

SECOND PAPER

21L706
Professor Kibel

FILM AND LITERATURE

Papers are due on Thursday, November 10th in hard copy and should consist of six and one-half typed pages (roughly speaking about 2,200 words or 10K characters). Include a word-count or character count on the title page, which is not to be included in the count. Do not number the title page but number the rest. As before, the following questions and topics are meant to be suggestive. If you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so, but the focus of discussion should be one (or more) of the texts read or viewed this term after Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. (Since no one selected a topic dealing with *Seven Samurai*, I have included writing about that film as an option.)

Once again, please remember that you are writing an essay, not a book-report. We have read the book and do not require a rehearsal of its contents. What an essay supplies is some reminder of the contents in the context of an argument about those contents; the reminder is offered in the course of explaining how one should understand or interpret those contents.

If you are writing about a film and wish to review it, copies for viewing are available in the Film Office.

Suggested Topics:

I. The first topic suggestion is quite general: Write a pointed analysis or interpretation of any text that we have viewed or read from *Seven Samurai* through *Macbeth*.

The issue here is to say what the text is about, and the task is to offer an interpretation. As with the Constitution of the United States and with Holy Scriptures, there are those who believe in "strict constructivism"—that what the text means it says overtly and there is nothing more to do than to read it off and paraphrase it. But the assumption that we maintain with regard to our texts is that their interpretation is contentious, open to argument, not because they are incoherent but because they deal coherently with matters about which we have to make up a good deal of our minds, and examining the texts is an indirect means of thinking our way through such things.

To get a handle on the features of a text most open to interpretation and commentary, one might begin by questioning the most obvious or most obviously puzzling features. The most obvious features are often the most difficult to question; the most obviously puzzling are often the most difficult to answer.

For example: In the case of *La Jettée* we might ask why the narrative is told in still-frames or why it hints in the spoken narration that the protagonist's experience of the past is timeless and that he cannot be certain whether he is experiencing it, dreaming it, or making it up. In the case of *My Darling Clementine*, we might ask why the story is set in the desolate landscape of Monument Valley, where there never has been a pioneer settlement. In the case of *The Seven Samurai*, why is so much time devoted to the scenes of recruiting? How does it highlight the difference between the samurai and the townspeople? In *Macbeth*, why is Macbeth, the fearless, ruthless warrior so wavering and uncertain before the murder of Duncan and why doesn't he therefore go to pieces more quickly than the resolute Lady Macbeth? Just raising this question suggests a more difficult and all-important one: given Macbeth's awareness that the fulfilling of unconditional prophecies should need no assistance from their beneficiaries and his awareness that acting upon this prophecy will lead him "to throw away the dearest thing he owns", his soul, we may well ask why Macbeth decides to act *anyway*?

The answer to such questions (e.g., Macbeth cares more for power in this world than for his salvation in the next) may raise further questions (e.g., why should anyone in one's right mind make such

a sacrifice for power?), but these need not be answered. The purpose of finding the right questions is not to settle one's mind about everything important in life but to establish a perspective upon the text that will guide the arrangement of argument and detail in your account of it. In this case, it requires keeping in mind that Macbeth may be forcing himself to do something that he knows is not really in his self-interest. If, at the end of the day, you write an essay which simply demonstrates this conclusion (without, that is, making it thoroughly sensible that anyone might try to force oneself in this way), you have done your job. Your assignment is only to produce a short paper on a well-ploughed subject, not to break fresh ground.

II. The following suggestions are more detailed elaborations of the first. The questions are meant to be thought-provoking. Since this subject is supposed to be dealing with the differences between media, the questions raised are often very difficult to answer, but it is usually necessary to think about them a bit if one is going to write an exposition of a text that adds up to something.

