**ENGL 65 LC: Prompts for the Short Essay Part 2 of the Midterm Exam**

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For Part 2, please write a 2-2 ½ page (with a **maximum** of 3 pages) double-spaced short essay using one of the prompts below to focus your thinking. In your essay please focus in on ONE text; in such a short paper, you really only have the space to explore a single text. Of course you may refer to other texts or authors in passing, or explore two if you find that is the best way for you to create your argument. (For example, you might discuss two Poe stories and while emphasizing one, pay some attention to another as well.)

**A Guide to Writing a Short Essay that Works**

You’ll want to build an **argument** about that selected text—not a pro/con argument, but instead an open and exploratory interpretation that uses **details** of a scene or character, specific quotes and other kinds of language as evidence for the relationship you want to show between that work and the larger argument you’re making. These details of the language or the structure or the narration of the text that you select—and there are other things to choose as “details” also—become the **evidence** for the overall argument. Take a relatively small section or sections of the text you have chosen, and use its specifics of language or style or meaning to give weight and substance to the larger argument. This larger argument is your exploration of how a specific work or works might be shown to be manifesting a relationship with this larger idea.

Don’t use any outside research or critical analysis written by others—but do use any and all of your texts and notes, etc. This is **your** exploration you’re following in the paper, and it rests on how you want to select or observe details to help support what you are claiming, or what you have noticed is interesting.

The essay should be polished and careful, with a title that you give it, and if you want to use quotes or detailed descriptions (and you DO!) you can have a brief Works Cited page that shouldn’t be part of your 2-3 page count. There’s no single answer or even one “right” answer to any of these prompts. We’re asking you to explore the significance of an argument you make, with the prompt as a launch, and then using close details, descriptions of a scene or a passage or a narration, and/or quotes from a fiction or an essay to back up your investigation or interpretation. Write about something that interests you, excites you, confuses you, or inspires further thinking. It’s the journey you take through the focus on a single work that we’re interested in, **not any plot summary** or some “proof” that you have viewed or read a work. This is **not about regurgitating** something already said in the course: it’s about your idea of something and why it matters. Jump right into your short essay and the argument you’re making, since you know that your reader—the Instructor-- is well aware of that text and what’s in it. Write in a lively and compelling way, and remember that there are no “right” answers out there—there’s just **the journey your short essay takes us** **on**, and how you back that up with some specifics that help to make a case for your ideas.

Just a quick hint about how to make the most of a short essay for any course or project: **don’t start with a huge generalization**, such as “Man throughout the ages has always wondered . . .” This is always a sign you don’t have an argument yet, and it’s a waste of space and energy. Another type of generalized beginning that does not work is “Webster’s dictionary defines. . .” These kinds of generalizations bog down any paper and it’s hard to get it back on track after this. Sometimes it helps to jump in to writing a draft with a chaotic and messy first paragraph, and then—this is almost guaranteed—your actual final paragraph will become a perfect first paragraph, because it will be a roadmap for the paper—as you write you come to realize what the argument actually is.

This brings up the conclusion: no short paper or even a longer one needs a recap conclusion. The final paragraph, **the conclusion, is the place where the paper points beyond itself to the larger questions that still exist, or that are implied by the essay itself**. Doing a conclusion that way gives enormous power to the writing, because an essay is in fact a short journey a reader takes with you. For the reader to trust the paper—that means, to find it persuasive and powerful and exciting—there needs to be a feeling that the writer knows where the journey is going. At the end of any short trip no one turns to their companion in the car or on foot and recites the steps that have already been taken, right? Usually the point at which a journey stops is where, to take a metaphorical example, one of you points out into the distance and says “Did you realize that the mountain we can see over there has the same geological formation as this hill?” or something like that. A conclusion does the same thing for the reader of the journey you have created—it opens a new vista.

Be bold, passionate, witty if it suits you—take control of the essay journey and enjoy it! You’ll submit the short essay to your Instructor as they have asked you to do—either on GauchoSpace, or to their email address. It’s due by midnight on Saturday, November 21st. Please have serious fun with it. (50 points)

**PROMPTS—Choose One; Some Prompts may overlap so feel free to fuse them**

1. Pandemics always change the sense of time in the societies or communities they hit. Of course, pandemic time differs hugely, depending on the beliefs or the social structures of the societies that experience them as shocking and totalizing events. Literature—in the broadest sense, as the course looks at it, including history, philosophy, journals or even fake journals, fiction, drama, and cultural commentary—is a form using writing rather than exclusively visual images, that involves time. Writing grapples with time because narratives or stories or accounts unfold in time, and literature can use lots of ways to change how time is experienced or to recognize a social time, or a timeline, that was never noticed before. There can be a teleology—an End Time—that a pandemic can fragment or disavow. There can be a push toward linear time in a society that the literature of a pandemic event can open up, by creating individual time, or the time of the self. Choosing one main text, or a very few, explore how time may have been altered in that pandemic’s literary telling, and what that might change.

