

TOPICS FOR FINAL PAPER

Papers are due after Lecture #26, and should consist of eight to ten typed pages (figure 320 words/page). The following questions and topics are meant to be suggestive. If you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so, but the object of the discussion should be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed this term, with the added condition that at least one of the texts discussed should be selected from the group of texts read after *Père Goriot*. Papers should deal with issues centrally relevant to both the text(s) and to the subject-matter of our discussions in class.

A question that echoes one I put about Balzac's novel—why is Melville's story called "Benito Cerino"—why not "Delano's Tale"? We have observed how closely Balzac's *Père Goriot* hews in its telling to what Eugène de Rastignac sees and surmises. But the narrative of Melville's story hews even closer to Delano. By and large (with only one or two exceptions until the end of the story) we not only are confined for our information to what he sees and surmises, but we also have the information that he possesses transmitted in a way that expects us to share his general viewpoint about how the world is and what can be expected from various sorts of people. The simplest thing to say about this literary fact is that it introduces difficulties for the reader in grasping the attitude that the text means to convey. What else can be said about it? How does it affect the telling of the story? The first and the last paragraphs are, so to speak, Delano-free and so is the lengthy abstract of the court of inquiry just before the conclusion of the story. Do they contribute to the meaning in a way that is different from the bulk of the story? Are they any more trustworthy as a source of judgment upon the action of the story than the part devoted to relaying Delano's view of things?

Try to explain the situation of Don Benito at the end of the story. Is he a tragic figure? What does he mean by his answer to the question, "What has cast such a shadow upon you?"

Take any three passages from "Benito Cerino" and analyse them closely, showing how they connect to the central themes of the text, whatever you take them to be.

When Ibsen was honored at a banquet given by the Norwegian League for Women's Rights, he made a surprising and provocative response in a speech declining the honor that they had convened to award him. He said that "A Doll's House" was unconcerned with the subordination of women, that it dealt with "a problem of mankind in general". Comment.

Krogstad wants to put things right; Kristen tells him that there is time do so, but he shouldn't recover the letter unread. Better to live by painful truth than be happy in illusion. Does the play endorse this view? How does it do so? If Torvald is "patronizing" to Nora, isn't Kristen exceeding her prerogatives at this point? Let's ignore, for the sake of argument, the simple notion that dispelling illusion at this point saves exposure later, and consider that Krogstad will simply discharge the debt--or that Nora will easily and quickly pay it off once they have "lots and lots of money" and her household allowance is increased. The illusion that Kristen means to dispel is fundamental to the relationship of Torvald and Nora. Is she in the right to do so?

Torvald's illness (from which Nora saves him) is like his life; he couldn't measure up to his own standards and he cannot be told this. Here is a version of Torvald's credo:

1. Pay as you go. Debt is bad because someone has to pay and it needn't be you. Krogstad stands for this side of things--a money-lender. Nora doesn't give a fig about who the debt falls on, provided it isn't her family. (It can be her.) But as Rank says, you get nothing for nothing in this world and in every family, someone is paying someone else's debt. (What happened to value-added and win/win and the rising tide that lifts all boats?) This further enjoins
2. Probity. If you are a lawyer, don't be Alan Dershowitz and provide defense for guilty clients.
3. Work like the devil, sacrificing time, energy and life if need be, under the first two strictures in order to achieve independence for your family.
4. Transmit these values through the mother--the appropriate instrument, because she is malleable (but then usually also the source of degeneration)--to your children.

Nora says that her father and her husband have done her a terrible wrong. What is the nature of that wrong? Is it generalizable, so that it applies to the position of other subordinate groups in our society? Nora responds to Torvald's outburst about her irresponsibility, not by justifying her actions (they were necessary to save his life, etc.) but by accepting the judgment and abandoning her position in the household on its basis. Many have held that this gesture proves Torvald's case--however bad Torvald's outburst, she fails her duties as spouse and mother in leaving someone "who has always been so kind to me"; they argue, in brief, that Nora's discovery that she has failed in "a duty to herself" is not sufficient to justify her departure. This was a major point with Ibsen, who was continually explicit in his other writings that duties to oneself took precedence over other important values. This issue also goes to the heart of certain arguments about "affirmative action"--that the aim may be reasonable, but the costs are too high and unfairly distributed. (Torvald doesn't deserve to lose Nora entirely; Nora's children don't deserve to lose their mother.) Discuss.

