

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

WORLDVIEW: *The Scarlet Letter*

Study questions 10a. through 10f. 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.

How do the details of the author's personal life comport with the presuppositions suggested by the text?

Does the story seem to speak to contemporary issues or personal concerns of the author?

Do details from the author's life help to contextualize the story? How?

Possible student response:

Nathaniel Hawthorne descended from notable Puritan leaders associated with Salem's notorious witch trials of the late 17th century. His comments in the preliminary chapter of the work, "The Custom House," suggest his ruminations on this association, as does the historical fact that he changed the spelling of his name to distance himself from these ancestors. His shame regarding the harsh judgment and errors of his kinsmen shape and contextualize his novel. Rather than a subversive hit piece on the Puritans, the narrative seems an honest attempt to scrutinize the ideals of their utopic project and lay them alongside their theological presuppositions regarding the nature of man, God, and society.

Hawthorne did, historically, work in Salem's Custom House. Whether the details of the chapter are all factual, the experience did furnish him with a frame for his creative storytelling. His comments regarding the social elements of his own era and the likeness between them and their forebears suggest that the lessons of the past inherent in the Puritan experiment need curating.

In addition, Hawthorne's historic experience at the Brook Farm communal experiment with noted Transcendentalists such as Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau likewise shape his comments regarding nature and society. His creation of Pearl as a noble savage,



for example, as well as his indulgence in the pathetic fallacy of chapter eighteen seem to confront this philosophy. Transcendentalists believed all created things contained a divine spark. Nature therefore was a pathway to God by which man might overcome the hindrances of modernity and conscious reason to achieve oneness with the divine oversoul and live in harmonious community with one another. Hawthorne spoke skeptically about the possibilities of such a project, especially after his experience at the farm. In his novel, he portrays nature as fallen, misleading man to find false hope and security in his natural inclinations, rather than in truth and God. Hawthorne portrays human society within the novel as flawed, since it too is composed of fallen men. He depicts Puritan theocracy as far from utopic.

While it would be a mistake to read Hawthorne's novel as autobiography, it is clear that issues pertinent to his life influenced his choice of subject matter and themes. An orthodox Christian understanding of man permeates the story. A dark Romanticism likewise colors the narrative, with brooding, gothic supernaturalism and mystic omens, black men, witches, and demons. These, however, serve to facilitate his psychological study of man, his nature and needs.