Compare the ideal of heroism in *Seven Samurai* with the ideal of heroism in the mind of Don Quixote. Which (if any) of the characters comes closest to his ideal? Which (if any) comes closest to his own character? An ideal of apprenticeship is visible in the allegiance of the young neophyte mercenary to the leader of the Samurai group. Is this anything to do with Don Quixote's notion that a knight must have a squire? The Samurai are errants, but errants for hire. (The young neophyte is the only one with money.) Does this detract from the heroic character of their profession? Is it important to the film that they are all (save the young man) down-at-heel? What is the point of the lengthy sequence in which the members of the band are selected? (If you are interested in interested in *genres*, look no further. This sequence became an element—a regularly expected feature of all sorts of "Mission Impossible" films for the next twenty-years. Evidently, it spoke powerfully to audiences when it occurred in the right sort of film—just as the preliminary wanderings—the errantry—spoke powerfully to readers in the tales that inspired Don Quixote.) What is the meaning of the sequence at the end of the film, when the young man accosts the girl, who passes him by and goes into the fields to plant rice? Why does the leader of the band say that they have lost and the peasants have won? Is he right? How would the film be fitted into our schematism? What would be the Sender in this case and what the Recipient?

One supposes that the diagrammatic Subject in *Seven Samurai* is the group, not any individual. The director of that film was a great fan of American Westerns and the Westerns that he admired, without exception, took a single character as its Subject, usually an outsider, often a wanderer, who brought safety to a lawless town. In this connection, consider the contrast between *Clementine* and *Seven Samurai*. What difference is there in the climactic presentation of violence? Is one more realistic than the other? How do the landscapes—the natural background—of the two films compare? What is the meaning in *Clementine* of the scene in which two of the townsfolk, armed with empty shotguns, appear on the street beside the Earps and Doc Halliday, then quietly put the shotguns down and stand to one side? How does this compare with the treatment of the villagers in *Seven Samurai*?

An all-important feature of ancient Greek tragedy is that the representation is focused upon the witnesses of an action in which they take no decisive part but whose outcome will decisively affect their lives. (We will later meet a novelistic example of a so-called "choric figure" when we encounter the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*.) In writing about Greek tragedy, one must always be mindful of the presence of the chorus as a focus of the audience's attention. The townsfolk—the community—are present witnesses of events; the audience responds to their sense of things, their hopes and fears, because the presentation (unlike the script that we read) is largely dance and song. But, unlike the chorus, the audience knows the overall outcome of the story, which is a familiar one, and therefore knows more about the meaning of events than the choric witnesses. Example: the chorus cannot understand what Cassandra is screaming about, when she describes what it about to happen in the house but to the audience her words make simple sense. This feature of the presentation should make a difference to any account of what the play is doing. This feature is not active in Shakespeare's drama; a general foreknowledge of the plot may exist in some cases

or be guessed at in others (as we know perfectly well that Henry Fonda will not be killed by the Clantons) but the community in question is not passive witness to all the action of the play.

The long, opening song-and-dance with which the chorus enters in the *Agamemnon* gives us a good deal of history, describes a problem or dilemma that confronted Agamemnon and how he faced up to it, and then says something about the history of Zeus and the relation of human life to suffering. The dilemma has to do with choosing one of two evils when both are abhorrent. What was the choice about? Did Agamemnon make the right choice? Think of some parallel in modern times, or invent a case, where innocent life must be sacrificed for the sake of a justified enterprise. (We recall that Agamemnon's campaign against the Trojans was enjoined by Zeus.) Pay attention, in dealing with these questions, to the lengthy choric song in which Agamemnon's dilemma and his deed are described. What is the choric emotion at the end of the song? What do they think of Agamemnon's act and what are their hopes so far as its consequences are concerned?

Like the *Antigone*, the *Agamemnon* deals with a conflict between family loyalties and loyalty to some larger community—here, the alliance of different peoples. Clytemnestra values her daughter more than her husband's obligations to his command. Her murder of her husband is in one respect like the killing of the Clantons in *Clementine*—an act of vengeance carried out under the color of justice. The Clantons have “called out” the Earps, and though the town is willing to mass for their arrest, the marshal refuses their help and accepts the challenge. Do we accept the result as justice? Clytemnestra, in a subservient position in Argos, cannot call Agamemnon to public justice; she must manoeuvre her husband into a position of helplessness so that she can execute him. But she does so exultingly, visiting him with the same sort of death as he visited on their daughter, and she claims in this to act in the spirit of justice, pacifying the angry gods of the house (who presumably, in her view, demand the deed). Somewhat in the spirit of Macbeth, she asks that her act “be the be-all and end-all here”, the sort of act for which no answering vengeance need be taken. But if, in a sense, Agamemnon chose the lesser evil, can his punishment at the hands of Clytemnestra be justified?

