Dr. Clarkson’s Textual Analysis Papers

We read a lot in this class. Our discussions frequently concern larger arguments, themes and developments in the text. These discussions, though, depend upon a solid understanding of the text – what we call a “close reading.” Evidence for our interpretations is found in the details. Thus, textual analysis is a crucial skill. Your papers in this class will be brief essays that focus on arguing a thesis. The argument is based upon evidence and sound reasoning.

The Idea

Rather than writing a general response, a personal reflection on a theme, or researching and ranging throughout the whole work on a major idea, I want you to interpret and explain a specific passage. Select a few lines or a short passage that you find particularly rich, striking, ambiguous, illuminating, illustrative, infuriating, challenging, inspiring, or any number of adjectives that say this passage matters to you. Your task is to interpret and analyze that passage. That is, what is the meaning and significance of the passage?

Guiding questions include:

- What does this passage mean?
- How is this passage significant to the work?
- Why did the author use this particular word or this particular image?
- How does this passage take things in a new direction? How does this passage reinforce aspects of the text?
- What are the implications of my interpretation of the meaning of this passage?
- How does my reading of this passage affect our understanding of a particular event, character, idea, or theme in the work?

A passage may be open to various readings. The aim is to arrive at YOUR interpretation of the passage. If your paper is primarily about a passage and not primarily about a theme, idea, or character to which the passage may be relevant, then you are on the right track. Your paper should be structured around the passage and convey your interpretation of the meaning and significance of the passage. Think of the passage itself as the “topic” of your paper.

Choosing a Passage

Not every part of a work will lend itself to such a focused analysis. You need to choose a passage that you find particularly interesting (perhaps for its imagery, structural symmetry or dissymmetry, etc.), or one you do not understand, or one that you think is important for understanding a major idea in the text. It is important to remember, though, that you should concentrate on the passage. Do not jump into a larger discussion about the idea, theme, character, etc. as it appears throughout the book. In other words, do not use the passage as an example or evidence for some larger idea or theme. Rather, use the larger idea or theme in the work to support your interpretation of the passage.

You may choose a passage that appears to contradict another part of the work. In such case, you should paraphrase or quote the apparently conflicting material. Your goal, though, is always to explain the first passage. Are you going to argue that a proper understanding of the primary passage can harmonize the apparent conflict? Are you going to argue an interpretation that upholds the apparent contradiction as a real contradiction?
Structure

This paper will be very much like the instant essay exercises we are performing in class. You should organize your thoughts and organize your paper for the purpose of convincing a reader of your interpretation of the meaning and significance of the passage. There should be a thesis that encompasses the primary point or two about that interpretation. In this way, the papers are essentially persuasive essays: you are presenting an argument to which you want your reader to agree on the basis of the evidence and your reasoning.

Each paragraph should be organized around a key idea. The sentences of each paragraph are to serve the advancement and understanding of that idea. The paragraphs should be organized (with appropriate “meta” language for your reader) in such a way as to build a line of reasoning.

The actual steps of your reasoning and the textual evidence you use will be different for different passages and works. At times, you may want to emphasize the metaphors, or the diction, or the structure of a passage. In other cases, you may be explaining for your reader a particular concept being addressed in the passage, or (as discussed above) reconciling this passage with another. The genre of the work will also affect how you go about the task: epic poetry may raise a different set of questions than a philosophical treatise.

Context

Although you are explaining a single passage, you will likely need to make reference to the context or other parts of a work. For example, you may want to reference what the reader already knows about a character, how a term has been used in other places, where the passage falls within a story line or extended line of reasoning by the author. Do not be afraid to refer to the context and other parts of the text as necessary, but remember two things. First, do not slip off into writing about general ideas across large portions of the book. Again, your paper topic is the passage, not some general idea or theme. Do not produce a very shallow, narrow treatment of a deep, broad topic. Stay focused on the small excerpt you selected. Secondly, consider your wording carefully when pulling in contextual elements. What you consider an established trait of a character or meaning of an idea is also an interpretation. Some of these are easily incorporated as assumptions for the flow of your argument. It is acceptable to rely on your other interpretive conclusions, but remember that your reader will need to accept them as premises for your current line of reasoning. If your reader’s agreement to such a premise is questionable, then you should spend a paragraph or two establishing that link in your reasoning.

Translations

It may seem that such detailed analysis is questionable for a work in translation. Translations can present certain problems. We can read too much into terms in English that do not carry the same connotations in the original language. Nevertheless, we must deal with the text as we have it. We need to have some trust in the skill of our translators.

Be wary of treating major terms as though they were exactly equivalent to the English words. But at the same time, do not be afraid of careful, detailed, and nuanced reading. You may be misled by a translation, but for this class, you will certainly have a better understanding than had you never stopped to reflect on the passage in detail. In the process, you will have improved your skills as a reader, a writer, and a critical thinker.