

Essay #2: Memorial as “Oral Cemetery”

Background:

We have discussed at length all of the many ways Alice Oswald is employing structure and form in *Memorial* in order to amplify the poem’s central meaning, from the way the poem appears on the page to how she is wielding her content. Sometimes she includes long lists of names written in all-caps. *Similes* (pastoral lyrics) almost always appear after the slain soldiers’ *biographies* (laments/funeral songs). In addition, similes are repeated for special emphasis as well as to invoke the original poem’s oral qualities (reflecting how ancient Greeks would have almost certainly listened to the *Iliad*, not read it). Perhaps most importantly, Oswald recreates what she calls the *enargeia* (or “new insight”) of the poem’s similes and other metaphoric language, or how the *action* of the similes reveals or recreates the “overwhelming reality” of the topics and concepts that are otherwise extremely difficult to describe or communicate (such as the adrenalin or bloodlust of war, the terror from receiving a mortal wound, or paralyzing grief).

Through extensive class discussions focused not only on the structure and form of the poem but also the content and meaning of the similes, you now have a chance to write about your own interpretations and opinions about the book. You have also had a chance to do a group presentation on a simile of your choice. You’ve composed idea drafts to brainstorm your thoughts and have received extensive feedback on your peer response drafts. Building on our work in the first essay unit in which you practiced finding entry points into poems and metaphors, you will use in-text citations and evidence to support your side of the argument. Now you will write an essay in which you apply your tools to present and argue for your opinions.

Task:

Write an essay based on your own opinions about the book, what we’ve discussed in groups during class, and your simile presentations that answers the following question:

- In *Memorial*, Alice Oswald’s chief aim is to create a war memorial, or “oral cemetery,” for the fallen and forgotten soldiers in the *Iliad* (and simultaneously ignoring the classic “heroes” of the *Iliad*). How is she accomplishing this with the unique forms and structures of her long oral poem? What methods does she employ to communicate the poem’s central message, purpose, and meaning?

Requirements:

- Your piece should have an **introduction** that presents your argument (thesis) and provides context for your discussion of the essay topic. I highly recommend beginning your essay with a detailed discussion about how *actual* war memorials function in society (or as metaphors themselves). Your thesis should directly state what the poem’s central message or purpose is.
- Your **body paragraphs** should develop smoothly from one paragraph to the next (and may vary in structure).
- Your piece should have a **conclusion** that clarifies and discusses the significance of your overall argument and *does not* simply restate or summarize what you have previously written.
- Your essay should correctly **quote and analyze at least 2 specific similes** from *Memorial*.
- Your piece should be 4-5 pages long (**between 1300-1800 words**) and formatted in MLA style.
- All Work/Labor and writing needs to meet the following conditions (quoted from the Grading Contract):
 - **Complete and On Time.** You agree to turn in on time and in the appropriate manner complete essays, writing, or other labor assigned that meet all of our agreed upon expectations. (See Late/Incomplete Work above for details on late assignments). This means you’ll be honest about completing labor that asks particular time commitments of you (for example, “write for 20 minutes,” etc.).
 - **Copy Editing.** When the job is for the final publication of a draft, your work must be well copy edited—that is, you must spend significant time in your labor process to look just at spelling and grammar. It’s fine to get help in copy editing. (Copy editing doesn’t count on drafts before the portfolios or first drafts).

Characteristics of a strong paper:

- **Be organized:** The paper contains a clear hypothesis and accurate supporting evidence, has a logical flow, includes transitional phrases or transitions, and provides clear topic sentences.
- **Shows originality:** The paper is neither formulaic nor perfunctory. It displays some creativity, offers an interesting angle on the question, takes some risks in content or structure, and/or offers new insights.
- **Demonstrates control of language and style:** The grammar and vocabulary is appropriate for college writing, the language is descriptive and precise, the sentences are varied in structure, the paper has few errors that interfere with

readability, etc. Note: even though I require a high level of expressive language that can communicate nuanced arguments, please feel free to use whatever “language” or “dialect” or “voice” you feel you can best express your ideas.

