doctrines. Rather than a healing Nature, holy and divine, he suggests a heathen

landscape, alluring but fallen. This becomes most clear in chapter 18, “A Flood of Sunshine.” His romantic depiction of nature and use of the noble savage trope seem intentionally ironic against the Christian landscape and anti-relativism of his story. In the world of his novel, divine law is built into nature in the form of conscience, which cannot be circumvented by shunning society.

Recognizing the psychic discomfort Hawthorne felt due his ancestry and his rejection of the Transcendentalist ideals of man’s goodness, an exploration of man’s depravity that pits the Puritan doctrines of law-driven righteousness against doctrines of a righteousness by grace seems obvious. *The Scarlet Letter* tries inconsistencies in the Puritan social experiment, depicting the reformed doctrines of grace (that they likewise professed) as the only means to freedom. Although he illustrates the necessary hypocrisy his ancestors’ experiment in theonomy begot, his narrative conclusion remains ambiguous in its judgment of them, reflecting the honest confusion with which he regarded his own history and affirming his theme of grace as divine.