

TOPICS FOR SECOND PAPER

Papers are due on Lecture #17th, and should consist of at least six pages (figure 320 words/page). I add that choice of large type, triple-spacing, and huge margins are to no avail; word-count is what matters. PLEASE NUMBER THE PAGES; it will help me in writing my comments. If the numbers swallow up space beyond the usual one-inch margins, keep the word count in mind.

The following topics are meant to be suggestive--the starting-point for thinking through an essay. Please remember that you are not writing a book-report but an essay, which must have an argument, a point to make about the book(s) covered. In consequence of observing this distinction, it follows that you should not give an outline of the plot or descriptions of incidents and characters unless (a) they are directly relevant to a point that you are making about the book and (b) you are reminding your reader of the evidence that they supply. In other words, you should assume that the reader of your essay has read the book and already knows what is in it. Finally, the point of your argument should not be so obvious that no argument against it can be imagined; you shouldn't be arguing a thesis for which no sensible alternative exists.

To elaborate slightly: (1) An essay has a thesis (e.g., the "real" hero of Père Goriot is Vautrin); (2) your choice of thesis implies a puzzle that you are resolving (e.g., the title of the book suggests that Goriot is the protagonist of the book); (3) your thesis should have in mind the possibility of some alternative view of the matter (Rastignac is the hero) which is sensible.

These introductory remarks are not meant to provide you with the form of an outline for an essay but with the background assumptions that will keep your essay from sounding like a ramble among unassimilated details or a rehearsal of the obvious (or what is worst of all, a sermon: e.g., Vautrin is a bad person and we should all dislike him). You are making a case for a view (an interpretation) of a text.

One final restriction: if you chose to quote one of the topics below by way of introducing your paper, do so on the title page. What I have written should not count as part of the quantity of prose that you are submitting in satisfaction of this assignment.

Suggested Themes and Topics

Compare Aristotle's theory of tragedy with Nietzsche's at any point where the contrast is most pronounced. Which is more adequate to explaining the character of ancient tragedy as you perceive it?

Give a careful exposition of Nietzsche's theory of the Apollonian and Dionysian. Does the distinction apply to aspects of modern culture in any way?

Try applying any aspect of Aristotle's theory of tragedy to either Lear or Macbeth or Père Goriot and discuss its applicability or its inapplicability to the work in question in some way that

illuminates the meaning of the work in question.

This topic is a difficult one. Both Oedipus and Macbeth deal with characters to whom a prophecy is given which comes true; and each nearly brings ruin to their respective domains. In a sense, both are "tragedies of fate." But questions can be nonetheless raised in each case about whether the fate that overtakes the title character is inevitable. Discuss the two plays and the role of prophecy within them in any fashion that seems to you fruitful for understanding the plays when compared with one another. It will probably be useful in writing on this topic to bear in mind Macbeth I.3, 148-9: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/ Without my stir."

Another version of this difficult comparison: One might say of Oedipus that he is what he does and there is no change in his character; it is rather that the values placed upon his extraordinary nature have been reversed (from positive to negative) by learning something about what he has done. In *Macbeth*, every action taken by Macbeth has an immediate effect on him, so that, step by step, the courageous warrior becomes the guilt-crazed monster of the "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy.

Try exploring the following: Many scholars have observed that the audience in Greek tragedy was most closely identified with the chorus (we talked about the reasons for holding this view in class) and not with the monumental figures representing the mythological characters. Accordingly, those in the audience knew that they would never be as *consequential* in life as Oedipus (he is king and savior and seer and, as the chorus says, the most godlike of men, although not a god), and if they can say to themselves in response to the play, "I hope nothing like that ever happens to me," they would nonetheless know that since they are not so consequential, the chances are slim that they will be visited by such spectacular misfortune. Watching *Macbeth*, however, every member of the audience knows that although he or she is not "valor's minion", nonetheless the possibility of becoming a Macbeth exists in his nature. Thus the poet Rudyard Kipling wrote about two children:

. . . how at Bankside, a boy drowning kittens
Winced at the business; whereupon his sister
Lady Macbeth aged seven -- thrust 'em under,
Somberly scornful.

You can't imagine anyone invoking Oedipus in this way.

Like Oedipus, Macbeth seeks to confirm or disconfirm his worst fears; Oedipus consults the old shepherd, Macbeth the three witches, and each is urged not to seek to know. "Shall Banquo's issue ever reign in this kingdom?" asks Macbeth (4.1), and the witches cry "Seek to know no more". Why do the forces of evil try to warn him off? Have they got his interests at heart? What does this say about their character. What does it say about Oedipus and Macbeth that they both insist upon this knowledge? Are they alike here or different?

