PERFORMING THE PAST
Winter 2001
Midterm Paper Assignment

Length: 7 pages
Final Draft Due: Tuesday, February 13
Menu of Texts: The Song of Songs, “Death Fugue,” Iliad, Agamemnon, Libation Bearers (From the Dead), The Eumenides, The Bhagavad-Gita
Menu of Essay Styles: Close Reading; Compare/Contrast; Analysis

For this essay, you get to choose the text(s) you will write about and the style of essay you will write. The primary requirement is that the essay be argumentative and critical: you will, in other words, develop a non-obvious (i.e., arguable) thesis that offers your own interpretation of the text in question; you will need to demonstrate the validity of your thesis by citing evidence drawn from your chosen text(s). Remember too: you are aiming to demonstrate something to be true of the text, not something that you believe to be true in your own mind. Thus, you could validly argue that the Furies appear in Libation Bearers disguised as the chorus of slave women only if you can find evidence for this idea in the text itself.

You might be wondering, “What does a ‘non-obvious thesis’ mean?” A non-obvious thesis argues a point about a text that would not be evident to a first-time reader of the text. In other words, it’s an analytical claim that you can support using evidence from the text even though the surface of the text does not state this truth directly. How do you find a non-obvious thesis? It helps to focus on some ambiguity, conflict, or tension in the work you’ve chosen. You can seek these on a number of levels, both internal to the work (e.g., on the level of form, style, narration, content, setting, etc.) and external to it (in the tradition or genre of the work, in comparison with other works we’ve read, in its historical context, etc.). You are aiming to isolate a passage or feature that poses a conflict, ambiguity, or tension and that permits you to define and develop a critical analytical argument resolving it.

We are encouraging you to choose your own topic since your paper will most likely succeed if what you’re writing about truly interests you. Look back over your notes from lecture, readings, and discussion, and focus on the areas where you’ve been intrigued, disturbed, or perplexed. In general, don’t try to deal with too much in this paper; in fact, trying to reduce the entirety of any of these texts to a single seven-page argument probably won’t work. Instead, select some particular portion and/or feature of the text(s) that interests you and try to interpret that facet of the text alone. That will usually provide more than enough material to sustain a seven-page argument. Do remember, however, to relate your portion/feature back to the work as a whole.

Essay Styles
1. Close Reading (Textual Exegesis): Select one brief passage (its length can be anywhere from a few lines to a full verse, stanza, book (Iliad), scene, or teaching) from one of the texts listed
above. Analyze its meaning and effects in order to relate it to the design and concerns of the text as a whole.

How do you go about developing an analysis based on a close reading of a single passage? First, select a passage that allows you to develop the analytical arguments you want to make according to the guidelines just sketched. Then use the moment to unpack and develop both the problem you want to resolve and your analytical solution to it. In thinking about which moment to use, some of the following strategies may be helpful: Try to find a passage that typifies some aspect of the text of interest to you, and then consider what concepts, ideas, or arguments the passage conveys. Examine how the passage fits into the whole text, the ways it relates to the text’s more general themes and arguments. Think about why this passage is important in the development of the work overall. Consider whether this passage betrays the limitations of the work.

After you have selected your passage, think about the following when deciding how to use your moment to best make your case. Read your passage carefully several times; notice and annotate your passage’s distinctive features. These might include style, means of characterization, tone, patterns, symbolic meaning, and theme. Ask yourself what even the most obvious words mean in this context. Consider what this passage reveals about the meaning of these words and what they mean elsewhere in the work. Also scrutinize the formal aspects of the passage – its structure, its language, its rhythm. How do these contribute to the meaning of the passage? Are there relationships between form and content? If so, what are they? Use the relevant observations you’ve made in order to relate these features of the passage to the larger context of the work. Such text-wide features could include plot, repeated image patterns, theme, inner logic, implicit assumptions, or the structure of the work as a whole. The larger context to which you relate your passage can also include genre; literary, philosophical, or religious tradition; cultural and historical setting; or other things. What does your discovery about the text indicate about how performance and history work?

When writing your actual analysis remember that it does not suffice simply to identify stylistic or thematic elements in a passage. You must concentrate on showing how and why these features significantly support your interpretation of the passage and the text as a whole. Your exegesis, therefore, should take you well beyond the particular passage you have selected as your focus even if your paper continually returns to the passage in question. As a result, we expect that you will cite other passages and other episodes in the text during the course of your analysis. Take into account also the strengths and weaknesses of different strategies of interpretation given the focus of your project. Does the production privilege certain interpretive approaches (say, historical) and fight against the use of others (say, philosophical)? Why does the text demand that your interpretation be taken seriously? Answers to these questions can often form the basis for original analytical insights.

