

Department of English and Cultural Studies
McMaster University

17 October 2016

English and Cultural Studies 1A03 (Fall Term, 2016) / “Shorter Genres”

Instructor: Dr. David L. Clark



William Blake, *The Man Sweeping the Interpreter's Parlour* (c.1822)

Essay Assignment #2

“Literature interrogates and upsets accepted ways of looking at the world. Literature worthy of the name is disruptive and insurgent. It refreshes our perceptions, unsettles our understandings and frustrates our expectations. It expresses a forceful impatience with unquestioned assumptions, received wisdom and dangerous ideas. It is about struggle and is itself the scene of struggle. And literature accomplishes this task by putting the resources of language to work in unexpected ways.”

Discuss, writing a leanly cogent essay (1000 words) that compares and contrasts two literary texts assigned on this course. Pay particular attention to the ways in which form and meaning work together in the texts that you compare and contrast. In other words, what are the similarities and differences in how the authors develop the relationship between form and content in their writing? (You may choose texts from any part of this course, including the short stories and

autobiographical texts that we will be studying in the weeks to come. The only excluded texts are the three poems attached to Essay Assignment #1.)

Seven important tips for writing an effective essay:

- 1) Begin your essay with a thesis statement. In your first sentences you should clearly state what you intend to argue in your essay. Refer to the specific literary texts that you intend to discuss and briefly summarize the particular claim that you will make about them and about how they embody the spirit of disruption. So, for example, your opening sentence should sound and look something like: “In this essay, I will argue that . . .” *Do not repeat the essay question in place of developing your own thesis statement.* The essay question is not your thesis statement. Your thesis statement describes the particular claim that your essay will then support through analyzing the texts that you have chosen to discuss. You must wager a thesis that is beyond merely saying that the texts you are analyzing “are disruptive.” Instead, develop a thesis statement that is more precisely about *how* and *why* these particular texts are disruptive, and about *how* and *why* they are *differently* disruptive, always keeping in front of mind that literary texts do what they do by uniquely linking form with content and content with form.
- 2) The rest of your essay will be taken up with arguing the case you wager in your opening sentences. Make sure that your arguments and analyses are rooted in specific details drawn from the literary texts that you select. Back up your arguments by pointing to and discussing those details. As you write this portion of the essay, ensure that it demonstrates the thesis that you unfurled in your opening sentences. In other words, make sure that your argument and your thesis statement align, and that your argument remains answerable to your thesis statement.
- 3) Don’t forget to *compare and contrast* the different and specific ways in which each of the literary texts that you have selected capture the spirit of disruption.
- 4) Ensure that your remarks do significantly *more* than reproduce arguments made in lectures, tutorials and in the Study Notes posted on Avenue. But remember that the arguments made in lectures, tutorials and the Study Notes model useful ways to analyze literary texts.
- 5) Write *leanly*. What does that mean? It means that you should make every sentence of your essay count towards either establishing your thesis or making a case for that thesis through analyses of specific passages drawn from the literary texts that you select to discuss. Mercilessly delete all sentences that do not meet these criteria. So, no verbiage, no “filler,” nothing extraneous, no restating the question, and no un-argued generalizations. No wind-up; instead, make the pitch (i.e., do not waste time and effort slowly getting to your thesis; instead, *begin* with your thesis). Write clearly and concisely. Eliminate garbled sentences, grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. Be careful not to repeat yourself, saying the same thing in slightly different ways or circling round a single

point. Instead, push your argument purposefully ahead. It will help to have a good plan before you begin to write and to give yourself plenty of time to write. Trust me: an essay hurriedly written the night before it is due reads just like that. Ensure that your thesis is clear. Before writing your essay, sketch out how you intend to make a case: Which literary texts best suit your thesis? What moments in each of those texts best illustrate your argument? Why those moments? In what order will you make your points, i.e., what comes first in your essay's argument, then second, then third, etc.? Confirm that the points you make are all answerable to and flow from your opening thesis. That way you tighten up your essay and help ensure that your remarks stay focused and on track.

- 6) Your TA will provide useful suggestions and criticisms regarding your first essay assignment. Consider those suggestions and criticisms carefully. *Ensure that you incorporate those suggestions and criticisms into your second essay assignment.* Your TA will be looking to see that you have in fact applied those suggestions and criticisms to your second essay assignment since that is an important part of the learning process in this course. Your TA will also be looking to see that you have incorporated the instructions provided in this essay assignment handout. Jettison all old writing habits that are not serving you well. Embrace writing strategies that actually work.
- 7) Consult the Exemplars (or model essays) posted on the coursepage. (These essays have been graciously shared by students from last year's section of this course.) Observe the different ways in which these Exemplars meet the criteria for an effective essay described in this memorandum. Use these essays to help you write your own.

Your essay is due in tutorial **Monday, 7 November 2016** (worth 30%).