Discuss the often-noticed alteration between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (namely, before the murder of Duncan he seems weak, she stirs him on in the name of his manhood and his courage; afterwards, she seems to collapse, while he grows more steadfast in the face of horrors). Note the relevance of this alteration (as you have interpreted it) to other themes in the play.

There is a lot of talk about time in *Macbeth*, from Lady Macbeth's "Thy letters have transported me beyond/ This ignorant present, and I feel now/ The future in the instant", through Macbeth's talk of "jumping the life to come" (I.7), to the final "tomorrow and tomorrow" speech and Macduff's final, exultant "The time is free". Likewise, there is much about dying well: from

the death of the Thane of Cawdor, Macduff's mention of Duncan's queen, who "Oftener upon her knees than on her feet,/Died every day she lived," to Seward's talk at the end of the play about the death of his son. Take any three passages from either *Macbeth* or *Lear*, discuss their context and the relevance of the themes they suggest to the central concerns of the play.

Compare the depiction of evil characters (Edmund, Goneril, Regan) with the depiction of evil in *Macbeth* in any way that seems useful. Explore the value of the comparison in relation to one of the two plays.

Exposit the first scene in *Lear* in connection with what in your view are the central themes of the play. Get the details right. Was Cordelia right or wrong in her resistance to Lear's request? "Oh, reason not the need," exclaims Lear later in the play (when asked why he needs any retainers). Isn't Cordelia's answer, when she finally speaks, reasoning the need? Recall that the Fool and Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom) tease and torment Lear and Gloucester, respectively; they do not flatter. Why do they do this?

Tolstoy was annoyed with Shakespeare's revisions of an earlier play in his *King Lear*. The older play, *King Leir*, ended with Cordelia and France coming back and winning back King Lear's kingdom for him; the new one, Tolstoy felt, just piled disaster upon disaster--as when Edmund repents ("some good I'll do, despite my nature") as he dies, but the warning he gives comes too late to save Cordelia. The older play, too, might be thought to do a better job of motivating Lear's demand for expressions of love by tying them in with his plan to marry her to one of her suitors. (Highly relevant selections from the old *Leir* play can be found in your edition of "Four Tragedies".) Discuss the pro's and con's of this view, paying attention to the pivotal role of Edgar in extolling patience and hopefulness in the face of extreme misfortune. In this connection, you might also consider that two generations after Shakespeare, people felt dissatisfied with Shakespeare's ending and produced a version in which Lear gets his kingdom back and then resigns, and Cordelia marries Edgar, Gloucester's good son (the king of France gave her shelter in exile and support in the war but didn't marry her). This version held the stage until early in the nineteenth century. Comment in any way on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the ending as we have it.

Another version of the same point: "Poetic justice" is a phrase that is sometimes applied to the appropriateness of the distributions of fortunes at the end of a play, the "poetry" part applying to the particular ways (sometimes unexpected) that characters get their rewards or desserts and the "justice" part applying to the notion that everything comes out more or less on balance--evil suffers evil and good is rewarded with good. Evil and good aren't necessary adjectives applying to individuals here but to forces: good characters can suffer deeply, unfairly, irredeemably (they may be killed) and evil characters may derive benefits, but *on the whole* the forces of goodness should hold their ground and the forces of evil be defeated. Paying careful attention to the details of the play, argue whether poetic justice is served in *King Lear* or not and why this makes a difference to the meaning of the drama.

Examine the various uses of the term "nature" in *King Lear* and comment on the meaning of nature in the play.

Examine the concern in *Lear* with the distinction between getting down to essentials and concern with the trappings of life. The concern starts early, with France's declaration that Cordelia is herself a dowry, runs through Lear's exchange with the disguised Edmund during the

storm, and reaches a kind of climax with Lear's vision of anarchy in the "mad scene" on the heath. Of course, it is involved in Lear's remark about giving away the power of the king and yet keeping "the additions" and in the great speech beginning "O reason not the need", which talks about giving nature (that is, human nature) more than nature needs.

When the disguised Kent tries to enlist himself in Lear's service, he says "Thou hast that in thy face which I would fain call master--authority." (I am paraphrasing slightly.) What meaning does "authority" seem to have in the play?

"He [Eugène] had seen the three attitudes of men toward the world: obedience, struggle, and revolt; the family, society, and Vautrin. He dared not choose among them." Explicate this passage from Père Goriot. Why dare Eugène not choose among them?

