LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1 — Group 12 (Tyagi)

Assignment 1: Close Reading

Word Limit	800–1000 words
Weighting	15% of overall course grade
Presentation	MS Word document (no PDFs); regular font size (e.g. Times New Roman 12) with double-spaced text; indent the first line of each new paragraph and do not include any blank space between paragraphs; do include an essay title, page numbers, and a Works Cited page
Deadline and Submission Instructions	**11:59pm on Sunday, 13 September**; email your Word documents to me at ila.tyagi@yale-nus.edu.sg

This assignment builds directly on the type of activity undertaken and skills employed in seminar class discussions. The aim of this assignment is for you to practice close reading skills by selecting a passage from the prescribed readings of either the *Odyssey* or the *Ramayana* and then analysing its key points of interest.

You should go through the following stages in order:

(1) Select from the prescribed readings a short section (typically 1-3 pages) that you have found intriguing. Your chosen passage may present some 'problem' or inconsistency created by the text that seems to demand the reader's attention – e.g. a character behaving in an unconventional manner, a sudden change of theme/ mood, etc. But your passage does not need to display any direct 'problem': the important thing is that you select a passage that invites meaningful discussion.

Note: You may choose any passage that you think is appropriate, though I recommend avoiding passages that we have already discussed extensively in class. You may consult me on your choice of passage in office hours.

(2) In your introductory section, briefly set the scene for the forthcoming discussion by giving the context for your chosen passage (where does it come in the epic? What is going on in the passage?).

(3) Analyse the passage by discussing key points of interest. Depending on your chosen passage, this may involve, e.g., aspects of characterisation, use of speech/ rhetoric, metaphor, points of irony, etc. If you are discussing a 'problem' created by the text, you will want to explore responsible approaches that a reader might take to make sense of this problem. You will not have space to cover all points of interest in 1000 words – and no one expects you to – so focus on the issues that you think really matter in your chosen passage.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

Pitch

For an academic essay, you should typically think of your reader as a knowledgeable peer. Therefore, you can assume that they have a basic familiarity with the *Odyssey*/*Ramayana*

(so, e.g., there is no need to explain who Odysseus is). Your target reader is someone looking for guidance on your <u>specific</u> passage.

Relevance

Everything you say should shed light on the passage you have chosen. Any extraneous information or discussion, however interesting in itself, will detract from your focus and may confuse the reader.

Citing the Primary Text

Adopting a proper and consistent referencing style not only aids the reader but also adds to the professional polish of your essay.

When citing the *Odyssey* within your essay, you should use book and verse numbers as indicated in the Wilson translation: e.g. *Odyssey* 12.120, *Odyssey* 13.12-26. You may abbreviate *Odyssey* to *Ody*.

When citing the *Ramayana*, you should use book, sarga number, and individual section number as indicated in the Course Pack: e.g. *Sundarakanda*, Sarga 37.15, *Sundarakanda*, Sarga 37.42-46, etc. You may abbreviate the book title to the first four letters (e.g. *Sund*.).

When citing either the *Ramayana* or the *Odyssey* in the Works Cited page at the end of your document, you should use the following citations:

Valmiki. *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Translated by Robert P. Goldman et al., Princeton University Press, 1985-2019.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson, Norton, 2018.

Citing Secondary Sources/Modern Scholarship

For an assignment of this type, you are not required to consult secondary scholarly literature. You should base your ideas on your own reading of the set text.

Grading Rubric

The following general rubric applies to assignments in LH1:

<u>'A' range work</u> demonstrates sophistication and depth in analysis; compelling and reflective expression; insightful and original perspectives; professional polish in terms of presentation and referencing.

<u>'B' range work</u> demonstrates good comprehension of the materials; earnest engagement; shows potential to develop further in expression or perspective.

<u>'C' range work</u> and below indicates scope for improvement in a number of aspects as indicated by your seminar professor.

