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: In *The Scarlet Letter,* Hawthorne’s polysemous and opaque use of different literary features allows different interpretations of the text, which disguises the feminist themes and appeals to its original audience while delivering his ideology to modern feminists.

Argument 1:

Hawthorne’s use of literary techniques has multiple meanings, and one’s personal bias might prevent them from understanding certain meanings, which thus creates the multitude of interpretations

Point 1:

Imagery creates a immersive environment for the readers to allow more personal interpretations of the text. Hawthorne’s use of this feature can be seen from the light imagery. The sunlight is described to be “too vivid” for Hester’s “little face”. The original audience of the book will likely see the sunshine as judgment on Hester’s sin, as the quotation took place during Hester’s public humiliation, which the townspeople is also judging her sin. They might further see Hester’s movement of shying away from the sun as trying to avoid the guilt of her sins. Feminists will interpret the sunshine’s vividness as exposing secrets. This is connected to the puritan society’s sinned and judgmental nature, to create generalization that the sun can expose anyone’s secret to the judgmental society around them.

Point 2:

Hawthorne also uses the motif of nature to create multiple interpretations. The setting of Hester’s unite with Dimmesdale is chosen to be in the forest, and they were described to be sitting on “the heap of moss where Hester and Pearl had […] been sitting.” While the sublime is provoked by the gloomy diction of “moss” and “shadow”, the loving nature of the beautiful is touched upon by the “woods” next to a “small brook”. The sublime suggests the danger of the forest, which reflects the danger of committing the sin. The awe represents the motivation of committing the sin. The original audience will not picture the picturesque element because they are bounded by their social norm of having heavy judgment on sins. Feminist will notice the beauty of the forest, that it is the only place for Hester and Dimmesdale to hide from the society’s judgment. This highlights nature’s tolerance in contrast of the harshness of the puritan society.

Argument 2:

Hawthorne also uses ambiguity, as it allows readers to use their imagination to fill the ambiguous information. This creates multiple perspectives as sometimes readers lack context to understand certain allusions.

Point 1:

Hester equivocates that the magistrates are not to remove her scarlet letter. Her intention and real meaning of this dialogue is ambiguous. Male readers in the 1800s may see this as Hester submitting to the puritan’s values, and her action as result of the guilt that she felt from her sin. Feminists on the other hand may see this as Hester guarding her individuality, as the scarlet letter have become part of her identity. She uses the scarlet letter to openly express her love towards Dimmesdale thought the society does not know, and she does not want to lose her ability to express her feelings.

Point 2

Ambiguity is also used when Pearl refers to Dimmesdale as the Prince of Air. The Prince of the Air is a reference to Satan from the bible, and the metaphor was first brought to Pearl by Mistress Hibbins, the evil witch. The novel’s original readers may link Pearl to represent Hester and Dimmesdale’s sins, as she is the product of their adultery, and that they are very loyal to the bible. Feminists on the other hand, while may be religious, are more known for their stress on independence. They may see this as Pearl not being constrained by the society’s belief that Dimmesdale is a bad person, and instead has her independent opinion that Dimmesdale is evil.

Word Count: 997

Title

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne contains feminist ideologies, but targets male readers in the 1800s. (J. Hawthorne 3) They have minimal awareness of women’s rights, mainly due to woman’s lack of education and thus lack of ability to read. (UK Essays 2) This historical fiction set in the 1600s tells the story of Hester Prynne, whose scarlet letter marks her sin and guilt from 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, who is a respectable minister of the town. Hawthorne’s polysemous and open-ended use of different literary features evokes modern feminists to interpret Hawthorne’s feminist ideologies while disguising these themes to the interpretations of the original audience of the novel because of social conventions of the time.