The first American translation of Père Goriot ended at the words "Seeing him thus, Christophe slipped away" (on p. 275 of your text) and then added the following: "The reader may believe that Eugène returned to the Maison Vauquer thoroughly cured of his fancy for Parisian high-life and female patronage, and that in due time he married Victorine and took up his abode in the provinces." Comment.

Discuss the ethical issues raised by "the problem of the mandarin" in Père Goriot in relation to the plot

The Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto is about to marry Mlle de Rochefilde, but Eugène's cousin, Madame de Beauséant, only suspects this, is the last person in the world of fashion to know. When Eugène first visits her, the Marquis makes a slight movement when he hears the footman announce that a third party is about to make an appearance, and Madame de Beauséant guesses at the truth. "And so it must be recorded that Madame de Beauséant had observed her lover's involuntary movement--slight, but so simple as to be frightening". (p. 71.) Much of the book is concerned with the way in which Eugène learns to interpret such trifles--small gestures, subtle alterations of tones, a second meaning lurking beneath the apparent meaning of a phrase. Balzac takes it for granted that the reader will understand perfectly why a tiny gesture in these particular circumstances may provide evidence for the vicontesse's conclusion. In part, the book is a chronicle of a young man's education in the ways of fashionable society, penetrating appearances and learning how to conceal his own feelings. ("Never let anyone suspect your real feelings," says the vicontesse to him, "or you'll be lost." [p.82]). Take any instance of subtlety in verbal exchange or observation by Eugène and show how it works and what Balzac expects his reader to understand.

In the world of Balzac's Paris, power depends, paradoxically, upon the appearance of having power; that is why for those who want power, being mocked by the raised eyebrow of a servant can humiliate so deeply. (You might try explaining, in connection with this notion of the power of appearances, both the wit and the appropriateness of Rastignac's remark about his tailor: "I know two pairs of his trousers that have made marriages worth twenty thousand francs a year." [p. 99.]) Comment on the theme of humiliation in the book. Or comment on the appreciation of the truth about the power of appearances that underlies Eugène's remark about trousers. Who in the society that Balzac depicts would appreciate the wit of the remark? Evidently, the readership of Balzac's book is expected to appreciate it; what kind of relationship between the readership of the book and the characters within it is insinuated by their ability to get the point of the joke here?

Mme de Beauséant says to Eugène that she will lend him her name, which she asks him

not to disgrace, and then he appeals to his mother and daughters for the means to acquire "the weapons" (suitable clothing and transportation). It sounds a bit like a knight-errant starting out on his career. The comparison becomes explicit when Delphine sets him up in his own apartment. (p. 207) "Success is everything in Paris; it's the key to power." What is meant by "career" and "success" in the context of this book?

Why can women be exploited? They crave respectability, while the respectable aristocracy craves money. All is appearance--but only in Paris; the countryside remains a possibility. The passage on p. 217 that declares this speaks of the "strength to dominate but how or to what end he did not know". A remarkable idea. How does it bear on Eugène's state of mind at the moment? How does it bear on his final choice--to declare war on society?

The mutual courtship of male and female in Balzac's high society is a zero-sum game: there's a winner and a loser. In the text, women are largely manipulated by men--they are weaker. This is a feature of Balzac's fiction--women who can love at all wind up as victims, because sooner or later their beloved exploits or betrays them. Women are constant in love, men love and then fall out of love--that is the Balzacian general rule. Eugene's story is one version of this. Discuss the role of women of fashion in Père Goriot--the ability to patronize young men such as Eugène, their susceptibility to being victimized by husbands and/or lovers.

After their confrontation in the garden, Eugène thinks of Vautrin: "That man must have a brain of iron! he told me bluntly exactly what Madame de Beauséant told me in polite phrases. He told me more about virtue than I've ever learned from men or books." What are the teachings of Vautrin? How would you elucidate his character and the kind of temptation that he represents? Are his views, indeed, endorsed by Mme de Beauséant in the speech to which Eugène refers?

At one point, Balzac announces the theme of his book as tracing "the devious ways by which an ambitious man of the world gets the better of his conscience as he tries to skirt round evil, so as to achieve his aim while preserving appearances . . ." (pp. 129-30.) Is this the theme? Elucidate.

Vautrin: Virtue is indivisible--hence go all the way to crime. True? Goriot: they are committing all crimes in this one. True?

Discuss the idea of heroism in any text read so far this term. (Don't ask: what do you mean by "heroism"? Or: do you mean the hero of a book or heroics in life? Resolving ambiguities is your job.)