[Student Name]

Professor Tyagi

Literature and Humanities 1

13 September 2020

The significance, ambiguities, and misinterpretations of prophecies in *The Odyssey*

The build-up towards *The Odyssey*'s climax is permeated with foreshadowing, and the integration of prophecies into the plot is one way in which Homer expresses this. A memorable example is in Book 19 when an Odysseus in disguise finally reaches home in Ithaca and has an important conversation with Penelope (while remaining unrecognized) after gaining her trust. From lines 539 to 583, Penelope details to Odysseus her prophetic dream of twenty geese being killed by a talking eagle, who subsequently tells her that he is Odysseus, about to return home to bring death upon the suitors. From this passage, I argue that prophecies such as these hold a large significance to Homer's characters, but that their ambiguous nature makes their reliability questionable and thus prone to misinterpretation. To support my argument, I will first explain the prophecies' significance by elucidating the language Penelope uses in her description, following which I analyse how the opaqueness of Penelope's conversation with Odysseus adds to their ambiguity. I will then examine Penelope's own hopelessness and the ultimate circularity of the passage as evidence for prophecies' poor reliability and regular misinterpretation.

The significance of prophecies to the characters in *The Odyssey* can be seen in the evocative description Penelope gives of her dream. Her language not only conveys detail, evidenced by the amount of lines dedicated to telling her dream (*Odyssey* 19.540-54), but also evokes strong imagery. Her account goes comprehensively into describing vividly the course of events that occur, in particular using very illustrative words: the "*huge* eagle with a *pointed* beak" that "*swooped*" down to "*break* the necks" of the geese (*Ody* 19.543-44), how she "*wept* and *wailed*" while her female servants gathered around her (*Ody* 19.545-46), and finally her retelling, word-for-word, of what the eagle says to her (*Ody* 19.550-54). That prophecies are conveyed to characters in such

detail speaks to their importance to the poem, in that they function as powerful tools of foreshadowing. In addition, however, Penelope's graphic description also tells us of the amount of effort she is willing to put into remembering the dream, and convey it so comprehensively to who she believes is a stranger (*Ody* 19.539-40) just so she can understand its meaning. The prophecy's detail and Penelope's need to interpret it shows that they are often seen as guidance on what the future may hold, and are hence significant enough for Homer's characters to dissect.

Despite the significance of prophecies, however, they remain ambiguous in nature, demonstrated by the opaqueness between Penelope and Odysseus, which reflects the dream's cloudiness. The back-and-forth conversation between Odysseus and Penelope itself represents this lack of transparency in prophecies, as Odysseus literally *and* figuratively shapeshifts between his true self and some other illusory body both in reality and in Penelope's dream. This opaqueness is further exemplified by Odysseus' misleading persona in their conversation: Odysseus reassures Penelope that her dream will come true and the suitors will be killed soon (*Ody* 19.558-63), but he is interestingly described as "well-known for his intelligence" (*Ody* 19.557-58) before he does so, implying that his message is laced with manipulation as he is craftily hiding his identity from his own wife. This is juxtaposed a few lines later with Penelope being described as "shrewd" (*Ody* 19.563), which evokes a sense of skepticism regarding her judgements of Odysseus' declarations. This reveals the deep blockage faced by Penelope, where she is unable to accurately comprehend both her husband and in parallel, her dream. The portrayal of Penelope's dream within this blurred conversation hence serves to render prophecies in a complex and suspect light, in that they are neither clear-cut nor transparent.

