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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.

Point 1:

Word Count: 1000

*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne contains feminist ideologies, but targeted an audience composed of males in the 1800s, (Hawthorne) who have minimal awareness of women’s rights, mainly due to 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, whose scarlet letter marks her sin and guilt 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, 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,” 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,” 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. 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”. 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”. The dark and gloomy aspect suggested by the “moss” and “shadow” suggests the sublime aspect of the setting while the natural and balanced sensation from the “small brook” and “woods” suggest the beautiful. The novel’s audience would likely recognize the sublime aspects of the scene: the meeting of Hester and Dimmesdale is tied together by their common sin, which was seen as offensive against god at the time, thus developing the theme of sin. 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 to gain popularity in its audience while still expressing his beliefs.

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 “the power of the magistrates cannot take off this symbol.” 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” 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, which symbolizes her sin, as evidence of the strict puritan beliefs assimilating her. Feminists would instead see this as Hester guarding her last individuality, because Hester showed “pride” of the ‘A’ on her chest. Since the scarlet letter represents Hester’s identity and symbolizes her passion of love, the scene demonstrates 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, Hawthorne alludes to the Bible, which described Satan to be “prince of the power of the air,” when Mistress Hibbins called Pearl “the lineage of the Prince of Air.” 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”. 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.