

Name: _____

Class: _____

Date: _____

SCORE/GRADE:

WORLDVIEW: *The Scarlet Letter*

On the lines below, write an **interpretive question** about this story's themes or worldview and summarize three (3) possible answers based on the details of the story. An interpretive question is an open-ended discussion question *to which there are several possible answers that can be supported by the text.**

Interpretive Question:

What does the story suggest about the origin and nature of law and grace?

Answer #1

Hawthorne represents law as a necessary evil that finds its origin in man's sinful depravity. The story's initial scene, which opens upon the town jail, initiates the subject. The imagery Hawthorne uses to describe the place juxtaposes the dark and depressing reality of sin and judgment with the undeserved grace present in Nature:

Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass plot, much overgrown with burdock, pigweed, apple peru, and such unsightly vegetation which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rosebush, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him. (Hawthorne 56)

Hawthorne characterizes law as emanating from man's fallen nature, but grace as coming to the lawless through the natural expression of Nature's heart – mercy.

Answer #2

The story suggests that law is a social construct while grace is a natural emanation of the divine disposition.

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While civilization is responsible for the “black flower” that is the prison, full of darkness and rooted in social severity, Nature shows its merciful heart through the wild, untamed beauty of the rosebush. This grows, even upon the mechanism of social judgment, softening society’s rebuke with its own sweet, undeserved fragrance.

Answer #3

The story suggests that law is rooted in reality and cannot be escaped by a flight into the natural order, which, fallen like man, smiles upon man’s sinful rebellion. In the forest scene between Hester and Arthur, Hester openly blames society for imposing the harsh penalties she and Arthur suffer for their adultery. The couple plan to run away and live with the savages; yet they are discovered and cut off by Dr. Chillingworth. Arthur recognizes in this the intervention of God, who will not be thwarted in His designs to ferret out sin and bring individuals to repentance:

The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! It may be, that, when we forgot our God—when we violated our reverence each for the other’s soul—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. God knows; and he is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By sending yonder dark and terrible old man to keep the

torture always at red heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost forever! Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell! (Hawthorne 239)

Dimmesdale views all of his suffering and punishment as acts of God to draw his soul from death to life. Even the evil manipulations of Chillingworth he sees as God's mercy—the physician a sort of hound of heaven. Speaking with the voice of authority at the turning point of the novel, Dimmesdale declares law grounded in God. To break it is to defy him. Judgment and punishment, divine attempts to deliver the sinful soul from eternal perdition, he construes as nothing less than divine grace.

*Each of these perspectives could, of course, be developed into thorough essays on the topic. Teachers may utilize this exercise by requiring simple, single paragraph answers and a list of quotations to support each. These may serve as the substance of an in-class discussion of the question and result in a single essay on the subject.