The Scarlet Letter Essay:

* Choose one of two critical perspectives and apply to the text.
* Based on the question (perspective) you choose, this will determine the instructional work you do in class, so come prepared.
* You will choose either feminist or psychoanalysis.
* Use the question choices to help guide you towards a thesis.
* You will generate a thesis statement which you will ARGUE/DEFEND in your paper through logical organization of details and explanation.
* Your thesis statement will **not be** a “feminist approach to the Scarlet Letter is…” but an application of one of the perspectives (this requires research, understanding, and deep comfort with the text). For example, Hester Prynne’s role within the Scarlet Letter represents Hawthorne’s critique of patriarchal ideologies, which tend to openly condemn women for the same excused crimes committed by men.

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**Sources:**

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2009. Print.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today A User-Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

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**Feminist Criticism** examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. However, just as the practitioners of all critical theories do, feminist critics hole many different opinions on all of the issues their discipline examines.

* The representation of women in literature was felt to be one of the most important forms of “socialization,” since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals/aspirations.
* Feminists pointed out, for example, that in 19th century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they absolutely have to.
* Instead, focus is on the heroine’s choice of marriage partner (Pride and Prejudice?) which will decide her social position and determine her happiness and fulfillment (or lack thereof).
* Feminism emerged in the 1970s as the cultural mindset which perpetuated sexual inequality.
* Treat literature as a series of representations of women’s (what we might do with film/TV today) lives and experience which can be measured and evaluated against reality.
* Freudian Psychology connection: the ideas of social castration (women’s lack of power, lack of representation) and “penis envy” whereas not a biological concept but a symbol of power (Barry, 126)

**What they do:**

1. **Revalue women’s experience**
2. **Examine representations of women in literature by men and women**
3. **Challenge representations of women as ‘other,’ as ‘lack,’ as part of ‘nature’**
4. **Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy**
5. **Recognize the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem natural and transparent… AKA how language can interpret or reinterpret what we see/feel/think.**
6. **Raise the Question of whether men and women are essentially different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different**
7. **Make clear the ideological base of supposedly ‘neutral’ or ‘mainstream’ literary interpretations.**

**Questions that may apply to the text *Scarlet Letter***

1. How does Hawthorne critique patriarchal ideology, specifically as it manifested itself in marriage and religious practices of the 17th century?
2. How does Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* reflect patriarchal ideology through comments about and attitude toward women and through sexist representations of the other female characters? Does the novel invite us to accept or criticize sexism? Is the novel even aware of the sexism?
3. When the novel was written, it was generally considered unnatural for women to have sexual desires (clearly, the Scarlet Letter is dealing with a sensitive issue: female sexuality). How does Hawthorne’s story critique (or promote) this patriarchal belief? What other patriarchal ideology does the story critique? What does the story suggest about the intersection of patriarchy and religion?
4. In what ways might we say the text plays with traditional gender categories, revealing the biases and limitations of traditional definitions of gender?
5. Do you consider Hester to be a strong female character? Or, to put it in another way is *The Scarlet Letter* a feminist novel? You will need to provide, first, your own definition of the term “feminist” before you move on to your argument about the topic.

**If you choose this essay topic, you will read portions of Lois Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today* and the *Great Gatsby* sample.**

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**Psychoanalytical Criticism can be simple without being simplistic**. Taking time to understand some key concepts about human experience offered by psychoanalysis allows us to begin to see the ways in which these concepts operate in our daily lives (and literature) in profound rather than superficial ways, and we will begin to understand human behaviors that until now may have appeared baffling. And of course, if it helps us better understand human behavior, than it must certainly be able to help us understand literary texts, which are *about human behavior*.

