

LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1

Assignment 1: Close Reading

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| 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 Saturday, 14 September ; upload your Word documents to Canvas |

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 *Ramayana* or the *Odyssey* 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 he/she has a basic familiarity with the *Ramayana*/

Odyssey (so, e.g., there is no need to explain who Rama is). Your target reader is someone looking for guidance on your specific 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 *Ramayana* within your essay, 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 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 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:

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

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

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

Odysseus at the sea – the ultimate trauma

The *Odyssey* portrays the warrior and king, Odysseus's decade-long journey of returning home after the famous Trojan war. In the chosen passage, Odysseus is retelling his journey at sea to Phaeacians, describing the catastrophe he faced while passing through the six-headed Scylla and whirlpool Charybdis, before he reached the island of Calypso. In this essay, I argue that Odysseus is conveying the intensity of his suffering in what is the climax of everything he has endured. In what follows, I will first address Odysseus' language in describing the fearfulness of Scylla and Charybdis, then analyse Odysseus' traumatized mental state, watching his men being snatched away. Finally, I will consider the Odysseus' identity as a warrior, which makes this experience all the more traumatic for him.

Odysseus uses his language to convey the fearfulness of Scylla and Charybdis, who are the monstrous goddesses they have to pass by at sea. Odysseus did not give a graphic portrait of Scylla, but a single statement "she meant inevitable death". (*Odyssey* 12.224-25) He further supports his claim indirectly by assuming his men's dread towards Scylla: "if they knew, the men would drop the oars and go and huddle down in the hold in fear". (*Ody* 12.225-27) While when it comes to Charybdis, Odysseus engages his audience with sound, such as "gurgling noise" and "roaring dreadfully", enhancing Odysseus' anxiety in anticipation of what to come as well as the tension in the atmosphere. His words, such as "sucked", "spewed", "seethed", "churning", "swallowed", "stirred", carries an anxious and nervous tone. They also suggest that the whirlpool is not a natural entity, but a creature with hostility and the agency to attack. Furthermore, Odysseus compares Charybdis to a "boiling cauldron on a huge fire", which is often associated with witchcraft and evilness, hinting at the creature's maliciousness. (*Ody* 12.234-43) Hence, Odysseus' language used in describing the two dreadful creatures reflects his fear, which sets the mood for the climax of the catastrophe.

Odysseus' fear was tremendous, but the climax of the tragedy hits him when his best six men were taken by Scylla. This is most evident in his plain statement: "that was the most heartrending sight I saw in all the time I suffered on the sea". (*Ody* 12.258-59) In comparison to Scylla's effortless

attack, Odysseus' men appear powerless and pathetically vulnerable. Odysseus uses a simile to illustrate the extreme power disparity between Scylla and his men:

“as when a fisherman out on a cliff
casts his long rod and line set round with oxhorn
to trick the little fishes with his bait;
when one is caught, he flings it gasping back
onto the shore-- so those men gasped as Scylla
lifted them up high to her rocky cave
and at the entrance ate them up”. (*Ody* 12.250-56)

The simile acts as a pause of narrative. The reader is slowed down from the rapid transition of scenes and movement, to appreciate the impact of this traumatic scene that Odysseus has to witness. The word “gasp” is used twice in this simile: the fishermen “flings it gasping back”, suggesting how swift and effortless Scylla’s motion is; and “those men gasped as Scylla lifted them up high to her rocky cave”, where the crew’s tremendous fear and desperation was crystalized in this single action. The detailed description of his men also reflects how closely Odysseus is observing them, and how these images are deeply engraved in his memory, to the extent that he can recall perfectly when he retells the story more than 10 years later. Thus, we can conclude that this experience may be the climax of his traumatic journey at sea.

Furthermore, Odysseus’ trauma is further enhanced by his identity as a military hero. Seeing himself as a mighty warrior, Odysseus cannot let go of his ego when it comes to fighting. And this quality of him no doubt exacerbates his pain when he fails utterly facing the power of gods. This is evident when Odysseus defies Circe’s warning to not wear an armour. Even though he is aware of the inevitable casualty he would face, he still uphold his spirit of fighting: “I dressed myself in glorious armor; in my hands I took two long spears, and I climbed up on the forecastle”. (*Ody* 12.226-30) The word “glorious” suggests his pride in fighting back. Even when he retells his experience to the Phaeacians, he mentions his action in such details, which reflects his effort in

justifying his deed. Odysseus' strong determination of fighting against his team's destiny forms a drastic contrast with how easily his men are snatched and eaten, and how powerless Odysseus appears at that moment. Especially when the men "cried to [Odysseus] and called [his] name—their final words" and "still reaching out to [Odysseus] in their death throes", Odysseus' identity as savior and hero shatters in front of this gory scene. Hence, Odysseus' identity as a military hero no doubt aggravates the trauma he experiences.

In conclusion, Odysseus' suffering at sea come to a climax when his crew faces two monstrous creatures, Scylla and Charybdis, and Odysseus witnesses the gory sight of his men being eaten. His identity as warrior further adds up the intensity of his trauma. Odysseus' retelling of his adventure not only serves as a vivid narrative from a first-person perspective, but also reflects his mental state and inner struggle, as well as his subconscious effort in trying to justify his actions. The frequent repeated narrative within the *Odyssey*, allows us to discover that the journey of Odysseus is largely bounded by fate and the will of gods. Through this short passage, we are able to witness how Odysseus fight against the inevitable and live through his own traumatic memory. It makes us wonder what are the qualities of Odysseus that enable him to be the lone survivor of his 20 years voyage.

Works Cited

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

Hi [name],

This is a compelling close reading of your chosen passage, such as when you note that words like “spewed” and “swallowed” suggest that the Charybdis is not a passive natural phenomenon, but “a creature with hostility and the agency to attack.” You also do an excellent job of unpacking the fisherman simile, particularly when you observe that the simile slows Odysseus’s fast-moving narrative down enough to make the reader fully appreciate the impact of the traumatic scene he witnesses, a sight whose every detail, as you say, is still etched in his memory several years later.

In your next essay, some minor areas you could work on are below.

1) Put the full stop after the bracketed citation at the end of a sentence, not before. The citation is part of the sentence. So, not ““she meant inevitable death’. (*Odyssey* 12.224-25)” but ““she meant inevitable death’ (*Odyssey* 12.224-25).”

2) Italicize the names of texts: not “The frequent repeated narrative within the *Odyssey*” but “The frequent repeated narrative within the *Odyssey*.”

3) Use present tense consistently when discussing a text. In your first body paragraph, for example, you say “Odysseus uses” and “He further supports his claim,” which is appropriate use of the present tense, but “Odysseus did not” slips into past tense. While it might make sense to discuss a passage using past tense since it was written a long time ago, it’s a convention of literary studies to imagine that the events within a text are happening in the present.

Shadow grade: A-