Your TA will provide further helpful suggestions in your tutorials. Don't forget too to draw from the considerable writing resources that are to be found in Leslie E. Casson, *A Writer's Handbook: Developing Writing Skills for University Students* (Broadview Press, 2011) and in the *First Year English & Cultural Studies Handbook*, http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/undergraduate/FirstYear_HandBook/Levelonehandbook.pdf.

Olivia and Nisha, the Writing Tutors in the Department of English and Cultural Studies, can also offer assistance in improving your writing skills. This semester, their office hours and email addresses are:

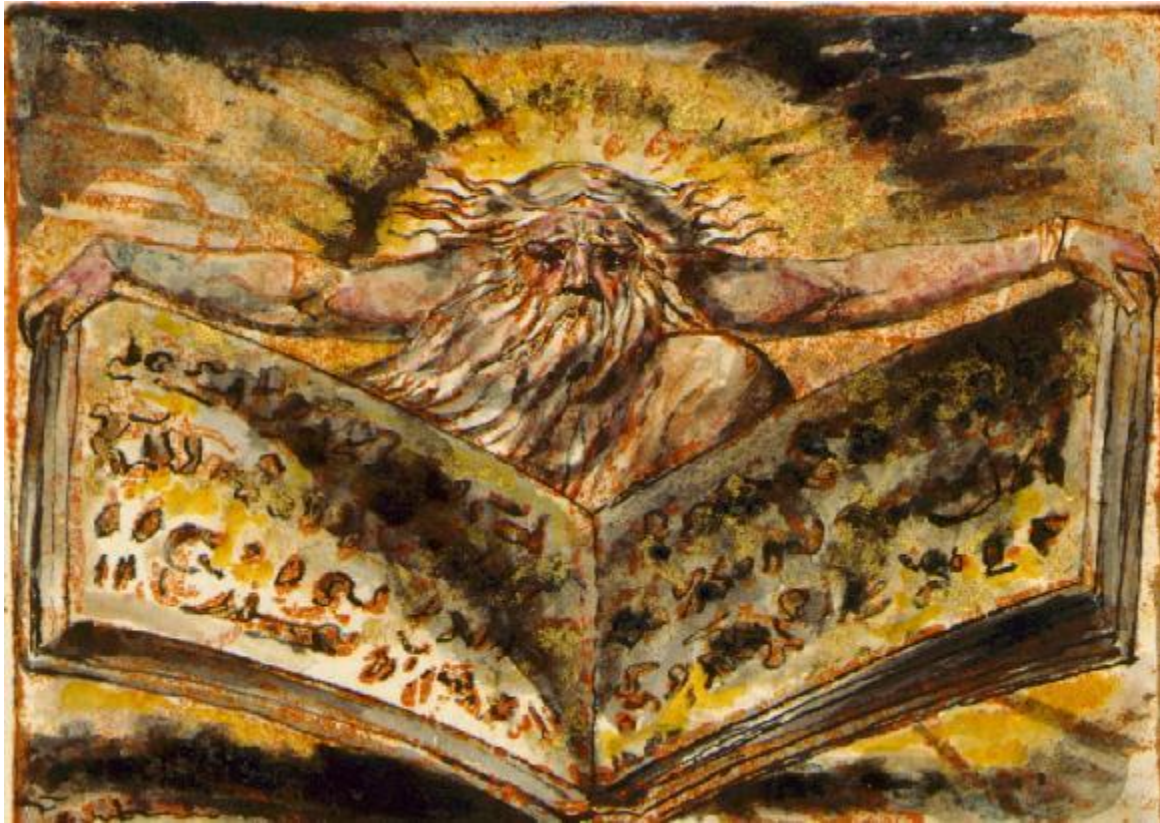
Olivia (weigeldo@mcmaster.ca): 10AM-1PM Tuesdays and Wednesdays, CNH Room 404

Nisha (eswaranb@mcmaster.ca): Thursdays 11AM-5PM and by appointment, CNH Room 212

The texts assigned on this course were not written for specialists in English literature but for attentive and resourceful readers like yourself. I encourage you then to immerse yourself in their worlds, taking time to wrestle with their strangeness and challenges. To be sure, specialists have

written about these texts. You will see some of that work—called “secondary sources”—in the library or on the web. But for this assignment you are not required to work with already existing scholarship about or discussions of the literary texts at hand. But if you do cite someone else’s remarks in your essay (i.e., if you draw from or quote something that someone else has said about the texts that you are analyzing), you must do so in a way that fully integrates that source into your own argument and that acknowledges your indebtedness to that source. Make sure to cite these sources properly, using MLA guidelines as described in the *First Year English & Cultural Studies Handbook*. If you choose to use secondary sources, they must also appear properly referenced on a Works Cited page at the end of your essay. (Note: Wikipedia or analogously user-constructed web-based compendiums of opinion are not recognized as legitimate secondary sources and should **not** be used or cited at any time in this course.)

My suggestion? Bring your own growing strengths as a reader of literature’s shorter genres to bear on the texts at hand, and write an essay based *entirely* on a careful reading that you have developed on your own.



William Blake, *The Book of Urizen* (1795)