

Readings Presentation

engl 242 / sec. B / spring quarter 2010-11 / chang



Our class covers a broad survey of prose and fiction, from *Huckleberry Finn* to *Harry Potter*. One of the best ways to explore and understand a text is through close reading. Another way to explore and understand a text—using what you have gained through reading—is through lively discussion and questioning both the text and your experience of it.

In order to accommodate everyone in the class, you will sign-up for a readings presentation in small groups of no more than four. As a team, you will read the text for that day and then generate a critical, analytical question to get class discussion started for the day. You will be required to create a 1-page handout copied for the

whole class that may include: a brief biography of the author, a brief synopsis of the text, important historical or critical context for the text, your critical question, and any other information you feel is useful or relevant. Presentations are 4 to 6 minutes.

Presentation Outline

All presentations fall either on a Monday or a Wednesday. Presentations will be made by small groups of 2 or 4 students. Each group member must contribute to the overall research, handout, and presentation. Each group member must speak at least once during the presentation. The topics for your presentations will be assigned to you; however what you present (be focused, framed by your critical question, connected to the class) and how you present (think about readability) the information is up to you.

If your group is assigned a biographic/bibliographic topic, then you are responsible for a critical question plus:

- 1) a very brief biography of the author, noting any significant or relevant events, connections, and perspectives to the text at hand,
- 2) a brief contextualization of the text, outlining its significance, controversy, reception, or connection to other texts of the time.

If your group is assigned historical/theoretical topic, then you are responsible for a critical question plus:

- 1) a brief articulation of the history or theory at hand (e.g. US slavery and reconstruction, Freudian alienation, Modernism, race, gender, class) keeping the focus to points relevant to the text,
- 2) a brief analysis of how the topic connects to the text, how the topic helps us understand the text, or how the topic provides critical ways to analyze and challenge the text.

Once your presentation is done, each group member will assess their fellow presenters. Please send an email to me (changed@u.washington.edu) with the subject "Readings Presentation Evaluation" and a brief description of your group's process, division of work, each person's responsibilities, and anything else that comes to mind. Then rate each member with a score from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Grades will take into account overall group performance and individual performance as well as the quality of your handout. Your individual assessments and scores will be taken into account in your presentation grade.

Guidelines and Due Dates

Format: 4 to 6 minute oral presentation
light but focused research on the text or topic is required
refer to specific passages and the texts for the week
1-page handout **copied** for the class including a bibliography of sources used

Due: on your sign-up date, at least once during the quarter
make sure to send your evaluation email
please post your handout and presentation information to the class blog

What is a Critical Question?

Generating critical questions is a necessary and useful academic skill; critical questions are often the beginning of intellectual or theoretical or artistic exploration, require active and attentive reading and thinking, and can generate the beginnings of analysis, multiple perspectives on an issue, topics for research, ways to critique and understand a text, and further curiosity for the material at hand.

Your critical question for your readings presentation should develop from a close reading of one of the week's texts and your critical thinking about the text. **What questions or concerns do you want to ask of the text? What questions or concerns does the text ask of you?** Your critical question should be developed, dimensional, and complex that pushes beyond simple questions of theme, symbolism, personal opinion, or personal reaction. Consider the following when generating your critical question; your critical question:

—May think about the larger critical questions of our class, beyond just the course goals. What does the text reveal about our “culture” or “literature” or “reading”? How and why and what does the text respond to, reassert, or critique keywords like literacy, race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and citizenship.

—Asks more than, “What does _____ mean?” Critiques more than just theme, symbol, character, plot, setting. Think about the following: What is important about _____? Does _____ raise questions about representation (or how the text makes meaning), how we understand our lives and our world? Does _____ challenge or perpetuate cultural definitions, norms, traditions, ideologies?

—Begins with “How might...” or “Why...” and requires answers beyond yes or no, right or wrong, black or white. How and why and what would your answer to such a question be? In fact, critical questions often invite many different ways to answer a question and different kinds of evidence and reasoning as well.

—May focus on one section or one main idea of the text. How does the section fit the overall text? How does the main idea run through the whole text? What makes the section or idea important? What connections does it make to other texts, to the course goals?

—May be explicitly about the form, structure, language, and rhetorical or literary features of the text. What is its genre? How and why and what does it play with form? What rhetorical or literary features does it possess? How and why and what does it play with these features? How is the text answering the question, “What is important about this text?”

—Contextualizes the text in history, geography, politics, academia, and its conditions and modes of production. In other words, how and why and what is important about when the text was made, who the text was made for, where it was made, how it was made, and why it was made? What does its context tell us about our own context as we read it now?

Insufficient Critical Questions

What does the green light at the end of the dock in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* signify?

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, why does Harry choose to save both Ron and Fleur's sister? What does this say about his personality?

Because the author was nearly drowned as a child, the novel uses the metaphor of drowning as a main theme. If the author had not had this unfortunate accident, would the novel be different? Would the ending change?

Is Hamlet really crazy or just pretending to be crazy?

Complex Critical Questions

Much has been made of the green light at the end of the dock in *The Great Gatsby*, calling it a symbol of unrequited love, the American Dream, or envy and money. Clearly *TGG* is preoccupied by the definition of and critique of class and wealth. If the green light is something unattainable, how might we think about how the novel argues about who gets to achieve the American Dream, who doesn't, and more importantly, how these logics of inclusion and exclusion fall along gendered and raced lines. Moreover, how might the American Dream be deployed to police these lines, particularly for characters like Myrtle or Meyer Wolfsheimer?