Compare or contrast Clytemnestra and Lady Macbeth in any way that seems to illuminate the concerns of the two plays.

An interesting feature of the *Agamemnon* is that fully one-third of it is devoted to the agony of Cassandra. The actual deed in Greek tragedy (the suicide of Antigone, the self-mutilation of Oedipus, the killing of Agamemnon) takes place off-stage, and the presentation relies upon the response of the chorus, usually linked to the response of another central character. Here, the response is by the victim to her own murder, so that the response is also the agony. Thanks to Apollo's curse, the chorus cannot understand her and so remains indifferent to it, but the audience understands and shares the agony.. Fate depends on your perspective: if you are a god, or endowed with godlike vision like the prophetess Cassandra, fate is something determined--it is already happening. Ordinary mortals are shielding from this by ignorance. If you are a mortal, you believe that you can avoid fate.. Where does this leave the audience? Or can this feature of the play be otherwise interpreted?

Creon and Antigone articulate different views of the authority that they invoke in justifying their positions. One of these concerns allegiance (*philein*'loyalty), another human nature, a third the nature of the gods. What is Creon's view of these things? What is Antigone's? Does the outcome of the play reinforce one of these views or the other, or does it suggest that both parties to the quarrel are wrong?

What is Creon's position at the outset of the play? What ideals does he stand for or come to stand for during the course of the play? What is Antigone's position at the outset of the play? Granted that the ritual burial of kin is a sacred obligation, but only a ritual (it need only be a token sprinkling, which is all that Antigone can supply), why is it so important to her? Is Ismene (caught-in-the-middle Ismene) an

ethical weakling, a mere fence-sitter, or does she represent a reasonable position? Is it ever a good idea to say about someone that they are either a part of the solution or a part of the problem?

Argue for one of the following four views: (a) *Antigone* is a play without a hero (or heroine). (b) *Antigone* is a play where one sort of right collides with another. It has two central characters, two tragic figures—in terms of our schematism, two equally plausible Subjects. (c) Creon is the tragic center of the play. (d) Antigone is the tragic center of the play.

Compare *Antigone* with Eastwood's *Unforgiven* in any way that illuminates either. What are the salient points of comparison? What are the differences?

The original title of *Unforgiven* was "The William Munny Killings" but Eastwood changed the name, against some resistance by the distributors, who feared confusion with another Western directed by John Houston entitled *The Unforgiven*. Is the film aptly named?

Like *My Darling Clementine*, *Unforgiven* employs a contrast between two characters with a monopoly of unrestrained violence, the sheriff of Big Whiskey, Little Bill, and the outlaw turned pig-farmer, William Munny. Locate differences in the ways in which the contrast is drawn in the two films and say something about how these differences illuminate the respective character of each film.