2. If, as Arundhati Roy says, the pandemic (our current moment of course, but also “the pandemic” as a general concept) “is a portal”, our response to it seems particularly bound up in whatever new ways of “seeing” are thrust upon us/made open to us during these times. The extent to which we can accept the pandemic as a “portal” in our own lives also seems to depend upon whether or not we (as individuals or as a community/nation/world) feel personally able or willing to bear/engage with these new ways of “seeing” in a productive/transformative way. Consider what things are we “seeing” now that may have been invisible (intentionally or coincidentally) prior to the pandemic (“seeing” here can of course be literally and/or metaphorically interpreted).

Choose **one main course text** (or a shared element that is present across a small number of our course texts) and explore **TWO**of thefollowing questions, using Roy’s claim as a guide: What role does “sight” play as a vehicle to achieve a deeper understanding (of life/culture/history/relationships, etc.) within the text(s)? What new ways of “seeing” were opened up for you by this text (or by an element of these texts), and how have they impacted your experience of our present moment (include specific examples from the text and life when possible)? If a “portal” has been opened for you via this text/an element of the texts, what is the “portal” exactly (how would you characterize it?—is it an idea, a sentence, a motto, a character, a warning?), and where do you think this portal leads?

3. We have seen that pandemics have a tendency to reveal pre-existing structural inequalities. Discuss the relationship between pandemics and power/corruption. You may take this in multiple directions, considering the intersection of disease and war, gender, class, race or ethnicity, and so on. You could also choose to explore the link between pandemics and revolution—this could be political Revolution, of course, even if it “fails,” but also a revolution more generally as a new way of thinking about political relationships, or a revolution in the understanding of social structure and how it can or must be improved.

Edgar Allan Poe: Masque – Social/political corruption.

Porter - Women serving men as entertainers.

4. Pandemics are about mass death from an infectious disease that has the power to spread widely and indeed globally. For this reason alone pandemic writing involves the personification or the embodiment of death. This varies widely in pandemic literature, and becomes a very important way of telling the narrative of the pandemic. **Choosing one or two texts with a tight focus, consider the significance of different embodiments of death**—for example, of death as a “pale rider” versus death as the thief of life, or the contrast in works that make death invisible, putting it out of the direct narrative, or works that consider death indirectly and after it has occurred, as with poor Yorick’s skull in ***Hamlet’s*** graveyard scene. Your essay needs to dig into the meaning or the significance of that embodiment, disembodiment, or even absence of embodiment, not just listing how this might be treated in a specific text. Consider **why** the pandemic narrative is working this way, and **how** the approach to Death’s embodiment brings a new narrative possibility to that work and its audience of readers—that audience of readers can also include you.

Edgar Allan Poe: Masque

5. In a strange way, pandemics are “democratic” in that potentially anyone and everyone can succumb to the pandemic infection. This isn’t intentional on the part of the disease or infection, obviously; epidemic diseases spread because that’s how an infectious bacterium or virus or agent can reproduce or replicate itself, and it needs a host body to do that. There’s a way that pandemic literature or pandemic writing can use that non-political “democratic” aspect, as well as the global spread that gives pandemics their name, to bring a new sense of interconnectedness to a society, or to give a vision of a global outlook to societies that may have been very insular and inward-looking before, not really acknowledging a wider world beyond the village, the town, or the nation. Choosing one or a few texts to explore this idea, and concentrate on whichever part of it, in other words, “democracy” or the “global,” that you wish, or these together. As devastating as they are, can pandemics also bring more awareness, and how do you see this as a goal of the text(s) you have selected?

6. Pandemic literature involves a narrator, or a set of main characters, or a voice speaking to an audience about this explosive and uniquely stressful event, where people can’t see the enemy particle, and can’t know they have caught it in some cases before it’s too late. In and through one or a few texts, explore how pandemic literature may, over time, be important in the process of creating ideas of individuals, selves, personalities, or voices, and the impact that may have: social, political, internal, or in terms of shaping identities for those who may have been left out narrative before, or not been seen as the active focal point they can become. Who gets to tell the story, or be in the story, or witness the story, and why?