

Literature in Context

For this assignment, you will write an essay of approximately 5-7 pages in which you analyze and interpret the literature you choose in relation to the historical and/or cultural backdrop against which it is set. You will be required to identify a significant social and/or historical issue within a selection of the works we have studied in class. Such issues might include race, class, gender, war, marriage, mental health, technology, nature, spirituality, or philosophy to name but a few. You may present your idea for a topic to me at any time during the semester in order to determine whether the subject is appropriate. Any combination of the selections from the NAEL may be used to illustrate the issue you are exploring. Here are some rather more specific examples of the kinds of topics you might consider:

1. Impact of the industrial revolution on British society
2. The influence of faith/the church on human experience
3. Political change in the literary period you choose
4. The relationship between gender and power
5. How the world wars affected thought, art, and experience in Britain and Ireland
6. The evolution of the working class
7. The effect of mass literacy on the people of the U.K.

These are only a few suggestions. Feel free to explore any issue which particularly interests you provided that it has been addressed in the literature in some significant way. Keep in mind your goal is illustrate how the literature reflects its times. You must show how the authors of the works you explore present an accurate, realistic commentary on the conditions in which they produced their work. In choosing your primary texts (the literature), you may focus on a particular author, or choose a selection of authors who address the same or similar contextual concerns. You must establish a thematic consistency, corresponding with the historical/social backdrop, between the works you choose.

Sources

Apart from the primary texts, you will need to do some library research for this assignment. The requirements are as follows:

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1. **One article that would be categorized as literary criticism.** The source may pertain directly to the individual works or to the authors of the works. I recommend that you start here as the titles of these articles often act as "leads," identifying themes and issues you may not previously have considered. The *MLA International Bibliography* (within EBSCO) and *The Gale Group* databases are excellent sources of literary criticism; ***Spark Notes*, *Cliff Notes*, and any other similar kinds of notes are not acceptable!**

2. **At least two scholarly sources on the social or historical issue you will be discussing.** It would probably be better to have your topic in mind before beginning to research the contextual background. For example, searching for "Women's Rights" would generate more information than you could possibly handle. (A search for "education" within that deluge of matches, for example, generates a much more manageable volume of information which would be useful if you were interested in how women were entering into academia in a particular era.) ProQuest and EBSCO are the best bets for scholarly articles on social issues.

Structure

The essay should be developed around a focused thesis. Your introduction will identify the literature you will be discussing as well as the issue you will be examining. After that, it is up to you how you integrate your sources but you must make sure that your argument is supported by evidence from the primary texts.

Example (If you were discussing the marginalization of Native Americans in the works of Louise Erdrich):

In Louise Erdrich's *The Red Convertible*, Henry Lamartine has just returned from the Vietnam War. In a scene in which he is watching television, Henry bites through his lip and seems oblivious to the blood running down his chin: "... every time he took a bite of his bread his blood fell into it until he was eating his own blood mixed in with the food" (Erdrich 273). Critic Pratima Dutta, in a Post-colonial interpretation of this story*, writes that the scene symbolizes Henry's rejection of the white man's imposition of his culture upon that of the Native American. She argues, "The whites have been around so long that their corrupting influence now runs in his blood. His blood flows out, so that when he bites into his bread, he eats his own blood" (Dutta 1). Dutta seems to be arguing that the infiltration of colonialism is inescapable and cyclical - a legacy influencing generations to come.

* As we are not studying literary critical theory this semester, it is not necessary to identify the critical paradigm of the article. If you know a little about the theory, though, go ahead and

identify the perspective the critic takes (Marxist, Feminist, New Historical, Reader Response, etc.)

Citation and Documentation

This shall be done in accordance with MLA standards and is most easily facilitated by the use of Noodletools, accessible via the CSM library website. You will include a properly formatted works cited page at the end of your essay. See the handouts folder for a sample paper in correct format.