- *Uses a variety of sentence combining strategies*, including the use of coordinators, subordinators, noun-phrase appositives, and relative clauses.

Extra-labor Options:

Remember that as part of the grading contract, we negotiated certain “extra-labor” practices that can earn you a higher +/- letter grade for your final grade. One of the ways we negotiated is to simply turn in a larger essay project that typically requires more reading and writing labor. I’m listing a few options below, but if you have an idea not included on the list we can negotiate it as a class. If you *are* thinking about doing an extra-labor task for this essay, you must let me know as early as possible because you’ll likely need to start right away. I would ask that you remain in contact with me throughout the unit as a way to consult with me about your ideas. In general, I want to make sure you have enough support to qualify for the extra-labor grade bump.

- **Option 1: construct your own literary and/or multimodal memorial.** Now that you’ve discussed at length the mechanics of Oswald’s “oral cemetery,” as well as the purpose of memorials in society, create your own memorial! This project can be a strictly literary work, like *Memorial*, but it can also be multimodal (using sound or images or other media). The one requirement is that the *form* of your creation (organization, structure, presentation) must represent or resonate some core concept or metaphor of your message, similar to how Oswald utilizes form to help resonate her metaphor of walking through an actual war memorial (or cemetery). You will present your memorial to the class in a 10-15 minute presentation. In addition to your memorial you must also turn in an *1,000 word reflection* that must include an explanation for why/how you made your creative choices as well as how it relates back to Oswald’s *Memorial*. Note: your memorial can be a range of topics: a war memorial for a different war (like WW2 or the Iraq War), a memorial for a close friend or family member, a memorial for a former self or former life, a memorial for a cultural icon or cultural movement, or anything else you can possibly imagine.
- **Option 2: deep dive into the purpose of actual war memorials.** Expand the section of your essay in which you discuss the meaning or function of war memorials in society (for example, the shape and layout of war memorials are all constructed with great purpose and generally reflect a society’s attitude toward those wars). Are there any universal qualities about war memorials that we haven’t discussed yet in class? This will require outside research on the library’s databases. I would strongly recommend going to the library and getting a librarian’s help for finding a two or three good sources. You would need to quote from at least two additional sources. The purpose of this activity would be to learn more about war memorials and to understand and examine Oswald’s own creative choices on a deeper level. This project would require a little extra reading labor (keep the word count of your extra reading to less than 20,000 words), and extra writing labor (the essay would need *an additional 900 words*, or be a minimum of 2,200 words, or 6-7 pages).
- **Option 3: deep dive into the “heroes” of the *Iliad*.** Read the first couple chapters of either Homer’s *Iliad* (preferably a very recent translation, such as by Robert Fitzgerald or Stephen Mitchell) or the first chapter of Christopher Logue’s version, called *War Music*. I want you to focus on how the different translators present their “heroes.” How does Homer (or Logue) treat his “heroes” differently than Oswald? How are they portrayed? How is the concept of “hero” different? The extra labor for this option would represent an additional section of your essay and would need to be *at least an additional 900 words*.
- **Option 4: deep dive into the different *Iliad* translations.** Ancient Homeric Greek, or the Greek that Homer composed in, was a very complex amalgamation of different dialects of spoken Greek at the time as well as more traditional poetic versions of the language. Homeric Greek was actually never spoken by any ancient peoples, it was simply a versatile version of Greek that Homer invented for his poetic purposes (like fitting his words into a strict meter and rhyme scheme that’s impossible to reproduce in English). That’s all to say that translating Homeric Greek into English is an enormously difficult task. This extra-labor option would allow you to explore some of the more current, popular translations of Homer’s *Iliad*. You would need to acquire three different translations of the *Iliad* from the library (I can help guide you towards which translations would be most useful). Find a handful of your favorite Homeric similes from *Memorial* and find them in the different translations and make a comparison of them all. Why do you think different translators made different choices? Why do you think Oswald’s “version” of the *Iliad* (she wouldn’t call it a translation, strictly-speaking) is so different from the rest of the translations? How does this help resonate her project of creating an oral cemetery? This option would also require an extra section in your regular-labor essay and would need to include *at least an additional 900 words*.