If Nora lives in a Doll's House, so does Torvald. He is constantly shielded from unpleasant truth. Rank will bar Torvald from his household during his final illness, because he knows Torvald cannot bear unpleasantness. He does not like to see the evidences of household labor (the disarray of sewing, which testifies to household economy, must be kept out of sight, but crocheting is acceptable as a proper, leisure-time pursuit). He is interested in having clean hands, and would not take clients in his law practice who were shady types--the led him nearly to work himself to death. He has always paid his way (and his family's), because he is unwilling to incur a debt upon which there is the least chance that he would default. Nora has conspired with these characteristics. Was she wrong to do so?

What is the function of the "frame" narrative (the story of the telling by Marlow of the story) in "Heart of Darkness"? Why does Marlow insist on the difficulty of the telling? Why does he lie to the Intended? What does he mean by his "being faithful to the nightmare of his choice"? We see very little of the reaction of the group that is told the story and the nameless "I" who tells the frame narrative does not comment on his response, either. What is suggested by this absence of delineated response and how does it relate to what Marlow has to tell?

"I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it." Marlow thinks this makes Kurtz worthier than the other "pilgrims", as Marlow called them, who have come to Central Africa. Considering what Kurtz has been doing (the man of "unsound methods"), how would you support Marlow's view?

Answer any of the following questions about "Heart of Darkness" by an *argument* that refers to details of the book: "Heart of Darkness" is a story told by someone without a name, who relates a story

told by Marlow, about someone named Kurtz. Whose story is it? What is the effect of the narrative upon the nameless teller? What is the effect on Marlow? Why does he tell the story? What effect did the events of the story have on him? Marlow says that he hates a lie more than anything, yet at the end he tells the Intended a lie--why? What is the heart of darkness? What does Kurtz do and why don't we see him doing it?

A larger question: why does Marlow, presented (as he says) with "a choice of nightmares", chose Kurtz? In comparing Kurtz (whom he has not yet met) with the "pilgrims" at the Central Station, Marlow says that "There is something after all in the world allowing [that is to say, in the fact that the system of justice allows] one man to steal a horse while another must not look at a halter." (We might say, "allowing one man to steal an automobile while another will be punished for stealing a hub-cap.") What does this imply about the contrast between Kurtz and the other Europeans? Again, the journalist says of Kurtz that he could belong to any party but that is not because he hypocritically reflects the views of those whom he would lead (keeps his eyes on the polls, as some have said of Clinton; rather it is because he is, as the journalist says, an Extremist and believes every Big Idea. Compare this with the Chief of the central station, who is "sincere" in his expression of sadness that Kurtz is dying, despite his hatred of him--once Kurtz is no longer a rival.

Narrated texts often present us with access to the run of thoughts in the minds of characters; sometimes only certain characters are presented "from within", so to speak, while others, even important characters, are presented from the outside only, as they are viewed by the characters to whose thoughts the texts does give us access. This granted, we note that sometimes a central character is "observed from without", as Nick Carraway observes Gatsby; we never know what Gatsby is thinking unless he tells Nick. A character observed extensively from within who observes the major figure of a story (in Nick's way) sometimes provides a narrated equivalent of what in drama is the chorus. Such figures can be considered choral figures; they observe the drama, suffer with the major characters, are deeply affected by what they see, and comment on the meaning of the action, but they are not the tragic protagonists.

Develop the idea of narrative choric figures in connection with any text and comment in any way that seems interesting.

