Approaches to *The Scarlet Letter* Essay

There is a lesson, a “sweet moral blossom,” in this romance. To interpret the lesson, you must decide which of the following literary movements Hawthorne most closely followed. Literary critics argue this point and I would like you to do the same. Read through the following lists. Based on your understanding of *The Scarlet Letter*, decide where you think Hawthorne belongs and write a persuasive essay explaining why.

Remember to use textual evidence and fully explain how it supports your argument. Take time to answer your critics. Anticipate the other side of the argument and explain why yours is better. Refer to your “essay tips and reminders” handout.

Puritanism

* People are inherently sinful
* Society is necessary for survival
* The law is superior to freedom
* Reason overrides emotion
* Decisions are made for the collective good
* Children are miniature adults held to the same standards
* The forest is the devil’s domain

Romanticism

* People are inherently good
* Society corrupts
* Freedom is superior to law
* Emotion is superior to reason
* Individualism is valued
* Children are free and models for the rest of us
* Nature is holy

Transcendentalism

* People are inherently good
* Society corrupts
* Freedom is superior to law
* Emotion is superior to reason
* People possess transcendent knowledge within themselves
  + It is always better to trust yourself (Self Reliance) than conform to the group
* Children are free, pure, and uncorrupted by society
* Nature is holy

Anti-Transcendentalism

* Believed transcendentalists were naïve and unrealistic
* People are inherently flawed and must struggle constantly to be good
* Society is necessary for the rules and structure it provides
* Law and reason are necessary
* Individualism is dangerous
  + People are flawed and may follow negative impulses (fail to transcend them)
* Nature is vast and incomprehensible (often dark, mysterious)

Gothicism

* People are inherently depraved, and often passionate or obsessive
* Settings are often old, dark, and creepy – often a decaying structure
* An atmosphere of mystery and suspense is enhanced by the plot
* Foreshadowing and dreams play a large role
* Forlorn character (depressed)
* Nature is dark, foreboding, and forbidding – overgrown vegetation

Early Realism

* Often considered an attack upon romanticism.
* People are central to the story. Characters are more important than plot.
* Relations between people and society are explored
* The purpose of writing is to instruct and entertain
* Plots emphasize the normal
* Ordinary characters studied in depth

**Elements of a complete essay:**

* MLA heading
  + Your Name
  + Mrs. Cotton
  + English 11
  + 25 October 2011
* Effective introduction
  + Refer to examples in your notes and on our class website
  + Include a clear thesis
* Body paragraphs thoroughly explaining your interpretation of Hawthorne’s novel
  + Cite evidence of Hawthorne’s use of the tenets of the movement you have chosen
  + Explain every quote in your own words. Relate them clearly to your thesis
  + Acknowledge the opposing argument and explain how yours is stronger
* Clear Conclusion
  + Go beyond a simple summary
  + Explain why this is important. How does the lesson in *The Scarlet Letter* relate to our world today?