

Notes on elements of literature and guidelines for presentation and essays.

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I. Elements of Literature

Content:

At the surface level, this pertains to what happens in the narrative (the plot), where the narrative is set, when it is set, who the characters are that appear in and drive the plot (the characters in a play or a novel), what the play or novel or short story or poem is about (its themes, ideas, lessons, etc.)

At the deeper level, this pertains to the historical, social and cultural raw material upon which the narrative draws in order to put the plot together. As discussed in class, the raw material that forms the basis for *Hamlet* is, according to the literary scholar Fredric Jameson, the situation of transition between feudalism and an early form of the modern nation state represented by the Absolute Monarchy, a transition that was occurring in Europe around the period of the Renaissance (Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1600, during the late English Renaissance. *Hamlet*, by the way, is a remake of another play by Thomas Kyd, which is itself based on a 13th century legend).

What was going on in England at the time that Shakespeare wrote his essay was precisely this long, drawn-out transition from the situation of entrenched power rivalry between warring clans that characterizes feudalism (what, after all, are the English civil wars about, if not the warring of feudal factions and the attempt by one faction to gain dominance?), and the pacification of this rivalry by the monarch. This context animates some of the themes and tensions of the play: the problems of succession of rule, the problems of the romance between Hamlet and Ophelia, of the morality of revenge, etc.

See Jameson's *Allegory and Ideology*, who argues that the play is working through historical and political problems present in Elizabethan England: "[Queen] Elizabeth's hesitations about the choice of her successor (like Hamlet's own procrastination), the question of succession and usurpation raised both by the contradictions of the late-feudal system itself and of the structural incapacity of the dynastic institution to resolve the generational problem, the dilemma of time and change itself" (89). Jameson proposes that: "*Hamlet* thus can be seen to emerge from a twofold situation that combines the contradictions of both feudalisms, the early rivalry of the clans, the later primacy of the monarch. It activates the conscious or unconscious uncertainties that haunt both, addressing its categorical anxieties not as its central thesis but rather as the raw material of its affective mood and as the narrative possibilities of its *Darstellung* [German word approximately meaning mode of presentation]."

The problem of *Darstellung*, or of the mode of presentation, then gets us to a discussion on form.

Form:

At the macro level, form has to do with narrative structure and therefore overlaps with matters of genre. The play is an old form: it dates back in the Western tradition at least to the ancient Greeks. For the Greeks, drama was an enacted and embodied form in which real actors (wearing masks) spoke out lines before a spectating public as part of a larger set of rituals. See, for instance, Rush Rehm's description of Greek drama as it relates to Athenian rituals in *Greek Tragic Theatre*.

Furthermore, for the Greeks there were different types of plays: there were tragedies, which Aristotle defined as being stories about dignified characters (kings, warriors heroes, etc.) whose fate would cause the spectating public to react with pity or fear (see Aristotle's *Poetics*, one of the first works of literary criticism in the Western tradition). The tragedy was juxtaposed to the comedy, which was another dramatic genre and which according to Aristotle dealt with common folk and common everyday stories and often served to teach moral lessons of a more direct sort. Note how comedy did not necessarily have anything to do with humor in this designation.

At the macro level, then, form has to do with narrative structure: is a given novel arranged into chapters, or is it one uninterrupted flow of text? Is the text organized into the form of a short story?

At the micro level, form refers to the sentence or paragraph level. It has to do with the following elements:

The use and materiality of language, as well as the deployment of language to produce pace and perspective:

Syntax (vocabulary and grammatical structure).

Tone (meter, alliteration; the sound of language; the materiality of language).

Pace

Tense (past, present, etc.)

Point of view (third person, etc.)

And the figurative use of language, in which language goes beyond its "literal" meanings:

Simile

Metaphor

Metonymy

Synecdoche

Personification

Imagery

There are elements of form, furthermore, that intersect more directly with content. For instance, elements like irony, allegory, symbolism, etc. *This gets us to what is important for you to think about when studying elements of form in a piece of literature: your job is not simply to provide a list of*

metaphors or similes or allusions or metonyms as they appear in the text. The job of the literary scholar or critic is to try to understand the role and function of these formal elements as they pertain to the content and to the surface level themes and ideas of the work, as well as to the deeper level contradictions that text is working out and that animate it and give it tension. The question you are seeking to answer when interpreting a literary text and when you are focusing on form is: **what is the function of the formal elements of a literary text?**

In *Hamlet*, the use of figurative and metaphorical language references the specific historical moment of English as a language in Elizabethan England. As Jameson argues, the richness of the language in *Hamlet* is “dependent on the dual ancestry of the English language: its simultaneous Latinate and Germanic roots, which give us two of everything” (94).