Unforgiven has a choric character of a sort, the pulp novelist W.W. Beauchamp, who can be so described because he is fascinated by directed violence (as is, presumably, the audience for a traditional Western) and appears to be sitting-in for the audience when Little Big instructs him on the realities, as opposed to the myths, of the Old West. He pees in his pants when threatened by violence and his hand shakes when he holds an (allegedly) loaded gun. (He does not know, nor do we, that there is no bullet in the first chamber.) What does his presence in the film imply about its attitude towards the audience, who must be assumed to have some taste for the depiction of violence, if they are interested in viewing this film? The violence in William Munny's past came from a bottle; it is part of the irony of the film that he tries to summon up the nerve to kill while confronting a large glass of whiskey in a town called Big Whiskey. He has avoided drink, trying to remain faithful to his wife's view of violence, but he is haunted by ghastly hallucinations of his victims, whose deaths he can scarcely remember. Is it the view of the film that conscience is something to overcome? He reverts to drink when he hears of the death of Ned Logan. Do the final killings also come out of a bottle? In this connection, one should consider that the climactic violence of *Unforgiven*, like that of *My Darling Clementine*, also departs from the usual face-off, but in a different way. Munny's surprise entrance is more of a 'bushwhack' than a gunfight. The first victim is shot without warning or immediate provocation. Even Little Bill is amazed: "You just shot an unarmed man," he says, and surely the audience is supposed to share his astonishment, which confirms everything that Little Bill has maintained about "assassins". When the bullets start flying, Munny really is 'lucky' in the order of events—everyone but Little Bill panics and he only gets the better of Little Bill, after throwing his rifle at him, because Little Bill violates his own announced rule, which is that a gunfighter must take his time. Munny fires second and mows Bill down. As for the rest, watching closely reveals that the first deputy is only winged in the ear with the first shot and Munny's second shot misses completely. The third and fourth shots however kill two deputies, and the fifth is killed when the man turns to run and Munny shoots him in the back. He finishes Little Bill off when he is in no position to fight back and almost as an afterthought kills the first wounded deputy as he walks past on his way to the door.

There is a growing concern with the justification for killing in the film. The excuse continually offered by the Schofield kid is that the cowboys "have it coming". Do they have it coming? At length, Munny replies, "We all got it comin'." Munny kills with deliberation before the climax, listening without evident distress to the dying moans of the younger of the two cowboys that he came to kill (for money). When he finally dispatches Little Bill, Bill's courage in the face of death does not falter: his "I don't deserve to die

this way. I was building a house” is not a plea for mercy. Munny’s reply, “Deserve’s got nothin’ to do with it,” might be the epigraph of the film. True enough, he is careful not to kill any but the representatives of law and order, but that, surely, does not make him the representative of justice. Comment.

“It is certain that while Sophocles did not pretend that Apollo (the god of prophecy at Delphi) is just in any human sense, he nevertheless held that the god is entitled to our worship.” Defend or attack this notion in the light of the text of *Oedipus the King*. Or try your hand at defending or attacking this notion: “Oedipus deserves his fate, insofar as he is headstrong, quick to judge, filled with *hubris* or overweening pride.” In either case, do not simply argue your view but debate the two sides of the issue involved here and come to a conclusion about them.

Oedipus the King is not a drama of fate, although a story about fate and fated events lie in the background of the play. Granted, the past that overwhelms Oedipus is odd from our point of view, because at one point a prophecy announces what is to come. But in a sense, the past is always ‘fated’ (a word derived from the Latin “*fatum*” which means “a done deed”), and so we are all liable to Oedipus’s fate insofar as we are all liable to discovering that something we did has taken on dreadful qualities in the light of events subsequent to our doing it. In this connection, we can say that the action of *Oedipus the King* is not the spectacle of a man who becomes a puppet in the hands of the gods (or at least Apollo). That description might be used of the events leading up to the action of the play, but the play’s action shows us a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his ruin.” Present arguments on one or even both sides of this issue.

Or, alternatively: “Admittedly, what we witness in the play is someone freely choosing to know the truth about himself whatever it may turn out to be. (This is the point of the speech in which Oedipus calls himself “the child of chance” *Tuche* in the original Greek). At the same time, however, we have to be mindful that what happened, happened because Apollo intervened in the past and gave Oedipus a prophecy that he wasn’t asking for—he, too, might “bake his noodle” about a prophetic utterance that seems to precipitate its fulfillment, driving him straight to disaster. (Imagine the gods knowing who will win the World Series—nothing wrong with that, so long as they keep their mouths shut, because arguably what happens will still depend on everyone striving to do their best. But suppose that they tell the teams who will win and who will lose. Surely, that will have an effect on the action.) In this connection, compare the “fatalism” of *Oedipus the King* with the “fatalism” of Jesus’s prophecy to Peter that he will deny Jesus three times before sunrise.