It is often said that the tragic protagonist must represent the highest expression of human powers, because the fate that overwhelms the tragic figure must represent a judgment upon human agency in all its essential strength. In this connection it is further argued that the depiction of human fate in the modern period cannot aspire to the tragic effect because modern protagonists, for various reasons, lack the assumed "greatness" of the old tragic characters; they are not different from the audience, nobler and more circumstantial, remote in point of importance and authority and also in time and place, but as limited as ordinary human agents, like them in point of hopes and fears, disappointments and ambitions. The audience expects to see a person much like themselves in the protagonist's position, whatever the apparent elevation of the character's position from the viewpoint of the other characters in the story. Accordingly, the suffering of the modern protagonist is merely pathetic, not tragic. Discuss in connection with *The Great Gatsby*. What does the idea of greatness have to do with Jay Gatz?

It has been said: Gatsby is more than a Midwesterner come East; the story of his dream together with his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" are those of America itself, and his tremendous and misled hope becomes that of mankind. Pretty extreme, isn't it, to say this of a crook who fixed his dream on a rather weak-willed young woman from an upper-class family in Wisconsin? What in the text's language of description would justify such a remark?

Nick Carraway begins his tale with a remark of his father's, who is urging tolerance of those not born with advantages; at the same time, his father has suggested that "a sense of the fundamental decencies [of life] is parcelled out unequally at birth." This last view Nick identifies as snobbish. Is it? Almost immediately, Nick speaks of Gatsby as representing "everything for which I have an unaffected scorn." What is the source of this judgment? Does the novel share this scorn and the view that it is snobbish to think that fundamental decencies are parcelled out unevenly at birth? Gatsby is someone who

tries to deny his birth—to think that his parents aren't really his parents. The first four paragraphs of the novel set out the character of the narrator and his view of his subject—Gatsby. Relate them in any way to the concerns of the novel.

Nick has his own story. He ran away from entanglements in the Midwest and returns, fleeing from what he finds in the East. Why does he throw over Jordan Baker? She accuses him of dishonesty in their final meeting. He early said of himself, “I am one of the few honest people I have ever known”—a somewhat absurd phrase, when put in the first person. (Compare: “He was the most honest person I have ever known.”). How does Nick observe? How does he relate to people? Discuss Nick in the light of his fitness to be chronicler and final judge of Gatsby's worth and Gatsby's fate.

Compare and contrast Jay Gatsby and Eugène de Rastignac as young men on the make, people not born to importance in society (although Eugène has the kind of birth that once carried position along with it) who are stirred by a notable form of ambition to achieve it.

The last four paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby* are usually taken to be a key to the novel's meaning. Review its imagery—the green light, the boats losing headway, the fresh green breast of the new world, the dark fields of the republic—and relate them to your understanding of the force of the story.

The old lord in “Sorrow-Acre” has a problem. How would you describe it? What is at stake for him in the problem, which leads him not to render a decision but to pass responsibility along to a subordinate who must take a fearful risk to resolve it? Why is Adam's uncle unwilling to act upon his beliefs or his sympathies? One way of looking at the old lord's action is to see it as passing the buck—a failure of decisiveness and accountability. At least part of this view is founded on a sense that the risk imposed on Anne-Marie is disproportionate to the risk (if any) that would be incurred by the old lord if he simply instructed the judge to free the boy on grounds of insufficient evidence. What answer can be made to a proponent of this view? Adam, of course, takes the view that the old lord is failing himself and his responsibilities by making the wager with Anne-Marie. In part, Adam's view is determined by his opinion of the folk for whom the old lord is responsible. What is this view? Why will the old lord not take back his word?

Compare the old lord in “Sorrow-Acre” with Creon in *Antigone*, exposit the dilemma that each finds himself in, and elucidate the rightness or wrongness of their exercise of authority *as the text seems to approve or condemn it*. Your own judgments upon them may follow, but first try to expose the view that the text seems to be taking of them. (You can then agree or disagree with the texts, but you don't have to judge the characters directly—they are not historical figures, just parts of a fiction.)

