Name: Leo Chai

Subject: Language and Literature HL

Candidate Number:

Written Task 2: Critical Essay – Outline

General

Prescribed Question:

How could the text be read and interpreted by two different readers?

Text analyzing

*The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne)

Focus on the course:

Part IV: Critical Study: Literature

Essay:

Thesis statement:

Word Count: 1000

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne processes feminist ideologies, but targeted an audience composed of males in the 1800s, (Hawthorne) who have minimal awareness of woman’s rights, mainly because of woman’s lack of education and thus lack of ability to read. (UK Essays) This historical fiction set in the 1600s tells the story of Hester Prynne, whos scarlet letter marks her sins and guilts of committing adultery. Castigated and isolated by the scarlet letter on her bosom, Hester raises her daughter Pearl at the edge of the colony near a forest. Roger Chillingworth, Hester’s husband, meanwhile seeks revenge on Reverend Dimmesdale, the respectable minister of the town and Pearl’s father. The polysemic and opaque use of different literary features disguises the feminist themes and appeals to its original audience while delivering Hawthorne’s ideology to modern feminists

Hawthorne employs techniques such as imagery and motifs polysemically, concealing the feminist ideology from the average male readers of the time and only to feminists whos views allow them to relate more easily. Imagery submerges the readers into the text by enabling them to connect the sensually represented thematic ideas to their personal life. When Hawthorne describes the Hester that just walked out of the prison door turning her “little face from the too vivid light of the day” The average 1800 male readers will likely interpret the sunlight as hope, and thus see Hester’s action of avoiding it as a representation of condemnation from her guilt. This is likely because the 1800 society had substantial judgments on sins, and Hawthorne has just previously described Hester as “a black shadow emerging into the sunshine,” juxtaposing the sinned Hester and the bright sunshine. Modern Feminists on the other hand will likely interpret the sunshine as a judgment from the society on one’s action. Hawthorne evokes this perspective by describing the “morning sun” having “shone on “ the ladies in the crowd, who were judging Hester’s sins and punishment. The “too vivid” sunshine criticizes the puritan’s overwhelming judgment on Hester’s choice of Dimmesdale for her love, thus promoting the freedom of thought, which appeals to feminists. The romantic era glorified nature with significance, and Hawthorne utilized this motif during Hester’s meeting with Dimmesdale to expose Chillingworth’s secret revenge. They sat on “the heap of moss where Hester and Pearl had … been sitting” earlier, in the “shadows of the woods” next to a “small brook”. The diction of “moss” and “shadow” suggests the sublime aspect of the setting while the “small brook” and “woods” suggest the picturesque and beautiful. The novel’s audience in the 1800s would likely interpret the scene by its gloomy and dangerous sublime aspects, as their meeting is tied together by their common sin, which was seen as dangerous at the time. This leads to the theme idea of avoiding sins. Feminists on the other hand would likely appreciate the picturesque and beautiful more, as this interpretation portrays the darkness in nature as the only safe place for the couple to hide from society’s judgment. Similarly to the first example, this promotes the theme of not judging other people’s actions by criticizing the judgmental nature of the puritan society. Hawthorne therefore successfully uses imagery and motifs polysemically to create separate interpretations of the text to gain population in its audience while still expressing his beliefs.

Furthermore, Hawthorne’s opaque use of equivocation and allusions leads different readers to interpret the novel differently caused by insufficient context for the techniques. The power of ambiguity is that it allows the readers to use their imagination to fill in the gap, which makes the story more relatable to them, but in this context serves the purpose of allowing multiple interpretations of the text to exist. When Chillingworth suggests to Hester that the council was debating to take off her scarlet letter from her bosom, Hester equivocated that “the power of the magistrates cannot take off this symbol.” Since the scarlet letter is mainly a symbol for Hester’s guilt, male readers in the 1800s would likely interpret Hester’s refusal of removing the letter as evidence that the strict puritan beliefs are assimilating Hester. This is especially because Hawthorne described Hester as wearing “grey” puritan like clothing and have concealed her long hair, appearing more like a puritan. Feminists would instead see this as an action of Hester guarding her last individuality, as Hester showed “pride” of the ‘A’ on her chest. Since feminists interpret the scarlet letter as Hester’s identity and a symbol of expression for her love, the scene thus has the thematic significance of demonstrating Hester guarding her independence from being stripped away by the council. Moreover, ambiguity in biblical references also creates separate perspectives as different groups of people value religion differently. For example, when Mistress Hibbins called Pearl “the lineage of the Prince of Air”, Hawthonre is alluding to the bible, since The Bible described Satan to be “prince of the power of the air”. To the religious men in the 1800s, this allusion not only makes the tone serious, but also links Pearl and Dimmesdale with Satan. This allusion thus characterizes Pearl as a product of evil, which delivers the theme of avoiding sins. Feminists, who are less known for their passion for religion but independence instead, will likely see this allusion differently. Feminists will probably focus on the fact that Pearl accepted this characterization of her father, as she later tells the shipmaster that her father is the “prince of the air”. This aligns with her previous action of refusing to hold Dimmesdale’s hand on the scaffolding, and shows her expression of independent thought. Hawthorne thus demonstrates how ambiguity in equivocation and allusions separates perspectives.

Therefore, Hawthorne polysemically and opaquely uses literary features to disguise the feminist ideologies in the book from its general audience, so it appeals to its male audience of the 1800s while still expressing his feminist ideologies. Hawthorne expressed his philosophy while also appealing to a broad audience makes *The Scarlet Letter* a masterpiece of the romantic era.