

## THE FIRST PAPER

Due Friday, October 3, at 5 p.m. on Sakai

Write a short paper making an interpretive argument that engages with a poem by Auden, Bishop, Hughes, or McKay and a theoretical text by Shelley, Wilde, Shklovsky, Brooks, Ransom, or Adorno. Your argument should in some way relate to the conceptual question of the nature and function of literary form. The key evidence for your paper should consist of careful analysis of *both* the poetic and theoretical texts in terms of their themes, linguistic detail, rhetorical structures, and forms.

When formatted according to the guidelines below, your paper should be six pages in length. Less is not acceptable.

The choice of topic is your own. Here are some possibilities:

1. The political lyric. How do we apply theories of poetic form or the special quality of poetry to poems with explicitly political content? Writers on form from Shelley to Adorno insist that explicit politics is not in the nature of poetry. But can their theories nonetheless tell us something about the way poetic form works with political content in poems like Auden's "Spain," McKay's "If We Must Die," or Hughes's "Good Morning Revolution"?
2. Poetry as theory. Many of the poems we have read can be read as reflections on the nature and function of poetry or of literature, some quite explicitly ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats," "At the Fishhouses") and others implicitly. Think about how the poem does theory, and put it into conversation with a prose theoretical text: does the latter reveal, complete, challenge, or (even) lose out to the former?
3. The example. In Brooks, Shklovsky, and Adorno, the discussion of quoted examples is central to the unfolding of their argument. Consider the way an example works in one of these writers, and then develop an argument about how a different example, chosen from among our poetic texts, might be analyzed on parallel or divergent lines.
4. Sestina. "Paysage Moralisé" and "A Miracle for Breakfast" are both sestinas.<sup>1</sup> Consider how the use of this rigorous poetic form speaks to one of the theories of form we have read. Does this "form" seem like form as described by Adorno or Shelley or Shklovsky? What is the significance of the different understandings of form?

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1. For an explanation of the form, see *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, s.v. "sestina": [http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&xres\\_id=xri:lion&rft\\_id=xri:lion:ft:ref:R00794069:0](http://gateway.proquest.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&xres_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:ref:R00794069:0).

## WRITING WITH THEORY

As with literary texts like novels and poems, so with theoretical texts: to write about them effectively, you must attend carefully to specific details in order to build an argument based on the way the text works. Show explicitly how you arrive at your interpretations of the theorist's argument by quoting and analyzing the evidence of their text.

Theory imposes a further demand, however: the theorist's own arguments matter. You have to give a clear, concise account of what the theoretical text argues. At the same time, whereas in general a scholarly argument about a literary text should not make explicit judgments about that text's value or quality, engaging with a theoretical argument *does* mean you will say what is valuable and what is not in that argument. This does not mean that the only way to engage is to declare that Theodor Adorno is wrong about everything, but it does mean that mere paraphrase is not enough.

Literary theory has a tradition of difficult writing. As a result, you may find yourself engaging with a text whose full meaning is not completely clear to you. In that case, your task is to clarify exactly where the difficulty lies and then give the best interpretation. Obey the principle of charity: interpret the theorist's argument in such a way as to make it as convincing as possible, especially if you are going to dispute the theorist's claims.

## EVIDENCE

The central requirement of this paper is careful analysis using the evidence of the language of the text. 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. When it comes to poetry, an analysis that says nothing about poetic devices like stanza structure, meter, and rhyme is unlikely to be convincing.

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. And make no claims for which you lack evidence.

## ARGUMENT AND MOTIVE

Your interpretation must be organized into an *argument* with a meaningful *motive*. In other words, your paper must address a significant, interesting, non-obvious question raised by putting theory and poetry together, and it must propose a clearly articulated, non-simplistic answer to that question in the form of a *thesis*.

Motive is normally established at the start of an essay. Avoid writing a generalizing introduction. In fact, avoid generalizing altogether. Engaging with a theory provides a strong possible motive,

but only if you immediately make clear how your own argument relates to the theory: are you building on it, challenging it, taking it in a new direction? But it is also possible to find a motive in an interpretive puzzle posed by your chosen literary text or texts, and to move into theory as you begin to explore that puzzle.