Compare the significance of landscape in "Sorrow-Acre" and in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness".

Discuss the old Lord's theory of tragedy (in "Sorrow Acre"). By his own lights, he is not a tragic figure, for all his suffering. Is he right or wrong? Defend your view. His notion of the tragic is connected with his view that the Greek gods "take over the woe of the universe." In connection with this, he observes that power does not stand in the way of virtue; rather, it is the supreme virtue. What does he mean by this? Does the manner in which the story is told uphold or deny his judgment? Alternatively: apply the old Lord's theory of tragedy to any other work read this semester.

In the case of any narrated text read this term, discuss how important the fact of narration is to the communication of its meaning.

The hero of Camus's *The Stranger*, Meursault, offers a narrative of events that doesn't explain or elucidate or justify; it avoids taking a stance. This has led some commentators to say that Meursault is utterly without self-consciousness. But he does seem to know himself pretty well, and even more important, he seems to know other people; it would be more just to say that he doesn't take a stand on what sort of person they are at bottom. (Note in this connection his account of Salamano and his dog, which other characters—Celeste and Raymond—take to be a case of animal abuse.) In contrast, the magistrate, the prosecutor, the priest are all convinced that they can see into the bottom of Meursault's soul, and they condemn what they see. Comment on the contrast. Why does the court condemn Meursault? Do you agree with the verdict if not with the arguments?

Basing one's account on the events of the day during which the alleged crime took place, one could construct a narrative leading to a plea of legitimate self-defense. But Meursault makes no such defense nor allows his lawyer the possibility of doing so. Neither will he allow the lawyer to present a narrative that would support a claim that Meursault regrets what happened. Is Meursault victimized by the court?

Along the same lines: One critic has argued that the overall purpose of part I is to stir the reader's impatience with Meursault's failure to construct a narrative that would build up a definitive picture of his character; then, in part II, the narrative presents the impulse to build up such a picture characteristic of those who want to kill Meursault. Comment.

When Camus's *The Stranger* first came out, the word "étranger" (alien) referred popularly to immigrants. Now it refers to extra-terrestrials as well. One might say that now the translation of the novel should be titled "Alien", which more appropriately captures the force of the French. Or, since the notion of estrangement is built into the French word, perhaps the best translation would be "The Alienated One"—not as nifty but more accurate. Comment in the light of what you think about Meursault's character. In what way he is a stranger? In relation to what—to his particular society? to society in general? to human reality? to reality itself? He says that he wanted to assure the lawyer that he was like anybody else, an ordinary man. Is he ordinary or extraordinary or a mixture of both? Or is he a stranger through a certain relation of the ordinary to the extraordinary within him? Who finds him a stranger in the novel, who finds him just a bit strange, who accepts him as ordinary? Does the reader experience him as a stranger? Examine the text for clues to the answers to some of these questions and try to say what the significance of Meursault's character is for the book.

Despite the title, Meursault does not appear a stranger or outsider to the other characters in the novel. His inward withdrawal from the possibility that some things matter—the groundwork of love, of friendship, of commitment to marriage or a career—is not often expressed and when it is, people are disconcerted or startled or somewhat disappointed but then continue to treat him as a normal human being. And yet the reader, given the benefit of this peculiar inward account of his life, knows better. His behavior, his friendships, his love-life do not add up, so to speak. Document the foregoing assertion by *careful* discussion of his relationships with people that he knows.

At the end of the book, in his outburst to the priest, Meursault insists that he was right, that his life has been validated. What does he mean by this? Does the book back these judgments up? Is it possible that a person who is apparently (note the adverb) lacking in self-awareness nevertheless be a conscious representative of a valid attitude towards life?

Kurtz dies denouncing his life; Meursault ends by affirming his, in the most striking way: he says that the only afterlife he wants is the ability to remember this one and that he would be content to live his life again, just as it was. The contrast can be developed to afford a view of the meaning of each of the two texts.