2. Compare/Contrast: Select two characters, themes, images or image patterns from one text or select one each from two texts, and write an essay using comparison and/or contrast to argue
some point and to come to some conclusion about the things compared and the text(s) in which they appear. Again, relate that conclusion to the text(s) as a whole.

Some general tips for writing a comparison/contrast essay: 1) The overall point of the comparison should be made clear—you should have a thesis that you’re arguing rather than just offering similarities and differences between the two elements; 2) the ordering of your topics should be consistent throughout: usually the best way to organize such a paper is to juxtapose one term of the comparison with the other on an item-by-item basis, rather than treating the first term of the comparison in the first half of the paper and then the second term in the second half; 3) information about one term of the comparison should be suppressed when there is no corresponding information about the other item with which to compare it.

3. Analysis: Produce a detailed, critical analysis of an idea, theme, image, pattern of images, or other element from a single production. You may choose to focus on an element that appears only once or a recurrent element. The term “analysis,” derives from the Greek word meaning “to loosen up,” “release,” or “undo.” To analyze a text, therefore, means to reduce it to its constituent parts. The goal of this reduction is to reveal the hidden meanings of the text not readily apparent on the surface. These hidden meanings should be the point of departure for your thesis. Once you have isolated a set of things to analyze, ask yourself why they are important and what purpose they play in the work as a whole. Once you can answer these questions in a non-obvious way, you have your thesis.

Examples of topics (not theses):
  - an analysis of a particular character in Agamemnon
  - an analysis of deity in the *Iliad*
  - an analysis of a particular image in *The Bhagavad-Gita*

Feel free to talk with us in office hours or at other times about your ideas for your paper. Get started early—see due date schedule below. Follow the attached guidelines in preparing the final draft of your paper. Turn in your peer’s review of your work along with the final draft.

**Guidelines for Essay Format and Documentation**
1. Put your name, the date, the name of the course, your instructor’s name, your chosen essay type, your peer reviewer’s name, and the title of your paper on the first page of your paper. Do not underline, italicize, put quotation marks around, or otherwise set off the title that you give to your own essay; capitalize the first letter of the first word and all other major words in your title.

2. Double-space and leave a one-inch margin on all sides.

3. Number all pages except the first.

4. Staple your paper in the upper left corner.
5. Use 12 point font.

6. Underline or italicize titles of books, plays, magazines, works of art, TV shows, movies, and newspapers; place quotation marks around titles of short stories, poems, songs, and articles or chapters in books or magazines.

7. Indent quotations longer than four full lines of your text; do not use quotation marks. Introduce your quotation in the body of the text. Include shorter quotations or supporting references in the body of the paper.

8. Acknowledge all resource materials, including the primary text(s), whether summarized, paraphrased, or quoted directly or indirectly. The primary text you select to work with (along with reading and discussion notes) will provide the supporting evidence for your essay. Please do not use other resources such as secondary critical articles or books.

Give references to the text in parentheses after the cited passage.

   Example: Aquinas proves God’s existence with the “argument from motion” (p. 30).

This simple system of documentation will suffice if you’re using an edition that’s common to our course; give bibliographic data on a final sheet if you’re using some other edition. Remember the general rationale for citing your sources: your reader may want to locate the passage you’ve referred to in order to read it again, to find out more, to check the context, etc. Make it easy to find your sources.

When you use ideas or opinions from the introductions of our common editions or from presentations or lectures, give a reference: for example, (Worthen, Introduction to The Cherry Orchard, p. 645) or (Hana Lass, Hamlet presentation, 1/12/01) or (Ehren Fordyce, Bhagavad-Gita lecture, 2/6/01).

**Due Date Schedule**
Feb 1 Working Thesis
Feb 6 Revised Thesis Statement and Outline
Feb 8 Complete Draft*
Feb 13 Final Draft (with Peer’s Review of your Feb 8 draft)

*You and your review partner are responsible for exchanging drafts and reviews with ample time for both of you to make revisions for Feb. 13. We suggest you exchange reviews no later than Sunday, Feb. 11.