

21L.003 Semester Review

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Semester Portfolio Contents

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Paper 1	A Painter's Eye: Exploring "The Last of the Valerii" through the Narrator's Character	February 26, 2002
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Paper 4	Fear and Loathing in Chekhov's "The Bet"	April 18, 2002
Paper 5	Trapped Between Subsumption and Isolation: Women's Lives in Chopin's "The Awakening"	May 18, 2002

Things I Learned this Semester

Brevity

I learned that I write too much and that my writing is better when I plan in advance on writing less. The Chekhov paper was a good example of striving for brevity and getting good results. I also learned that if I want to write less than the upper limit, I should plan to write for the lower limit (my Chekhov paper was supposed to be only three pages). Cynthia was helpful in showing me how superfluous a lot of my transition sentences were.

Procrastination

"Hurry up and fall behind so you will have more time to catch up!" — Anonymous MIT student

Yes, I was late on most assignments for this term. I am sorry. I made a real effort to finish things on time. To some extent, my delays were caused by extra work in other classes, like the design project from hell ("Sha, if you answer a technical question with

'But we're the cutest group in the whole class [giggle]!' one more time, I swear, I am going to take this keyboard and shove it down your throat"). In all honesty, I put in enough hours for this class and did not slack off simply because it was not a technical class. I certainly handed things in late in other classes. Part of the problem is that writing is still a "magical" activity for me (see the section on magic below) and it is hard to turn magic on and off on command (do people fall in love on command?). I've been working to make writing less magical, but it's an ongoing process.

Look, I'm not proud of being late, but I try to see things in context. If I pass this class, it will be the first time I've ever passed a HASS class. I have struggled my whole life getting papers done on time. This semester is one of the best I've ever had in that respect: everything got turned in and most things were turned in on time or only two days late.

Preparation

This class convinced me of the benefits of starting early on projects so that good ideas could properly germinate. It also helped me realize the benefits of early discussion. If I hadn't discussed my ideas for my Austen paper with you, I would have wrote about how Tilney was so enlightened compared to the primitive Thorpe, just like everyone else. Instead, I got to have more fun and write something more interesting.

Context and Structure

"Plans are worthless but planning is invaluable." — General Patton

I realized that while my sentence level writing can be very good, I really suffer on higher level organization. I had to spend a lot of time just trying to find frameworks to fit observations into as well as trying to find paragraph structures to fit sentences into. The best example is my rewrite of my James paper. In all honesty, some of the problems with that paper were due to my ignorance of what a paper in this class really meant ("do I have to answer all these questions" versus "find a something interesting to say in this general area"). In any event, once I had a framework in which to place my observations, the whole paper made a lot more sense.

Another place where understanding the context really helped was when writing my Chekhov paper and presentation. I struggled to find some way to organize what I was seeing, some framework in which to understand Chekhov's deceptively simple stories. Talking about them with a CMS friend helped greatly, as did discussing the presentation with you. Knowing that Chekhov is the master of the short story helped me realize that I had to talk about something larger than the plot lines of his stories.

Writing as Magic

"If you can't measure it, you can't fix it." — Jeff Drew, my old boss

I'm slowly learning how to make writing a more conscious activity. This is not easy for me because I'm very intuitive person used to doing things by the seat of my pants. For me, writing means combining words to create a flow, a rhythm. I've struggled this term with consciously working on topical and paragraph structure, trying to write outlines. It's helped, but it's also demonstrated that to really improve, I need to add

more “industry standard best practices” like better editing for phrase diversity and transition placement. The only way to do that is to make writing less of a “magical” process and more a conscious, well planned activity. Sigh.

Strawmen

“Look! It’s a man, made entirely of straw. What’s this? A torch. Burn strawman, burn!” — Anonymous poster to slashdot.org

I’ve learned that I have a tendency to build strawmen and make them burn. The clearest example is in my Austen paper where I was originally going to write about how Thorpe was a neanderthal and Tilney was so enlightened. Fortunately, discussions with you prevented that.

Other cases of strawmen are less clear. I realize that I do try to portray complex situations as black and white; it makes life so much easier and papers so much shorter. This often looks like I’m uncritically praising or mercilessly condemning a single character. Good examples include Joe in my Dickens paper and Marco in my James paper. On further reflection, though, I’m not sure that’s what is happening.

I really disagreed with the class’ criticisms of Joe, especially complaints of his “lack of education”. What exactly are we to compare Joe’s “lack of education” with? Miss Havisham, who makes fine use of her education? No doubt she has a PhD in clinical psychology with a focus on grief counseling. Or perhaps we should compare Joe to Matthew Pocket, who is so educated that he can write books and give lectures on household economy while clearly having no ability to manage a household. Perhaps Joe could use Herbert Pocket as a model of education: he’s so educated that he can see beyond “traditional” reality and know for a fact that he actually won his fight with Pip and that it’s only a matter of time before he becomes rich while doing nothing in an insurance office. The point I’m trying to make is that there is a difference between real learning and “being educated”, at least in the world Dickens created. Education is just a social stamp that you get if you have enough money. It means nothing, absolutely nothing. Real learning matters. It includes all the things a blacksmith needs to know so as to avoid dying while spending a lifetime working with molten iron. It also includes learning to read as an adult. From this perspective, Dickens is satirizing all the “educated” people of his day who didn’t actually know anything while praising the supposedly ignorant workers who made learning a lifelong occupation.

I admit, I do sympathize with Joe, perhaps too much. I know that at the end of the day, I’m just a digital plumber. I make big plumbing systems for information to flow through, and despite all the math involved, it isn’t really different from the work of real plumber or even a blacksmith. I’ve worked on billion dollar undersea telephone cables connecting the US and Japan that can carry several million telephone conversations at once. But I still appreciate the fact that those systems aren’t so different from two tin cans connected with string. I also sympathize with Marco. In the final analysis, he warned his wife that something terrible would happen, she ignored him, and something terrible did happen. The experience of Cassandra resonates strongly with me.