It will also help to ask yourself what alternative arguments someone might raise about your topic and to anticipate objections to your claims. If there are no alternative arguments or no possible surprises, you haven't found a motive, and you will have to revise your argument.

Repeating interpretations from class or dwelling on evidence already thoroughly discussed in class also detracts from motive.

#### ORGANIZATION

Writing about multiple texts in a short space requires careful choices about where your paper spends its time. It is not necessary to devote equal space to all the texts in question. Think carefully about the structural possibilities: you can start with the theory and then turn to the literary text, or vice-versa; you can briefly mention one text, turn to another, and then return to the first; and so on.

More generally, pay attention to 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: it may help to think of the essay as a story you have to tell, 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, including both theory and literary text, that are most essential to your thinking and then deciding what sequence they should be presented in.

#### FURTHER SOURCES

You may make mention of other poems and theories than the ones you have chosen to focus on—indeed this is often a useful way to explain why your evidence is significant or where your motive comes from.

For this assignment, you are not required to do additional research off the syllabus. Given the short length of the paper, it would be a mistake to try to squeeze in many other sources. If you do use other sources, use them appropriately and cite them carefully.

#### DRAFTS

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

## FORMAT

Use margins of 1.0–1.25 inches on all sides, a twelve-point serif font suitable for body text (e.g.: Garamond, Hoefler Text, Palatino, Baskerville, or, less appealingly, Cambria, Times), and between one-and-a-half and double spacing. *Number all pages.* The paper should have your name and the date on the first page. Title your paper.

Submit electronically via the Sakai “Assignments 2” page for this paper. E-mail submissions are not acceptable.

Digital submissions should, if possible, be in Portable Document Format (PDF). Native word-processor formats (.doc, .docx, .pages, .odt) are a second-best alternative. All word processors are capable of producing PDF files, through either a “Save As . . .” option, an “Export” command, or a “Print to PDF” option in the print dialog. For more on producing PDF files, see [andrewgoldstone.com/pdf](http://andrewgoldstone.com/pdf).

If you prefer to turn in hard copy, leave your paper in my mailbox in Murray Hall and *send me an e-mail before the deadline* saying you are doing this.

## STYLE

*You must proofread carefully.*

Quotations should be carefully transcribed, punctuated, *and attributed*. For bibliographic conventions, you may use either MLA or Chicago style. For the latter, give a full citation in a note the first time you quote a text, then use page numbers and an abbreviated title in parentheses. 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.

Automatically generated citations are always immediately obvious as such. Pay attention to detail. Nonetheless, honest attribution and proofreading are more important than following formatting rules exactly.

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*.

For grammar, I consider *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum to be the reference standard; it is condensed in their slightly less daunting *Student’s Introduction to English Grammar*.

**LATE POLICY**

I will grade late papers. 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 December 8.

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. Note that there are no “minus” grades. Here are some typical characteristics of papers in the various grade ranges:

3.5–4.0: The paper has a specific, interesting argument, supported convincingly by extensive analysis of evidence from both the poetic and the theoretical text. The paper demonstrates a thorough engagement with the complexities of the texts and the theoretical problems. The paper is clearly written and free of mechanical problems.

3.0–3.5: The paper develops a convincing analysis of textual evidence, in support of an argument that is too broad or less well-motivated. Both theory and poetry are included but their relationship is not fully developed. The paper is clearly written and has only minor mechanical problems.

2.5–3.0: The paper analyzes textual evidence, but its argument is not clear, or its organization is weak. The theoretical questions have not been well-understood or articulated. The paper has some problems with clarity or writing mechanics.

2.0–2.5: The paper is mostly summary or generalization. It has no clear thesis or its thesis is not at all arguable. The theoretical text is significantly mischaracterized. There are extensive mechanical problems.

Below 2.0: The paper is under the length requirement or otherwise unsatisfactory in major ways.

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/>.