**English 200: Literature in a Global Context**

# **Prof. D. Rienstra**

**Final Paper**

My goal for this paper is for you to experience the rewards of moving to an even deeper level of understanding and idea development than you achieved in previous papers. Your goal this time is to make connections — between two or more works and between ancient ideas and forms and the contemporary world.

This should be a formal, thesis-driven essay. Be sure to review and follow carefully ***all eight*** of the conventions for writing literary papers. Also refer to the Course Guidelines document (the salmon-colored one) for format requirements.

**Length: 5-6 pages**

**Deadline: Dec. 5 in class**

You have four basic options for developing your paper topic:

1. **compare two works we have read and connect to a contemporary context**

For this option, look for an interesting point of comparision between two (or *maybe* three) works we have read. Develop that comparison. Frame your close study with brief reflection on why it matters for contemporary life.

1. **epics then and now**

For this option, your task is to make an illuminating connection between a contemporary (post-1900) work of art and one of the texts we have read this semester. The most straightforward way to do this is to choose a film, poem or set of poems, television show, novel or novel series, work of visual art, etc., that offers an illuminating connection to one of our texts for the semester. How does your reading this semester enrich your understanding of the contemporary work—and vice versa? What insights can we gain about contemporary life from this comparison?

We have been making references all semester to superhero stories: *Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Hunger Games*, and more. You might use this as a chance to explore and make your own statements about these or other connections.

1. **research**

All of our texts are the subject of extensive scholarly commentary. If you like research, I can help you identify a research question and you can explore what the scholarship says about it.

1. **a creative project**

You could do a creative project instead that still fulfills the spirit of the paper options. This could be a work of visual art, a short film, a script, a TV series treatment—use your imagination! The challenge for this option is to do something *substantial* and *detailed* enough to be fully equivalent to a paper. If you choose this option, you should definitely consult with me about your idea and I’ll give you further instructions.

*What about those old exploration papers?*

Whichever option you choose, consider using material or ideas from a previous exploration paper. **Cutting and pasting is allowed**! You can also do something completely new, of course.

*Thesis*

As you develop ideas for your paper, spend some serious time devising a good thesis. Say something more than “These two works have similarities and differences.” Figure out exactly what those points of comparison are, and then draw a further conclusion from that.

Example: “Milton’s grand and eloquent Satan and Dante’s repugnant, silent Satan reflect the particular effect on the reader each work seems designed to achieve. Milton’s epic is designed to fool the reader into discovery of her own attraction to evil, while Dante’s is designed to purge the reader of it.”

You will probably not be able to come up with a good thesis until you are well into the writing. That’s OK. Begin with something, anything, and keep looking to refine your thesis as you go. Getting to a good one may take a couple drafts of the body of the paper. Let the final version of your thesis present the higher level of insight you have achieved during the process.

***Conventions of literary writing***

Here’s where you put into practice the skills you have been developing in the exploration papers. Please refer back to the main “Literary Conventions” document (on Moodle) for details.

1. Punctuate **titles** correctly.
2. Use the “**critical present**” tense when describing what happens in a story or poem.
3. Refer to the **genre** of a work correctly.
4. Show **line breaks** when quoting poetry.
5. Use a correct and minimal **reference** in parentheses after a quotation.
6. **Introduce** quotations carefully.
7. **Punctuate** correctly before and after the quotation.
8. Always include a correct **works cited list in MLA 8 style**.

*Evaluation criteria*

This essay gives you a great deal of creative freedom. Enjoy it. Meanwhile, keep in mind that the best essays will

1. demonstrate creativity in the development of the topic
2. show a comprehensive understanding of the original work(s)
3. insightfully address key themes or issues in the original work(s)
4. show a detailed and astute “reading” of the contemporary work (if applicable)
5. gather your analysis into an organized essay with a clear, interesting, and insightful thesis
6. balance broad insights with carefully chosen details from both works, including meaningful quotations
7. present a polished, complete, carefully proofread final appearance.

