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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 can sympathize to the experiences of Hester. Imagery immerse the readers into the text by enabling them to connect the sensually represented thematic 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. Thus, they may see Hester’s action of avoiding the sunshine as a representation of condemnation from her guilt. This is likely because the society back then viewed sins with substantial judgment, and Hawthorne has just previously described Hester as “a black shadow emerging into the sunshine,” juxtaposing the sinned Hester and the bright sunshine.

On the other hand, modern feminists will likely interpret the sun as conveying a sense of exposing any secrets, as its “vivid” brightness contrasts with “black shadows” which represents secretive sins. Hawthorne characterizes the woman in the crowd judging Hester’s sin as “iron-visaged” and “old”. With physiognomy, the technique of reflecting characters’ morals through their appearance, this description characterizes the puritan society as judgmental and sinned. The sun overlooking Hester and everyone’s privacy evokes a sense of fear as the people’s secrets are vividly exposed to the cynical society around them.

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. 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 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 topic 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 harsh nature of the puritan society. Hawthorne therefore successfully uses imagery and motifs polysemically 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 different readers to interpret the novel differently due to 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. However, in this context, the device 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”, Hawthorne 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, making *The Scarlet Letter* a masterpiece of the romantic era.

WHERE ARE THE SOURCES?

ALSO A BUNCH OF IN-TEXT CITATION NEEDED. I’m too lazy to comment on all of them.