Hawthorne employs techniques such as imagery and motifs ambiguously, concealing the feminist ideology from the average male readers at the time and only conveying its true meaning to feminists, who sympathize to the Hester’s experience. Imagery immerse the readers into the text by connecting the sensually represented ideas to their personal life. When Hawthorne describes Hester as she walks out of the prison door, turning her “little face from the too vivid light of the day,” (50) average male readers in the 1800s would likely interpret the sunlight as hope. Given the context that the society back then viewed sins with severe judgment, and Hawthorne juxtaposed the sinned Hester with the bright sunshine by describing her as “a black shadow emerging into the sunshine,” (49) the novel’s original audience may see Hester avoiding the sunshine as a representation of condemnation from her guilt. However, modern feminists will likely interpret the sun as exposing secrets, as its “vivid” brightness contrasts with the “black shadows” representing secretive sins. (N. Hawthorne 49) Hawthorne uses of physiognomy, the technique of reflecting one’s morals through their appearance, to show the judgmental and sinned nature of society by describing those judging Hester as “iron visage” and “old”. (51) The sun vividly exposes everyone’s secret to the cynical society around them when overlooking Hester and the crowd. The original audience, possessing heavy judgment on sin, will likely not see this interpretation as they focus on Hester’s sins. The romantic era glorified nature’s significance, and Hawthorne utilized this motif during Hester’s meeting with Dimmesdale to expose Chillingworth’s secret revenge. Dimmesdale and Hester 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”. (N. Hawthorne 172) The dark and gloomy aspect suggested by the “moss” and “shadow” highlights the sublime aspect of the setting while the natural and loving sensation from the “small brook” and “woods” proposes the beautiful. (N. Hawthorne 172) The novel’s audience would see the dangerous aspect of sublime as Hester and Dimmesdale’s common sin, which was seen as offensive against god, while its inspiring awe symbolizes the sin’s motivation. It thus develops the theme of sin and guilt. Diversely, feminists would likely appreciate the beautiful, which highlights the softness and tolerance of nature, since they emphasize on Hester and Dimmesdale hiding in the darkness in nature to escape from the society’s judgment. Feminists would thus interpret this theme as criticism on puritan’s judgmental nature. Consequently, Hawthorne successfully uses imagery and motifs to create separate interpretations of the text.

Furthermore, Hawthorne’s indeterminate use of equivocation and allusions leads to different interpretations as sometimes readers lack context to understand the techniques. Readers use their imagination to complement ambiguous information, and Hawthorne uses the power of imagination to create multiple interpretations. When Chillingworth informed Hester about the council debating to remove her scarlet letter, Hester equivocated that “It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge.” (N. Hawthorne 153) Since the scarlet letter symbolizes Hester’s guilt, readers in the 1800s would likely see Hester’s refusal of removing the letter as evidence of the strict puritan beliefs are assimilating her. Hawthorne contextually describing Hester’s “grey” (143) puritan like clothing and her concealing her long hair displays Hester submitting to her sins. Since the original audience of the novel viewed sin seriously, they would likely interpret Hester’s refusal of removing the scarlet letter as evidence of the strict puritan beliefs assimilating her. Feminists would instead see this as Hester guarding her last individuality, because Hester showed “pride” (N. Hawthorne 51) of the ‘A’ on her chest. Since the scarlet letter represents Hester’s identity and symbolizes her passion of love, the scene demonstrates Hester defending her independence from the council. Moreover, ambiguity in biblical references also creates separate perspectives as different groups of people value religion differently. For example, Hawthorne alludes to Satan from the Bible, when Mistress Hibbins called Pearl “the lineage of the Prince of Air. (217) This allusion not only creates a serious tone to the novel’s religious audience in the 1800s, but also links Pearl and Dimmesdale with Satan. Hawthorne characterizing Pearl as a product of evil develops the theme of sin and guilt. Since feminists value independent thinking more than submission to religious beliefs, they will likely focus on the fact that Pearl characterized Dimmesdale as evil by later tells the shipmaster that her father is the “prince of the air” (N. Hawthorne 220). This aligns with her previous action of refusing to hold Dimmesdale’s hand on the scaffolding to shows her disproval of Dimmesdale., which contrasts society’s common ideology to thus demonstrate Pearl’s independence. Hawthorne thus shows how ambiguity in equivocation and allusions separates perspectives.

Therefore, Hawthorne uses literary features with multiple significance and opaquely 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, making *The Scarlet Letter* a masterpiece of the romantic era.

# Works Cited

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