

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

WORLDVIEW: *The Scarlet Letter*

Study questions 4a. and 4c. 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 (paragraph/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?***

***Are the story's answers to the questions consistent with the worldview the author builds into
the story?***

4. What does the story say about human society and relationships? What rules govern human society and/or relationships in the story? Is human society the source or occasion for good or evil in the story? What good things does it produce? What evil things?

Hawthorne portrays Boston's Puritan society as a source of great evil in the story. At the mercy of its theocratic form of government, leaders apply the Law to public instances of sin, making scapegoats of those discovered. Hidden sinners, however, continue to enjoy public liberty, shunning the shamed sinners among them. This creates a hierarchy of goodness within the community that encourages duplicity. Likewise, those branded sinners are outcast, removed from the sphere of good human relationship. Hester experiences this at the story's outset:

In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind. (Hawthorne 87)

Hawthorne speculates about the harm this does both to the individual and to the relationships within the community. Fearing exile, sinners withdraw, hide, play the hypocrite, and become isolated, rather than confess and repent. They choose to suffer the travail of conscience, rather than that of public defamation and censure.

Of course, Arthur Dimmesdale is the best case in point regarding this impulse. Even his piety encourages him to hide his sin, lest he lose the ability to lead others toward righteousness. Hester affirms this impulse, refusing to expose him to public judgment to retain the honor of his person and work in the community. But Arthur is not alone in his misbegotten

isolation. As Hester goes about her office in the town, she senses the hidden secrets of other hearts, unspoken burdens.

Walking to and fro with those lonely footsteps in the little world with which she was outwardly connected, it now and then appeared to Hester—if altogether fancy, it was nevertheless too potent to be resisted—she felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. (89)

These secrets terrify her, coming as they do from the most upright within the community. She suspects man's darker nature.

Hester's work with the heartsick and lonely at the story's conclusion, however, suggests that her public sin creates a sensitivity within her for other sinners. Once her understanding of her own depravity softened into repentance, she affords others a better kind of society.

Women, more especially—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought—came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. (245)

In fact, Hawthorne's inclusion of this part of the story suggests that it is not society in general that he finds evil, but a certain kind of society.

With his novel, Hawthorne condemns any society that would pretend to differentiate between saints and sinners. His story asserts instead the depravity of all mankind. Through the climactic resolution of the story, he puts the solution to man's sinful state in the mouth of the story's greatest paradox, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. His deceitful sin and sincere piety make him the perfect mouthpiece for Hawthorne's answer to the narrative conflict: How can men make a good society, especially if mankind is not good? If man is sinful and depraved, can we expect a society of men to be any different? Hawthorne's Dimmesdale suggests that honest, public confession of sinful deeds releases individual sinners from bondage and knits them together with other public sinners through an act of grace. This society of the saved—superior in holiness and humanity to its counterpart—he concludes is the good society.