

# LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1

## Assignment 3: Writing Reflection and Comparison

Word Limit	1,500 words overall
Weighting	25% of overall course grade (NB: Part A will be graded S/U on the basis of earnestness of effort; Part B will be letter-graded and will form the basis for the overall assignment grade)
Presentation	MS Word format (no PDFs); regular font size (e.g. Times Roman 12); double spacing; 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	<b>11:59pm on Saturday, 28 November 2020</b> ; email your Word documents to me at <a href="mailto:ila.tyagi@yale-nus.edu.sg">ila.tyagi@yale-nus.edu.sg</a>

This final assignment consists of two parts. Part A asks you to reflect on your progress over the semester as a reader and writer; Part B invites you to conduct a comparison between two texts, involving at least one of the texts from the final cluster: *1001 Nights*, *al-Khansā*, or *The Decameron*.

### Part A: Short Writing Reflection (300–400 words)

Reread your previous two writing assignments for the course, along with the professor's comments. Offer an earnest reflection on your progress as a reader and writer during this course.

The sort of questions you might ask yourself include, but are not restricted to, the following: What progress have you made in specific skills? What surprises you about your development as a writer? What are you still working on? What common concerns, themes, or interests do you handle in your previous two assignments? Do they reveal anything about your strategies and approaches as a reader and writer?

### Part B: Comparison (1,100–1,200 words)

You may choose either option B1 or B2 below. Choose the option that most appeals to you. There is no intrinsic advantage of picking B1 over B2, or vice versa; both options offer significant scope.

#### Option B1: Comparative Essay

Write a short essay, involving at least one of *1001 Nights*, *al-Khansā*, or *The Decameron*, in which you compare a particular aspect of one of these texts with another text that we have studied, and on which you have not previously written a paper.

A possible topic for discussion might be, for example, one of the following: the function of storytelling and recording events; boundaries between beasts, humans, and divinities; justice and vengeance; the role of physical journeys; food and eating as cultural practices; cleverness, rhetoric and wit. You are encouraged to devise your own topic beyond this list.

## Option B2: "Creative" Comparison

This is an opportunity for you to take a short section from one of our texts and recast it in the words of another one of our studied texts. You should ensure that you tackle at least one of the texts from the final cluster (*1001 Nights*, *al-Khansā*, *The Decameron*) as either the primary material for conversion or the new "host" voice. Again, you may not use a text on which you have previously written a paper as either the source or host text.

In going about this assignment, you will (a) choose a suitable short section and analyse for yourself what its core stylistic and thematic elements are, and (b) choose a new "host" author and think about how that author would recast the material in (a) to fit their own stylistic and thematic priorities. For example, how would *The Decameron* deal with the intrigues of Sima Qian's Empress Lü? How would the adventures of the third dervish from *1001 Nights* differ if they were written in the epic mode of Homer's *Odyssey*? etc.

In addition to your creative narrative, you should include a justification, in which you explain (with references where appropriate) why your choice of theme, style, manner of speaking, and perspective is characteristic of the voice you are seeking to impersonate. This can take the form of a few paragraphs entitled "Justification."

A suitable format would be:

- (i) Introduction: cite clearly or print the section you wish to recast. This does not count towards the word limit.
- (ii) Creative Narrative (c. 400-600 words): offer your creative retelling in the voice of the new "host" author.
- (iii) Justification (c. 600-800 words): justify the choices you have made in the form of a few body paragraphs. This section does not require an introduction or a conclusion.

Note 1: you can be as creative and inventive as you like, so long as you can convince the reader that what you say is consistent with the stylistic and thematic priorities of the host author.

Note 2: the best narratives will consider both stylistic and thematic aspects of the texts: i.e. they will consider *what* themes/motifs/topics are important to each author, and *how* each author tends to articulate and arrange those ideas.

## **Part A:**

My writing strategy is usually to first read the texts and find lines or expressions that stand out to me or interest me, then try to group them under themes, and pick the theme that I have the most quotes about. I think this can be improved by instead choosing quality over quantity – I should choose a theme that I can explore the deepest, and work with a minimal number of well-linked quotes by analysing them further.

My close reading skills have improved slightly – in the first essay, I quoted often and only wrote one or two lines of analysis for each quotation. After this, in my second essay, although I still probably quoted more than necessary, there were certain quotes that I unpacked much more and analysed more deeply. The quotes that I unpacked more were short phrases that were very descriptive. I realised that I often prefer working with imagery or vivid descriptions as I can visualize them better, and I analyse the images that form in my head and the feelings that they evoke in me when I am reading them.

I need to work on the justification for my essay questions. I noticed that in my essays, the reason or broader significance of the question I choose to explore is not clear in my introductions, and I express that it is important without really explaining why. Furthermore, I was surprised by the difficulty I had in linking my paragraphs. My various body paragraphs are stronger on their own than as a whole, which has revealed to me that the connection between paragraphs needs work so that my entire essay is tightly knit and flows logically. I realised that my scope and focus of the essay should be more explicitly defined to prevent this. If I define my focus and establish the boundaries in the introduction, I would be much more confident of my essay organisation and the point I am investigating.

(325 words)

## **Part B, Option B2:**

### Creative Retelling of Odysseus and the Cyclops in the style of *1001 Nights*

#### **Introduction**

In this paper, I will be retelling Odysseus' encounter with the cyclops in Book 9 of The Odyssey in the style of 1001 Nights.

#### **Creative Narrative**

'O great King Alcinous, with your permission, I must tell my story. Then you will certainly welcome me', Odysseus said. The king was intrigued and replied, 'Go on'.

ODYSSEUS SAID:

O king, you have heard of my encounters with battle and bloodshed, but God willed that I should encounter many more trials on my return. You must have heard the proverb:

Tread not on the land without ships,  
Mountains high with rocks of pure beryl,  
Goats roam on its peaks and dips,  
Beware the Beauty wherein lies peril.