***Remember: I am looking for depth of engagement with at least one of our texts.*** Don’t make the mistake of glancing briefly at the *Aeneid* and then spending four pages on *Batman*. Go deep! Details! The other thing I’d like to see is ***thoughtful insight***. You’re an educated person now, so deploy that by saying something thoughtful and relevant.

***Help??!***

I would strongly suggest that you run your idea by me before beginning substantial work. You can do this by e-mail or in person. This is not required, but it may be very helpful.

Hint: The key to a successful paper is to *limit the scope* of your topic to something you can do well. Challenge yourself to be creative, but also place wise boundaries on your topic. Draw on expertise you already have. Also, give yourself *time*. Don’t try to do this at the last minute.

**Suggestions for approaching this assignment**

Try brainstorming for the assignment by considering one of our grand questions for the semester.

***What do we need from a hero?***

One of the questions we posed at the beginning of the semester was this: What is it about the epic and epic heroes that we still seem to need in our imaginative life? What do our stories do for us? What monsters need slaying? With the background of reading you have done, you are now well equipped to answer this question. You might choose a particular hero of today—Batman, Spiderman, Iron Man, Rey Probably Skywalker, whatever—and consider what we find “needful” about this hero. To answer this question, you could compare to one of the heroes we studied. Perhaps Iron Man is a kind of modern Odysseus—a champion of the power of smarts in facing the challenges of contemporary life.

Another approach: argue that we still need two or more of the heroes we read about, that they offer us something none of our contemporary heroes can give. What is it?

***Why so often the singular hero, “accompanied but alone”?***

Some of our heroes this semester had companions or helpers or divine assistance, yet most of them seem alone against the challenges they face. Is this still true, or has this changed? What about Frodo’s companions, or Harry Potter’s friends, or Luke/Leia/Han, or the ensemble cast of *Lost*? Have we set aside the lonely hero in order to examine the need for community in addressing life’s challenges? How might one of these hero sets be compared to the companions or helpers of one or two of our text’s heroes? Is *Monkey* more modern?

Another approach: compare the relative “loneliness” of two of our text’s heroes. How does Virgil’s companionship to the pilgrim compare to say, Monkey and Tripitaka, and what can we understand better by making this comparison?

***Why (virtually) always the male hero?***

We noted this semester how female figures are “the other” in these ancient epics. They are the distraction, the loyal wife, or (in Dante’s case and in *Monkey*) the alluring spiritual guide. But not the hero. Has this changed? Analyze the role of women in modern epic-like tales. You might argue that a particular work is a modern epic with a female protagonist, comparing that protagonist to one or more ancient heroes. Or you might argue that female figures are still playing the same old roles, comparing a modern epic to a similar older one.

Another approach: compare two female figures from two of our texts in some detail.

***Why the superpowers of various sorts?***

Often heroes are larger than life, and this sometimes manifests in “superpowers” like Monkey’s cloud surfing. Some of our heroes are specially favored by the gods (Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Aeneas). Others: nothing special (Dante’s pilgrim, Tripitaka). Why do you suppose we are still fascinated with superpowers in our entertainments? Do these super-powered heroes allow us to imagine ourselves as special, or are they simply an exaggerated way of thinking about our own talents and abilities? Or do we favor heroes these days that operate strictly by wit and nerve? Work on this question by comparing two contrasting heroes from our texts, or by considering the way that powers and lack thereof operate in a contemporary work, as compared to an ancient one.

***What about those trips to the underworld?***

Here you could compare two trips to the underworld in our texts, considering in detail how each functions differently. Or you could examine a contemporary version of the underworld journey, making ample comparisons to one or two of our texts. Why do we still seem to need this epic convention?

***And what about machinery?***

What are some contemporary forms of “divine attentiveness” to the characters and plot? We have quite a range of god-involvement in the texts we’ve read, and you could compare two texts on that point. Or you could show how this convention has morphed into something else, perhaps secret agencies, some evil, some good. Or maybe we don’t have machinery anymore? We certainly have literal, technological, steel-and-gadgetry machinery! And what might that say about the contemporary context?

***What else?***

Use your imagination here and do something that interests you. Have fun. If you’re not having at least a little fun, you’re not doing this right.