Or consider this description of the historical trajectory of English: “Unlike the European Romance tongues, English had been cut off from imperial Rome by the Viking occupation; for several centuries what we now call Old English, the Germanic language of the northern conquerors, had prevailed. It was not until England was again invaded, this time by the French-speaking Normans, that the native tongue came back into contact with Latin. After 1066, what is now identified as Middle English emerged, distinguished from Old English by two major developments: the infiltration of Latinate French words and the loss of heavy Germanic inflections, the endings of words that indicate their grammatical function... Shakespeare, in short, was writing before English had been standardized. For both words and sentences, 1600 was a time of innovation and experimentation” (de Grazia 50). In the previous passage we get some clues as to the conditions of possibility for the overflowing richness of Shakespeare’s language. The centrality of figurative language to Shakespeare’s play, then, signals this moment of transition for English as a language and for England as a society.

Furthermore, form is intricately tied to some of the historical and social elements that constitute the raw material of the play. For instance, take the issue of resolving problems of succession and usurpation of power in a Feudal/monarchical system: *Hamlet* stages these problems at the very level of the figurative language that its characters employ. In Act I, Scene 1, after Bernardo, Marcellus and Horatio have witnessed the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, Horatio speaks the following lines (lines 67 – 69):

In what particular thought to work I know not,

But in the gross and scope of mine opinion,

This bodes some strange eruption to our state.

Note that the figurative use of the word state here is one that overflows in meanings (it is metonymical). The appearance of the ghost is an omen. What is it an omen of? Of “some strange eruption of our state.” The word state refers to the state of Denmark (the monarchy), on the one hand, but also to the state of the universe or of reality, and by transference also to the state of the individual soul. For in a premodern perspective, the murder of a king whose authority was supposed to be derived from God, and the unlawful usurpation of power, would have been seen as violations not only against the monarchy, but against God, and therefore as sins that would cause the state to be “out of joint,” and the whole body politic to be in a state of sin. Think of the parallels that we began to draw in class, thanks to your classmate Gulanara’s insight about the symbolism of the murder by slipping poison in the king’s

ear, between the origin story of Christianity (the Adam and Eve story) and the origin story of *Hamlet*: the murder of the king: the orchard where the murder takes place (Adam and Eve as inhabiting the Garden of Eden), the snake as tempting the queen (the snake tempting Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge), Hamlet's loss of innocence and his falling into melancholia (man's fall from grace due to original sin), etc.

Finally, it is important to remember from the Eagleton reading, (see syllabus), that defining literature is a very difficult thing to do. However, Eagleton provides us with 5 elements which people have often included in whole or in part when they are talking about literature. If you look at these elements closely, you will see that some deal more directly with content than with form, but all of them mix these together in an unstated fashion.

1. Fiction (fictional)
2. Yields significant insight into human experience (moral)
3. Uses language in a heightened, figurative, or self-conscious way (linguistic)
4. Which is not practical (non-pragmatic).
5. Highly valued as a piece of writing (normative, evaluative).

II. Guideline for the presentation

1. The practical elements of the presentation:
 - a. Time: around 10 – 15 minutes. It is hard to say much of substance in less than 10 minutes, hard to hold your audience after 15.
 - b. You can use any visuals you like or none at all: powerpoint, handouts, drawings, charts, etc. Avoid using youtube videos or videos online simply to provide information. You should only use visual material if it helps you illustrate an idea or a concept, not do something that you could easily do yourself. Don't let videos talk for you: the visual is a unique language that should only be used to do something you can't do with words.
 - c. Make sure you are using academic sources to back up any facts or debatable claims that are not your own that you bring into your presentation (as I have tried to do in the above explanation of content and form). Do not make overly general claims as part of your presentation, such as "In *Hamlet* the title character is schizophrenic but in Elizabethan times they didn't know what schizophrenia was." How do you know Hamlet was schizophrenic? Did a psychologist/psychiatrist read the play and interpret it thus? Is schizophrenia a condition that exists at all historical times, simply a chemical imbalance that would be the same at any point in time? Isn't saying that Hamlet has a psychological condition an anachronism (i.e. saying something about another historical time which only applies to the present or to modernity and not premodernity)? You see how making overly general and debatable claims without proper study and without proper sources leads you down a labyrinth of questions which you can't possibly have an answer for off the top of your head. Do not use websites or encyclopedias or

dictionaries (the latter two should only be used when you are doing philological work: when you are trying to decipher the origin of a word): you want to focus on using academic sources. See the guide to using academic sources section below.

