

First Paper Assignment

DUE SATURDAY, MARCH 6, AT 10 PM ON SAKAI

Write a focused, analytic paper making an argument about a specific problem, device, or pattern in *Portrait*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, or *As I Lay Dying*. You may, but need not, make brief reference to other texts we have read together, but in any case the argumentative focus should be on one text. You are not required or expected to use any secondary sources (scholarly articles, etc.). Your paper should be 1800–2400 words in length.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

Make an impression. Develop an interpretation of the significance of sensory detail in your chosen text; choose specific passages of description, or specific linguistic devices for registering perception, for your analysis. What comes to unexpected prominence, and what is pushed into the background? What sorts of skepticism or doubt does a focus on perception induce in the reader? You need not focus exclusively on sight (there are other kinds of perception). Distinguish rigorously between perceiving and knowing.

Minor role. Develop an interpretive argument about a character in Joyce, Woolf, or Faulkner who occupies only a small narrative space. What role does this character play in the structure and meaning of the text? How does this character work to point out particular themes? Why is the character represented only briefly, and what are the implications of this brevity for what is and is not represented? It may be particularly fruitful to think about the way fictional minor characters may be connected to forms of *social* marginalization.

Narrative and memory. Consider the narrative significance of memory in Joyce, Woolf, or Faulkner. When and how does memory enter the text: how is it narrated, and what is its narrative function? Why are events not simply narrated in order? Do not confine your claims to “character development” or to a list of examples, but identify a particular kind of memory and interpret its functions.

No biggie. Woolf writes, “Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.” Use this idea to illuminate the way *Portrait* or *Mrs. Dalloway* handles trivial details and unimportant happenings, particularly in contrast to its handling of more obviously weighty matters. To what extent does the novel privilege the small scale over the big deal—and why? Develop an argument around a few chosen moments of triviality, explaining both why they are trivial and why they are especially revealing.

Same-gender relations. Choosing one of our texts, develop an argument about that text's representation of same-gender characters' relationships and desires. Remember that desires cannot always be clearly categorized as sexual or not. If there is more than one homosocial relation of interest, use a comparison among pairings to sharpen your claims about the novel's representation of such relationships. Pay special attention to the distinction between what is explicit and what is suggested, what is socially legitimate and what is illicit—and how you know. Bad papers on this topic are characterized by generalizations, lazy assumptions that the past was repressed and we are free, or “outing” gestures (“X is actually gay”): instead, develop your most subtle and detailed analysis of particular cases.

Priests, suave and otherwise. Priests are everywhere in *Portrait*, from Stephen's earliest school days to his university life. Joyce himself wrote in a letter in 1904 (a decade before he finished *Portrait*) that at age 16 he “left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently” and waged “open war upon it by what I write and say and do.” Develop an argument about the representation of priests in the novel. How do the priest figures vary? Do they all represent bad forms of authority? To what extent does the priest remain a model for Stephen through the end of the novel? And to what extent are Stephen's own final attitudes ironized? A good argument will select particular depictions of priests for interpretation, avoiding broad generalizations about religion, and being careful to take the representations of Catholicism in the novel on their own terms; you do not need to introduce your own views of this or any other religion.

Composition of place. Develop an argument about the meaning of particular kinds of setting in *Portrait*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, or *As I Lay Dying*, explaining the significance of environments and of movement through space for the novel. To be effective, an interpretation of setting has to show that setting itself matters to the themes: it is not enough to say that certain plot events happen somewhere. For example, Stephen has an epiphany on a beach; this is not an explanation of why the beach is significant as a setting for *Portrait*, which must instead show why does Joyce puts this episode on a beach as opposed to any other setting. You might focus on city streets, for example; or on spaces of privacy and confinement; or on the way the novel compares locations; or on the difference between lived-in spaces and imagined ones for the novel.

Not all in the family. Most of Faulkner's novel is narrated by the Bundrens, but not all. What is the cumulative effect of those moments when the narrator is a non-Bundren? A good argument must sample over the whole of the novel, but a short paper cannot cover all the possible examples. Think carefully about the contrasts

among (say) Cora, Whitfield, and MacGowan, and develop an interpretation that makes sense of *how* the shift to a point of view outside the family works. What do these shifts let us see—about the Bundrens, about the society they inhabit, about the world Faulkner creates—that we could not otherwise see? Consider carefully about *when* the outsiders take over; think about how their biases are similar to or different from the main characters'; compare repeated narrators (e.g., Tull) with the one-offs (Samson).

Beasts of the field. The Bundrens are a farming family, and the novel pays a great deal of attention to the farm animals around them—horses, cows, mules—and to other fauna as well (vultures, fish). Develop an argument about the representation of non-human animals in the novel. For example: what do interactions between humans and animals reveal? Most conspicuous of all is Jewel and his horse, but this case is best placed in comparison to others. Or, bearing in mind that people are in fact animals: how does the novel compare people to animals, and with what effect? Consider the importance of figurative language as well as literal representation; consider animal and human labor; being owned and being free; animal bodies as against human bodies.

Ha ha, only serious. *As I Lay Dying* is a funny novel. How does Faulkner's humor transform the novel's treatment of its serious themes: death, grief, poverty, family conflict? Develop an argument that identifies one or more specific *kinds* of humor in the novel, paying close attention to the workings of language. Consider both laughing *with* and laughing *at*, mockery of outsiders as well as shared delight. How does humor reveal the ridiculousness of people who deserve to be brought low, and how (more disturbingly) does Faulkner get us to laugh at people who are already abject? A successful paper will carefully explain all the jokes it discusses.

Your own highly focused topic. I will gladly give feedback on self-designed topics up to two days before the due date.