* Use some techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature
* All of Freud’s work depends on the idea of the unconscious = part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence on our actions
* Repression = ‘forgetting’ or ignoring if unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires or traumatic past events so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious.
* Sublimation = repressed material is “promoted” into something greater or is disguised as something ‘noble.’ For example, some urges may be sublimated in the form of intense religious experience.
* Model of the Psyche: ego, superego, id (consciousness, conscience, unconscious)
* Transference = patient redirects emotions recalled towards the psychoanalyst: thus, the antagonism or resentment felt towards a parental figure in the past might be reactivated, but directed against the analyst.
* Projection = aspects of ourselves (usually negative) are not recognized as part of ourselves but are perceived in or attributed to another; our own desires or antagonisms, for instance, may be ‘disowned’ in this way.
* Transference and projection are both “defense mechanisms.” Psychic procedures for avoiding painful admissions or recognitions.
* Screen memory = trivial or unimportant memory whose function it is to eliminate or overpower a more important one.
* Freudian Slip = repressed material in the unconscious finds an outlet through such everyday phenomena as slips of the tongue, slips of the pen, or unintended actions.
* Dream work = real events or desires are transformed into dream images. These include displacement (one person or event is represented by another which is in some way linked with it, perhaps a similar sounding word or symbolic substitution); condensation (a number of people, events, or meanings are combined and represented by a single image in a dream).
* **Dreams, just like literature, do not usually make explicit statements. Both tend to communicate obliquely or indirectly, avoiding direct or open statement, and representing meanings through concrete embodiments of time, place, or person.**
* There are many other aspects of psychology to explore, including complexes and disorders. For example, Oedipus complex and Fear of Intimacy/Commitment. These are just some of many different elements of psychology.

**What Psychoanalysts Do:**

1. They give central importance, in literary interpretation, to the difference between the conscious and unconscious mind. They associate literary work’s ‘**overt’** content with the conscious, and the ‘**covert’** content with the unconscious, privileging the unconscious as being what the work is ‘really’ about, and aiming to separate the two.
2. They pay close attention to the unconscious motives and feelings, whether these be (a) those of the author, or (b) those of the characters in the work.
3. Demonstrate the presence in the work of classic psychoanalytic symptoms, conditions, or phases, such as the oral, anal, and phallic stages of emotional and sexual development according to Freud (Barry, 100)
4. Make large-scale applications of psychoanalytic concepts to literary history in general; for example, Harold Bloom’s book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sees the struggle for identity by each generation of poets, under the ‘threat’ of the greatness of its predecessors, as an enactment of the Oedipus Complex.
5. They identify a ‘psychic’ context for literary work, at the expense of social or historical context, privileging the individual ‘psycho-drama’ above the ‘social drama’ of class conflict. The conflict between generations or siblings, or between competing desires within the same individual looms much larger than conflict between social classes, for instance.

**Text Application: *Hamlet***

**“**…In the play Hamlet’s father is murdered by his own brother, Hamlet’s uncle, who then marries Hamlet’s mother. The ghost of Hamlet’s father appears to Hamlet and tells him to avenge the murder by killing his uncle. **There is no obvious difficulty in doing this, but Hamlet spends most of the play delaying and making excuses. Why? He is not particularly squeamish, as he kills other people in the course of the play. Also, what the ghost reveals merely confirms suspicions Hamlet had independently formed himself, and he gathers other external evidence that the ghost is telling him the truth. So why the delay?** …Psychoanalytic criticism offers a neat and simple solution/thesis: Hamlet cannot avenge this crime because he is guilty of wanting to commit the same crime himself. He has an Oedipus Complex, that is, repressed sexual desire for his own mother, and a consequent wish to do away with his father. Thus, the uncle has merely done what Hamlet himself secretly *wished* to do: hence the difficulty for him being the avenger…” (Barry, 102)

**Questions that may apply to the text *Scarlet Letter***

1. How might an understanding of the return of the repressed help us understand the ending of the *Scarlet Letter*?
2. How might an understanding of the ways in which death work can be projected onto the environment help us interpret a character(s) in *Scarlet Letter*?
3. How might an understanding of denial and displacement (in one case, displacement of negative feelings for one’s actions onto one’s physical self) help us to analyze a relationship within the *Scarlet Letter* (example: Dimmesdale)?
4. How might we use understanding of repression, the superego, and dream symbolism (especially water as a symbol of the emotions or of sexuality or caves, closed gardens, and/or rooms as symbols of female imagery) help us interpret *The Scarlet Letter*?
5. How might other understandings of repression, fears, complexes, symbols, etc. help us better understand or give meaning to certain elements of the text?
6. Explain how *The Scarlet Letter* may be read as a “psychological novel.” You may want to focus on the psychological nature of one or two characters, or you may want to trace a particular aspect of psychology across a number of characters. You should familiarize yourself with at least some basic concepts of psychology (repression, the unconscious, etc.) and the appropriate terms used to describe them.

**If you choose this essay topic, you will read portions of Lois Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today* and the *Great Gatsby* sample.**