Essay Guidelines

This assignment calls for a short critical essay (4-6 pages, typed, double-spaced, 12-point font, standard margins) in which you are to present an original interpretive argument, rooted in acts of textual analysis and critical discussion of a text (or texts) we have read in class to date. Although I encourage you to investigate some outside critical sources (available in the library, or through academic databases like JSTOR and Project Muse), this is not required—though any sources you consult should be properly cited.

Unlike, say, a book review in a newspaper or magazine (in which a critic offers an aesthetic judgment about the quality of a given work—that is, whether it is “good” or “bad”), a critical essay for an English course is an example of academic discourse that works from the basis close interpretive readings that build analytical claims from evidence. I want you to show us how you understand the significance of your chosen text, and how it produces meaning, by walking us through a few important and carefully selected passages. In these papers, you must:

- **Introduce** the topic under review. Academic essays are tools of intellectual discovery. What do you want to investigate? What issues have you identified that beg closer scrutiny? Offer at least a provisional thesis statement that anticipates the work of the essay, and serves as a point of departure for your discussion.
- **Incorporate** (a minimum of) five quotations. These quoted passages will be the centerpieces of your paper, the evidence you offer for your interpretation and analysis.
- **Come to a final reckoning** about the meaning and significance of the particular passages you’ve chosen to discuss. That is, your paper will use these quoted “parts” to offer us a new perspective on the “whole.” What can a reader gain by seeing the text as you see it? How do the elements you’ve identified correspond to the evolving issues and questions we’ve been developing in class?

A words of advice: don’t bite off more than you can chew. Keep the scope of your thinking focused, and clearly directed toward a specific and productive end. Avoid generalities. It is always better to develop your thinking on the basis of a few key observations & claims, and then proceed by fleshing out their deeper implications. The best way to do this is to define your topic narrowly and concretely from the start. Your introduction should include a well-crafted thesis statement that conveys an idea that is both insightful and complex. Use the body of your paper to develop the components of your argument through an adroit deployment and analysis of textual evidence. Avoid excessive summary, lengthy rehearsals of widely-known facts, and make sure that every paragraph and new piece of evidence introduces a new element to your argument. Bring in your secondary sources strategically (should you choose to include them), in the service of advancing your argument; make sure there is adequate context for understanding what your outside critics bring to the table, and how you are using them in the context of your own argument.

The best papers will develop sophisticated arguments of serious intellectual interest, will work productively and persuasively with quoted material, and will be presented in cogent, stylistically polished, and grammatically sound academic prose. MLA-style documentation is preferred; papers lacking parenthetical citation or a properly-formatted “Works Cited” list will be marked down. Good luck!

**THIS PAPER IS DUE ON MONDAY, MARCH 7, at 11:59 p.m.**