Elucidate these parallels between Sophocles’s *Oedipus* and Marker’s *La Jetée* (The Observation Deck) Both flirt with the idea of predestination or fate; in both, the fated event is responsible for affording the central character an opportunity to save a collective group—a city, a civilization, mankind—from the effects of pollution; in both, the central character finally embraces his destiny, even though he knows there is something deadly about it. And yet how differently are these traits figured into the two stories! Focus on one of them, commenting on the difference and on anything else that seems relevant (the use of freeze-frames in *La Jetée*, for instance) to elucidating its meaning. To aid in discussing the film I have posted a translation of the French script on our website (not the translation used in our version of the film, but close enough).

Oedipus embraces his destiny in the remarkable speech in which he declares himself the child of Fortune or the child of chance (just before the shepherd arrives to be questioned about the killing of Laius). Macbeth also embraces his destiny—here, too, there are similarities to consider. There is the business of prophecy, of whose equivocal nature the protagonist is aware; equivocation shapes the character of many speeches (this is true throughout the *Oedipus*, although translations usually do not make us aware of it—e.g., Tiresias’s declaring that “this day will show your birth and your destruction”, which Oedipus takes

just as a piece of invective); there is a moment, when the hero forces the unequivocal truth at last from an unwilling speaker (in one case, a shepherd, in the other, the Weird Sisters), and there is a critical speech in which the hero commits himself to his fate, whatever its character. *Let it burst forth, says Oedipus, whatever will, whatever must* (in the passage already alluded to); *Rather than that, says Macbeth (III, i, 72), come fate into the list/ And champion me to th' utterance!* Once again: how differently are these traits figured into the two stories! Focus on one of them, commenting on the difference and on anything else that seems relevant to elucidating its meaning.

More narrowly: Both *Oedipus* and *Macbeth* deal with characters to whom a prophecy is given which comes true; and each nearly brings ruin to their respective domains. In a sense, both are "tragedies of fate." But questions can be nonetheless raised in each case about whether the fate that overtakes the title character is inevitable. Discuss the two plays and the role of prophecy within them in any fashion that seems to you fruitful for understanding the plays when compared with one another. It will probably be useful in writing on this topic to bear in mind Macbeth I.3, 148-9: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/ Without my stir."

Again: One might say of Oedipus that he is what he does and there is no change in his character; it is rather that the values placed upon his extraordinary nature have been reversed (from positive to negative) by learning something about what he has done. In *Macbeth*, every action taken by Macbeth has an immediate effect on him, so that, step by step, the courageous warrior becomes the guilt-crazed monster of the "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy.

Discuss the often-noticed alteration between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (namely, before the murder of Duncan he seems weak, she stirs him on in the name of his manhood and his courage; afterwards, she seems to collapse, while he grows more steadfast in the face of horrors). Note the relevance of this alteration (as you have interpreted it) to other themes in the play.

There is a lot of talk about time in *Macbeth*, from Lady Macbeth's "Thy letters have transported me beyond/ This ignorant present, and I feel now/ The future in the instant", through Macbeth's talk of "jumping the life to come" (I.7), to the final "tomorrow and tomorrow" speech and Macduff's final, exultant "The time is free". Likewise, there is much about dying well: from the death of the Thane of Cawdor, Macduff's mention of Duncan's queen, who "Oftener upon her knees than on her feet,/Died every day she lived," to Seward's talk at the end of the play about the death of his son. Taking any three passages from the play, discuss their context and the relevance of the themes they suggest to the play's central concerns.

Soliloquy in *Macbeth* is not confined to the main character. Comment on this. Trace the pattern of Macbeth's soliloquies through the play and argue whether or not they show a developing state of mind; allude to the imagery, not just the thought that it expresses, in doing so. You might think as well about the device of soliloquy, which is a unique way of involving the audience in the viewpoint of a character and is rarely used in modern theater. The soliloquy in Shakespeare puts the audience in touch with the mind of an individual participant in the action; the chorus in Greek tragedy puts the audience in touch with the mind of the witnessing community. What difference does this make to the audience's perspective on the action?