It was of great misfortune that my ship had to dock on this island, for my men were hungry and tired, and our supplies were depleted. We set foot on the white sand. I saw flocks of goats and sheep grazing peacefully. My men and I started climbing the escarpment. As we climbed, green crystals shone brilliantly revealing the mouth of a cavern. Entranced by the luminous aquamarine, we ventured in. The sweet scent of goats' milk drew us deeper. Then, we saw Beauty.

A splendid girl sat on the crystals, her back toward us as she milked a goat. She was tall, with full, rounded breasts and hair dark like night. I beckoned my men to stay hidden in the shadows of the cave; I desired to gaze at her slender body unnoticed. Soon, she ran her fingers through her black curls, tucking her hair behind her ears, and then, she undressed. Her skin looked blue green in the glow, and her body was exquisite. She was as the poet said:

Dark-haired and slim-waisted,  
Her buttocks were like rolling hills  
And her figure like that of an olive tree.<sup>1</sup>

I praised God for His creation and wished to sleep with her. But God did not will it. The Beauty turned around to reveal a hideous face with a single eye that caught quick sight of me. I trembled as the girl transformed completely. It was an *ifrit*.

The *ifrit* screamed, “Who dares to enter the cavern of *ifrit* Polyphemus?” Rocks trembled as its voice boomed across the cavern walls. “Only I, tired traveler from afar. O *ifrit*, bless us with barrels of milk from your goats and God will surely bless you”, I replied, despite my trepidation. The *ifrit* became more furious. It flew at me, stripping me of my clothes and vowing “You have invaded my cavern and laid eyes on my naked form, then you use the name of God to demand milk from my goats? You have shamed and outraged me. So I will shame you, for my entertainment.”

In rage, the merciless *ifrit* stretched me out and tied my hands and legs to the wall of the cavern. It bit into my bare skin until it tore. In pain I cried, “Have mercy on me, one-eyed *ifrit*, as I have knowledge of how you will lose your eye!” The *ifrit* stopped and said “It was prophesied to me that Odysseus, son of Laertes would take my sight. I am no fool! I will never allow a mere human to commit such an atrocity against me. Tell me how it will be done, that I might kill Odysseus before he blinds me”. I took my chance and asked, “Untie me and I will show you, O *ifrit*,

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<sup>1</sup> (*1001 Nights*, pp. 74)

for Odysseus' cunning cannot be described with words." With that, I pulled with all my might at the beryl crystal my wrist had been tied to. I looked the *ifrit* in the eye and said "This is how it will be done". With that, I threw the crystal. It pierced into the *ifrit's* eye. Black blood oozed out and dripped on the rocks. The *ifrit* flew into a frenzy, hitting the walls of its own cavern.

(625 words)

## **Justification**

Storytelling and wit are central themes in both *The Odyssey* and *1001 Nights*. Odysseus' cunning is revealed in the cyclops episode of *The Odyssey* as he devises a plan to blind the cyclops and escape from him. He cleverly plays with words when he lies that his name is "No man" (*The Odyssey*, Book 9, line 366). Similarly, in *1001 Nights*, cleverness of words is seen in storytelling. Shahrazad tells stories as a way to escape being killed by the king, and the characters in her story also tell stories to escape death. This creative narrative begins with Odysseus trying to persuade King Alcinous to treat him hospitably by telling him a story of his adventures, thus indicating the entrancing power of stories that entrap the listeners and can change their intentions. Additionally, Odysseus' wit is shown when he deceives the *Ifrit* by observing and playing on the *Ifrit's* curiosity. In the story of the three dervishes and the ladies in *1001 nights*, curiosity threatens the guests' lives. In *The Odyssey*, hubris leads to Odysseus' downfall when he reveals his name to Polyphemus. In this retelling, the *ifrit's* pridefulness leads to its blindness as the *ifrit* ironically exclaims "I am no fool!" and impulsively unties Odysseus due to his curiosity.

Shahrazad's tales in *1001 Nights* have various elements like elaborate sensory descriptions, mystical creatures and strangeness that captivate her audience. Hence, in transforming a section of *The Odyssey* to the language and themes of *1001 Nights*, I incorporated more sensory images and absurdity. I wrote detailed visual descriptions of the cave and the woman form of the *ifrit*, olfactory imagery for the "scent of goats' milk", and auditory imagery when the *ifrit* screamed. I chose to recast the cyclops as an *ifrit*, who was initially a beautiful girl, to add more mysticality and

ambiguity to the story. Furthermore, the strangeness of the nudity and vivid violent diction was intended to evoke discomfort in the readers. This was to create a more immersive experience for the readers while making them want to read on to understand the absurdity, thus capturing their attention and embroiling them in the story. I also varied the length of my sentences and used shorter, action-packed sentences nearer to the end to build up to the climax and create tension and suspense in the reader, similar to how the pace in the climax of the cyclops episode becomes faster and more choppy, and the sentences are more verb based, in “quickly snatched it” and “shoved it in his eye” (*The Odyssey*, Book 9, line 380 & 383).

Proverbs and poems are an intrinsic and multifunctional feature of *1001 Nights*. They convey warnings, emotion and even descriptions of characters and events. I wrote the proverb at the beginning as a warning, inspired by the warning the girl gives the second dervish in *1001 Nights* when she says “If there is something that will destroy you, Protect yourself from it” (*1001 Nights*, pp. 75). I included this and the descriptive poem to add dynamics to the story and break the continuous narrative to keep the readers engaged.

(1150 words)

## Works Cited

*The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*. Translated by M.C. Lyons, Volumes 1-3, Penguin Classics 2010.

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