

Paper 1 Topics

Paper 1 (5 pages) is due Friday, February 16. The assignment is to write about a short poem from our reading. Be sure to tell your teaching fellow what you plan to write on, and get her or his approval for it.

It is not necessary to consult texts other than the Norton anthology or another edition of the poet you're discussing. Note what book you are using for the text of the poem in a footnote. Should you make use of a biography, a work of literary criticism, or another kind of source in print or online, including handout materials and lecture notes, even if you don't quote from that source directly, your paper should make reference to it in a footnote or, if you don't make specific use of it, in a list of works consulted. See "Some Matters of Form" under "Useful Links" on the English Department web site.

Paper 1 is a close reading, by which I mean a descriptive account of a poem that highlights a few of its special characteristics and uses them to make an interpretative argument about the poem's meaning. Choices of diction, effects of voice or tone, complications introduced by a simile or metaphor or a pattern of metaphor, the role of a symbol or image, a bit of syntax or grammar, the way a poem's argument develops or the way a poem tells a story---these are the sort of particulars you could focus on. What you select for comment will depend on the qualities of the poem you choose to work with.

As you prepare for the paper, postpone deciding what precisely you will argue while you gather material: pay close attention to the verbal textures of the poem, use the dictionary to trace the meanings and etymologies of interesting words (this is particularly important in Frost, who likes to play on etymologies), underline and tease out phrases or syntax that seem troubling or puzzling or significant. Ask questions---of the poem and of yourself. Don't take things for granted: ask how a line would be changed had the poet chosen another word, or had he cast a sentence in a different form (as a statement rather than a question, for example). Look to other poems by the poet for context (seeing how, for example, the same word seems to function in two or more of Yeats's poems). Consider the poem as a kind of story or plot that unfolds sequentially, whether or not it has a narrative of some kind to relate. What story does it tell? What is its plot?

Then, studying the notes you've made, choose some elements to study and comment on and let other elements go. Ask yourselves: what is the specific question or problem that motivates this poem? What is the poet trying to do? How, and to what extent, does he succeed? What gets in the way---what problems must he solve in order to accomplish what he intends to? In the process of answering these or similar questions, you will generate an interpretation of the poem (a view of what it means). The more that that

interpretation is generated from the specifics of the poem, and guided by them as evidence, the stronger that the paper it will be. Be wary of generalization, even in your opening and closing paragraphs. Focus on making careful statements about the poem at hand (rather than about the nature of man or modern society or even about modern poetry).

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