WRITING GUIDELINES

Careful analysis of textual evidence is central to this paper. We have been modeling this mode of analysis in class. Your claims should be supported by extensive *quotation*. To support a claim, it is not enough simply to quote; once you quote, you must *analyze* what you have quoted, paying close attention to the significance of individual words, of syntactical and rhetorical patterns, of nuances and implications. Instead of attempting to paraphrase what a text means or summarize what it's about, *show how it works*. Do not take for granted that your reader will see the text the way you do: point out the details that can convince the reader of what you

say. Every analytical claim you make should be supported by concrete evidence from the text; every part of your paper should make substantive analytical claims.

You are particularly encouraged to look back over your own commonplace-book entries, as well as your classmates', to search for evidence of the patterns, recurring themes, or insistent problems that you might write about.

Your paper must address a significant, interesting, non-obvious question about one of the texts, and it must propose a clearly articulated, non-simplistic answer to that question. The question does not have to be a literal question; but successful papers always have a strong, focused *motive* for the particular analysis they carry out. Think about how your *highly specific* claims connect to broader questions about the author, genre, or theme your paper discusses, and how following your interpretation changes how readers should think about these questions. In order to find a motive in this sort of single-text assignment, think about what is most surprising about what you have to say. You may take for granted that your reader has in mind what has been discussed in class. (That also means that you should not repeat material from class. Spending too much of your paper on material or arguments already extensively discussed in class will weaken your motive.)

Motive is often established at the start of an essay. *Avoid writing a generalizing introduction.* Begin your essay with a surprising piece of evidence or observation of your own that immediately frames the topic you are going to address and establishes its interest. Then move from motive to argument: expanding on that initial piece of evidence, forecast the terms of your argument, then state the central, argumentative claim of the essay.

Your argument should answer your motivating question. That does not mean that every good paper resolves every problem it poses; on the contrary, good papers attend to the complexities of their subject matter. But an effective argument means your reader learns something from your analysis of your evidence. It will help to ask yourself what alternative arguments someone might make about your topic and to anticipate objections to your claims.

Think carefully about the *line of thought* of your writing, the way one claim leads to the next. "Transition sentences" are less important than your sense of the overall logic of your argument: think of the essay as a story you have to tell about the text you are analyzing, one with an arc from beginning to end. One of the most compelling ways to tell such a story is by thinking carefully about the *order of presentation of evidence*: indeed, you can "outline" a paper by first choosing the five or six passages that are most essential to your thinking and then deciding what sequence they should be presented in. The best sequence is rarely the sequence of

the text itself; don't start at the beginning and end at the end of your text. Choose an order that makes your point.

DRAFTS

Plan to draft and revise. You may send me partial or full drafts for brief comments, as long as you do so at least three days before the deadline. I will answer questions, time permitting, up through the day before the deadline.

FORMAT

Your paper should have 1.5-inch left and right margins, with text in twelve-point serif font (e.g.: Garamond, Hoefler Text, Palatino, Baskerville, or, less appealingly, Cambria, Times), and between single and one-and-a-half spacing. *Number all pages.* The paper should have your name and the date on the first page. Give your paper a meaningful title.

Submit your paper electronically via the Sakai Assignments tool. E-mail submissions are not acceptable. If you wish to turn in your paper in hard copy, please contact me in advance.

Digital submissions should be in Portable Document Format (PDF) if possible. Native word-processor formats (.doc, .docx, .pages, .odt) are acceptable. All word processors can produce PDF files, through a "Save As..." option, an "Export" command, or a "Print to PDF" option in the print dialog.

STYLE

You must proofread carefully.

Quotations should be carefully transcribed, punctuated, and attributed. In a paper on a single text, you may give a full citation only once, either in an MLA-style "Work Cited" bibliography or in a Chicago-style footnote to the first quotation. After that, page numbers may be given in parentheses. Secondary sources are not required in this paper; but if you use someone else's work, including someone's informal comments inside class or out, *you must cite that work.* Using someone else's work without specific citation is plagiarism. Consistency and thoroughness in citation is more important than exact fidelity to either MLA or Chicago style.

Please follow the conventions of standard written American English. I am non-prescriptive about things like the split infinitive, the sentence-final preposition, and "they" used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. The passive voice is an excellent grammatical resource and can be used freely, provided it is used wisely.

The best resource on matters of usage is the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of*

English Usage, also available in a wonderful paperback Concise Edition. For detailed information about current and past word uses, the fundamental source is the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

LATE POLICY

Late papers will be graded. If I receive your late paper less than 48 hours after the deadline, your maximum grade is 3.0. A paper that is more than 48 hours late can receive no higher than a 2.0. You may turn in a late paper any time until May 3.

Computer problems are not a valid excuse for lateness. Plan ahead. Back up frequently.

GRADING

The syllabus explains the general meaning of marks on the four-point scale. The chief criteria of assessment are:

Evidence. Has textual evidence been used extensively, chosen well, and interpreted effectively in support of claims?

Motive. Does the paper make its central problem interesting?

Argument. Is the argument focused, logical, convincing, surprising?

Line of thought. Does the paper develop its ideas in connected, orderly fashion? Does the conclusion follow from (and differ from) the opening?

Style. Is the paper clearly written? Is it free from typographical, grammatical, and other errors?

IN GENERAL

An A-range (3.5–4.0) paper is strong by all these criteria; a B-range (2.5–3.5) paper has well-chosen, well-analyzed evidence but does not fully develop its argument or its motive; a C-range (1.5–2.5) paper lacks evidence or uses evidence only to summarize plot; and a D-range (0.5–1.5) paper is too short or ignores the assignment.

If you submit work that is not your own, you will not receive credit for the assignment, and you will face disciplinary consequences. See the Rutgers academic integrity policy on the website <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>.