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21L.004 Reading Poetry

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21L.004.02 Reading Poetry

Paper #3

Due on SES #20

6-7 pages; format, print on one side; staple pages: think formal attire

Don't Skip: Approach for a Longer Essay

As with each of the earlier two papers, the poems themselves are the primary topos – the only topic; no secondary sources are necessary. You have a growing repertoire of literary analysis to help you convey your own responses to the poems. Root your ideas in its language and its form.

As the writer, make sure to place the needs of your readers first by thinking about what they require to understand your ideas when you are not there to explain them. One of your goals is to persuade your readers to understand your essential point of view.

The two choices below simply direct you to think about pairs of poems by different poets or groups of poems by the same poet. A pairing will present you with two different poetic terrains to consider while a group of poems by the same poet will present you with some similarities about that poet's practice that you can consider in-depth.

Continue your practice of making concrete observations before beginning the paper (for example: the poem has three sentences or units of thought; each sentence has a different subject) that lead to develop your own ideas that you fully explain and develop for readers.

A good title alerts readers to the governing idea of your paper.

A compelling introduction identifies the works and authors you are writing about and immediately states your main idea (about the pairing or the grouping). Using language from the poem(s) can strengthen your idea and make the introduction come alive in such a way that draws readers into the rest of the paper.

In an academic paper of this kind, each subsequent new or supporting idea deserves to be stated immediately in the topic sentence of the paragraph and then developed in the body of the paragraph. The closing sentence of each paragraph brings that idea to its full conclusion.

Good analysis involves moving beyond one-sentence announcements and demonstrates a willingness to linger and pursue an idea as fully as you can. Good analysis is usually specific rather than general and stays connected throughout the essay to the artifact of the poem. Good analysis involves pushing beyond an observation that something exists (an image, a shift, a metaphor, a question, a rhyme scheme, a speaker) to a rigorous consideration of why/how it matters to your point of view.

As always, do not feel obligated to "cover" the poem or to follow its order. Interesting papers always follow the order of the writer's idea. Interesting papers resist pointing out every possible thing observed. Writers make choices about what to leave in and what to abandon as they begin to think about how to prioritize and shape a coherent order with foremost in mind.

Good conclusions refuse to announce "I'm way done now and have nothing more to say so I'll repeat what I've already said – gotta go, bye..." but rather continue to advance the paper. Good conclusions return to the main idea by pushing for a new insight that you could not have discovered before you wrote the paper.

You now know many poetic elements both from our discussions and from assigned readings in Vendler that can help you think more deeply about how a poem does what it does. Gravitate to elements that engage the way you like to think and that draw you further into the poem. These particular elements are imaginative spurs rather than directives:

the speaker (who is speaking? does the discourse change? how does this matter?)

speech acts (how are things being said? so what?)

time and space axes (where are we? what changes? where do we go? what are the implications?)

internal and external forms and patterns (how does the poet use stanzas, the line, grammatical play, and repetition, to name a few elements? what are the consequences?)

tense change (do verbs shift tense? what are the consequences of the shift? or perhaps as in “Holy Sonnet 14” the verbs both advance and dominate the poem)

One of the second papers investigated the word “again” in line 11 of Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 14”. The writer saw the word as the poem’s fulcrum and explained it as the paper’s governing idea. A paper on one pivotal word! I mention this choice in the hope that you will feel free to pursue your own governing idea.

If you are still having trouble incorporating quotations for lines, excerpts and titles, you’ll have to slog your way through an MLA handbook and get it right. Sadly, we do not possess the DNA codes for complete mastery of this. Consistent errors of this kind lower your grade. Allow enough time to proofread and print your paper.

Choices

1. Select two poems by different poets that you have not yet written about from among the following list:

Yeats, (“Leda and the Swan“); Wordsworth (“The Worlds Is Too Much With Us”); Donne (“Holy Sonnets” 14, 10, “Valediction”); Eliot (“Prufrock”) Bishop (“Sestina,” “In the Waiting Room,” “One Art,” “At the Fishhouses”); Stevens (“The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm”); Whitman (“Vigil,” “Song of Myself” excerpt 1 and/or 24, “Beginning My Studies”), Coleman (“Wanda Why Aren’t You Dead”); Hopkins (“Pied Beauty,” “As Kingfisher’s Catch Fire”). Rereading Vendler’s “Writing about Poems,” Chapter 10 will be valuable here.

Use the pairing as a way to think about how one poem sheds light on the different or similar qualities in the other – Donne/Hopkins? Stevens/Bishop? Coleman/Whitman? Whitman/Eliot? Eliot/Hopkins? Choose any pairing. What does one poetic pursuit show us about the other? Similar or different use of the speaker?

You will ratchet up your analysis by explaining how an element matters rather than simply announcing that it exists. For example, stating that Stevens and Bishop (in “Sestina”) both use repetitions in their respective poems is true but not yet an idea that makes a substantive claim. How does each poet use repetition and how does it matter to the poem? You need to synthesize your analysis in a comparison paper by addressing what you learn from both techniques.

2. Write about a group of two or three poems by Donne (Holy Sonnets 14 and 10 and/or “Valediction”) or three by Bishop (any three of the four on the syllabus) or three by Whitman (“Beginning My Studies,” “Vigil,” “Song of Myself,” 1 and 24). Vendler’s “Studying Groups of Poems,” Chapter 11 will be valuable here.

Launch your initial writing by thinking about what intrigues you about the poet’s practice or vision. Is there a common theme? How does this poet use form? What kind of voice comes through each poem? How does this poet view the world?

Good luck.