Finally, it is this ambiguity that makes prophecies in *The Odyssey* so unreliable and open to (mis)interpretation, which is evident in Penelope's hopeless take on her dream as well as the circularity of the passage. The tone of her voice towards the end becomes increasingly devoid of hope, signaling doubt at the veracity of the prophecy. Penelope uses dramatic terms to convey this doubt, for example by calling her eventual departure to the suitors "the day of doom" (*Ody* 19.571)

as if it were an unavoidable catastrophe. The passage also displays a striking circularity when Penelope devolves into sadness towards the very end, where she foresees missing her home "in [her] dreams" (*Ody* 19.583). After all, the passage begins with Penelope describing her dream in detail, but now we see it conclude with Penelope describing *another* future dream she would potentially have when reminiscing her old home (*Ody* 19.580-83). This circularity crucially hints at the unreliable, ambiguous potential of prophecies; the visual imagery of a circle is a line that ultimately returns to its original spot, ultimately not leading anyone (in this case, Penelope) to any answers or tangible destinations. Further, Book 22 would end up proving Penelope's bleak prediction completely wrong, demonstrating that even true prophecies are ironically misinterpreted due to their reputation for being unreliable. This all serves as evidence that prophecies are often fickle, and have a reputation amongst Homeric characters for being so.

To summarise, I have argued that prophecies in the Homeric world hold gravity because characters like Penelope place so much emphasis on remembering and gleaning from them some meaning about their fate. I have also scrutinized how the opaqueness between Penelope and Odysseus evokes ambiguity in prophecies, and how the passage's circularity and Penelope's wrong prediction is evidence for their propensity to be untrustworthy. I would add however, that my essay is but the tip of the iceberg. Prophecies, as we have seen by how they shed light on Penelope's desolation, can often be used as literary evidence for the emotional landscapes of Homeric characters, which Homer rarely provides explicitly. From the pigeon-holding hawk (*Ody* 15.527-30) to Telemachus' sneeze (*Ody* 17.543-45), there is indeed still much to be said about how such prophecies' varied nature can illuminate *The Odyssey*'s equally diverse characters in a multitude of ways.

Works Cited

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson, Norton, 2018.

Acknowledgements

Hi [Name],

This paper offers a competently written, engaging perspective on the text. Additional feedback based on the essay-writing rubric below:

<u>Thesis</u>: Your thesis does a good job of moving beyond simply saying "there are a lot of prophecies in *The Odyssey*" or "prophecies in *The Odyssey* seem like they are important" to rigorously cross-examine what overarching qualities those many prophecies scattered across the text have in common, and what they can teach us about how the text as a whole works.

<u>Work with Texts</u>: While you're attentive enough to language in this essay, in your next two essays, you could push your close reading even further. For example, in this essay you say that "*huge*" and "*pointed*" and "*swooped*" and "*break*" are "very illustrative" words, but you can develop that analysis by showing the reader *what*, exactly, they are illustrating. The fact that Penelope's dream is described with these details highlights the dream's significance, sure, but what is the effect of the specific details being described? What is the effect of the sense of scale evoked by "huge," of the sense of sharpness evoked by "pointed," of the sense of speed evoked by "swooped," and of the sense of violence evoked by "break"? What is the effect of the alliteration in "*wept* and *wailed*"?

Additionally, you may have felt too constrained by this essay's limited word count to do so, but in the next couple of essays, it might be worth adding another sentence or two to draw out certain claims you make about your chosen text(s). What is your evidence, for instance, that prophecies "have a reputation amongst Homeric characters" for being fickle? How do the "pigeon-holding hawk" and "Telemachus' sneeze" shed light on the emotional landscapes of characters in *The Odyssey*? In other words, rather than merely claiming "my essay is but the tip of the iceberg" or "there is indeed still much to be said" and leaving it at that, you could actually say some of the great deal that remains to be said. Less coy hinting, in short, and more explicit articulation.

<u>Organization</u>: You use connective language between paragraphs effectively, such as in the sentence "Despite the significance of prophecies, however, they remain ambiguous in nature,"

which both alludes back to the previous paragraph and handily sets up the topic of the new paragraph, making the new paragraph feel like it flows smoothly out of the previous one.

Presentation: The crystal clarity of your elegant writing style is a pleasure to read!

Shadow grade: A