



ENGL 1036

Dark Nights and Dark Knights

Literary analysis essay writing

Starting

- Choose a topic.
- Determine your thesis: often from a source of irritation or a response to another's comment.
- Write at least half of an introductory paragraph, including your thesis statement.
- Write one or two body paragraphs, and then decide if you are going in a good direction.
- Alter your thesis if you need to, to make it stronger.
 - Re-write your introduction and parts of your body paragraphs.

Topic

- Usually, the assignment will outline a topic for you.
- In advanced classes, the topic may be open: you need to decide upon your own topic.
- Focusing your topic is important: don't be too general or broad.
- You usually need to find a sub-topic within the assignment's topics.

Thesis

- Your thesis is your main argument for your essay.
- A thesis is based directly on the assignment instructions / questions.
- Your thesis should reflect your own interpretation / understanding / analysis of the text(s).
- It should not be obvious.
 - If you think others might have the same thesis as you, you should change your thesis.
- The thesis can come out of something you want to say in response to someone.
 - The prof said that these lines mean that, but I am going to argue that they mean this instead.
 - People might think that this text represents that, but I will argue that it represents this instead.
 - Scholar X argues that the author is commenting on that with the text; I will argue that the author is instead commenting on this.

Goal of the essay

- Your main goal is to support / prove your thesis.
- You are not expected to prove fully the thesis; you are expected to be persuasive.
- You need to offer insight into the text: what do you see as important?
- A highly successful English studies essay (75%+) will offer insight into the complexities of the text; a less successful essay will work with what is already generally known (even on an analytical level).

Audience

- Your audience is (often) just one person: the person grading your essay.
- You can assume your grader knows very well the course text(s) you are analyzing: there is no need to explain what the texts are about.
- If you are including texts that are not on the course and that your grader may not know already, you should introduce these, usually with a very quick summary of them.
- Ultimately, your audience is other scholars. Assume your audience is composed of scholars at a higher level than what you are at.

General advice

- You do not have to echo anything the instructor has said.
- Usually, you want to surprise the marker with new insights into the text(s).
- Summarizing the text(s) can be very useful in an essay, but it does not contribute much to the value of the essay. Assume your marker has read the text(s). Summarize parts of the text(s) only when you will comment on the parts you summarize.
- As a general rule, do not quote from the text(s) unless you comment on what you quote. Do not let a quotation speak for itself.
- Treat your subject matter with complexity: don't try to simplify too much.

More general advice

- Write about literature and other texts using the present tense.
 - The text says that ...
 - The author is illustrating ...
 - The raven croaks, “Nevermore.”
- Your essay cannot just paraphrase a text; analysis is your goal.
 - Note that when you paraphrase a text, you need to include citations. (They are not just for quotations.)
- Your essay should have plenty of statements (propositions) that your grader can disagree with. It is your job to persuade your grader that your statements are valid.

Statements

There held in holy passion still,
Forget thyself to marble, till
With a sad leaden downward cast,
Thou fix them on the earth as fast. (41-44)

- In these lines, Milton is showing how Melancholy looks both up and down.
- The term “holy passion” is linked to “marble,” suggesting that Melancholy is like a religious statue.
- The term “fast” contrasts with “leaden.”
- The term “leaden” suggests something heavy and slow, while “fast” suggests something quick: there is a strong contrast in these lines.
- The term “fast” could possibly mean *quickly* here, but the meaning of *firmly* or *securely* helps reinforce the heaviness suggested by “leaden” and reinforces the suggestion in all four lines that Melancholy will keep her gaze either up or down for a significant amount of time: looking up or down, Melancholy is slow and pensive.

Consequences of statements

- The term “holy passion” is linked to “marble.”
- This suggests that Melancholy is like a religious statue.
- This is important because the poem as a whole links passion with calmness, an apparent contradiction. It is also contrasting the spiritual side of contemplation with a more down-to-earth side.

Expectations

- For a literary analysis essay, your marker will expect:
- a well formatted (MLA) essay
- an essay with very clear writing (easy to understand — for someone with a Ph.D.)
- an essay with (almost) no spelling and grammar errors
- quotations from the text and analysis of or commentary on these quotations
- a clearly identifiable thesis statement, usually in the first paragraph
- an essay that stays on track: focuses on the thesis statement and the text(s) at hand
- a clear indication from reading your essay that you have understood at an appropriate level of complexity the text about which you are writing

Good writing

- It can take years to develop good academic writing habits: now is the time to start (if you haven't already).
- Aim for perfect grammar.
- Aim for precision in your word choice. Generally, use a simpler word as opposed to a more complex word.
- Avoid colloquialisms. Remember that when we talk (especially with friends), we generally use one form of the language; when we write academic essays, we generally use another form of the language. (There is a lot of overlap.)
- Avoid, as much as possible, using *they* / *them* / *their* / *theirs* when referring to a singular noun. Use them only when necessary, especially when a person has requested these to be applied to that individual. Otherwise, it is usually very easy to change the noun into a plural in order to avoid the gendered pronouns. Use *one* as much as you like to avoid gendered pronouns.