Critical Questions Presentation & Roundtable

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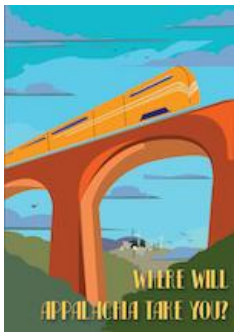

Our class covers a survey of literature, different analyses and perspectives, as well as scholarship. One of the best ways to explore and understand a text is through close reading and taking notes. Another way to explore and understand a text—using what you have gained through reading—is through lively discussion and questioning both the text and your experience of it. And, finally, a third way to explore and understand a text is to engage what someone else—a scholar, an expert, an academic—has said or written about it.

You will be a required to sign up for a small group presentation and roundtable **once** during the course of the semester. The presentation asks you to make connections between a week's narratives and the academic readings at hand. You will present and help facilitate the discussion in small groups. Your discussion will require forethought, planning, and perhaps some light research. Once you have signed for a particular week and a particular text, consider the following tasks and group roles and make a plan for who is responsible for what:

1. Ahead of time, read your narrative texts and scholarly (or secondary) essays assigned in your sign-up week.
2. As a group, identify two or three main points or arguments from the scholarly or supporting texts that can be used to illuminate and analyze the text. If there is no assigned article, draw on previous scholarly texts.
3. As a group, generate and collaboratively write a **framing discussion prompt** organized around a keyword, main idea, issue, or analysis—**more than just pull quotes or slides**. Your prompt should include 1-2 paragraphs that frame and introduces your whole discussion, 1 paragraph of author or historical context, 1-2 paragraph that summarizes the story (thus far), 1-2 paragraphs that summarize and integrates the scholarly essay being used. **Make connections**. Each group member must contribute to the framing prompt.
4. Then, the group must come up with **one to two critical questions** to help get the class discussion going for the day. Critical questions should point to particular passages in the narrative, focus on key passages or moments, and integrate useful quotes from the scholarship to provide context or critique. Critical questions must close read the text and do more than just summarize or describe character, plot, and literal theme. These critical questions and contexts will be added to the framing prompt.
5. Then, post each polished discussion prompt (the framing context + critical question) to the class Bb by the presentation date and time. Pick one person to post. Posts should be no more than 750 words and should include relevant images, video clips, or other media. You can play with what the presentation prompts look like or how to creatively engage the class.
6. On the day of the presentation, the group will join the professor in a "**roundtable**" where each member will present their portion of the discussion and their critical question. Then, with the professor as moderator and host (think "**chat show**" format), everyone will discuss what has been presented and other topics, including questions and comments from the whole class or "audience." Presenters should be prepared to answer their own critical question.
7. Once the presentation is over and the critical question prompts are posted, you will be expected to help answer the posed questions, explore ideas raised by the texts, and keep the discussion thread moving. Not every single reply needs a response, but **each group member** must respond at least **three** times to the thread before the end of the week. When appropriate, the professor will serve as moderator online.

Your presentation will be graded on relevance, completeness, organization, engagement with the texts with genre, and the overall quality of the collaboration, critical questions, curation and responses, and write-up. Each person in the group must equitably share in the preparation and conversation for the discussion. Once the week is completed, you will be given an opportunity to assess and reflect on the process and project.

Guidelines and Due Dates

Format: roundtable & discussion prompt and critique questions, every group member must participate
refer to specific passages or moments in the texts for the week
1-2 critical questions, 500 to 750 word posts, each includes framing, context, and unique critical question; include if necessary a bibliography of sources used

Due: on your sign-up date, **once** during the semester
each post should include the presentation date and unique topic as the subject line
(e.g. "Week 2: 1/19 PRESENTATION: Appalachian Stereotypes in Collins's *The Hunger Games*")

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:

—Think about the "big picture" or course goals of our class. What does the text reveal about our "culture" or "literature" or "reading"? Does the text engage or stabilize keywords like race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, nation?
—Critiques more than just theme, symbol, character, plot, setting. Rather than ask "What does _____ mean?" try asking, "What is important about _____? Does _____ raise questions about representation or identity? Does _____ challenge or perpetuate cultural definitions, norms, traditions, ideologies?
—Requires nuanced answers and supporting evidence. Answers beyond yes or no, right or wrong, black or white, good or bad. 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 does the form, genre, or rhetorical feature connect to what the text is doing with race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, nation?
—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, why it was made, as well as 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?
- 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?
- Do you like this novel?

Sample 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 Wolfsheim?

—Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" troubles the definition of "mad" or "madness" through a narrator that is simultaneously, ambivalently "very, very dreadfully nervous" and "healthy" and "calm." Given that traditional and stereotypical definitions of madness center on irrationality, wild emotions, delusions, and misperceptions, how might the story's narrator resist these definitions with his rationality, calm, and keen perceptions? He says, "Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!" Even the ending of the story, with the narrator overcome by his too keen perceptions, does not seem wholly uncontrolled. The narrator's confession seems more out of frustration over perceived derision than from guilt. How might reading the narrator as not mad challenge the ways madness gets defined, often mapped on to people and bodies that are deemed not "normal" or "acceptable," and how might the story itself challenge the privileging of rationality as inherently "normal" and "good"?