- d. At the end of the presentation, you should provide your audience with an activity or questions for discussion. Activities should help your classmates understand a point or concept you have brought up in your presentation. For example, if your presentation has been on the sound of Shakespeare's language and how Shakespeare tries to make the language sound like the actions or things to which it is referring, have students get into groups and discuss the sound of Shakespeare's language during Laerte's speech of advice to Ophelia, in Scene 3 of Act 1 of *Hamlet*.
2. The substance of the presentation:
- a. Focus on an element of content or form for your presentation (see notes above). You want to aim to go beyond pure summary, description, and lists. What you want to try to do is provide us with some of the deep elements of content and form. You want to begin your presentation much like you would begin an essay: with a thesis or a guiding question. For instance, you could begin a presentation on *Hamlet* by saying that you are going to present on the function of Ophelia as a character in the play, posing to us the hypothesis (the thesis) that Ophelia's chastity is a matter of anxiety for her male relatives given *Hamlet's* historical and political context in Renaissance England, and the problems of succession of authority that are taking place at this moment. Or, you could begin a presentation by posing the hypothesis that the origin story of Hamlet has parallels with the origin story of Christianity (Adam and Eve) and that this allegorical reading of Hamlet helps us draw out some of its key themes. Then your presentation could analyze some passages from the text in which the theme of Ophelia's chastity is important, and then you could provide the class background information on the historical, cultural, social, or political context of Renaissance England, as it relates to marriage and the subject of succession. You need to either do close readings of the text, or provide well researched context using academic sources, or both. The presentation is not a time to summarize plot, list metaphors, or give personal opinions.
 - b. If you focus on content: What are the historical, social, cultural and political elements that provide the raw material for the text in question? How do they animate and drive the plot, the conflicts that are central to the narrative, the themes or ideas that the play is trying to work through or resolve? If you are focusing on matters of form, make sure you present plenty of examples from the text. However, you don't just want to give us examples of metaphors and similes. *What is the function of these metaphors and similes?* And if you don't know for sure: What is your hypothesis about this function? What is your hunch? You are allowed to speculate a little bit here. You do not have to prove to us in your presentation that your hypothesis is correct, but you want to give us enough information related to your thesis's claims so that we have reason to think that you might be on to something.
 - c. At the end of the presentation, you should provide your audience with an activity or with questions for discussion. Activities should help your classmates understand a point or concept you have brought up in your presentation. For example, if your presentation has been on the sound of Shakespeare's language and how Shakespeare tries to make

the language sound like the actions or things to which it is referring, have students get into groups and discuss the sound of Shakespeare's language during Laerte's speech of advice to Ophelia, in Scene 3 of Act 1 of *Hamlet*. Or if you end your presentation with some discussion questions, these should be structured so as to have us build upon your presentation. Why does Shakespeare's language take on this "mimetic" role (where the language tries to *sound* like those things or actions to which it refers) at certain points? Why would Shakespeare make this stylistic decision? What do students make of your hypothesis, do they think it is plausible? Do they have their own hypotheses?

III. Guideline for the Literature Essay/Literature Research Essay.

1. Here you want to do the same thing as the presentation, but in a more extended and written format. The main difference between the essay and presentation, other than the fact that one is presented in spoken language and the other written, is that in the case of the essay you do want to propose a thesis and an interpretation of a literary text or set of literary texts and then attempt as much as possible to prove that your thesis/interpretation *is sound*. Like a lawyer in a courtroom, you want to attempt to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt if possible, that your interpretation of the literary text in question is plausible, and you want your interpretation to shed some new light on this text. To do this, you will need to apply the form of the literature essay (which focuses primarily on a close reading of the text without bringing in external sources) or the form of the literature research essay (which brings in additional, academic sources to support its argument). See the notes for writing a literature essay and for writing a literature research essay.

IV. Guide to academic sources.

1. Both for your presentation and for your essays, the only sources that are considered relevant and appropriate sources are *academic sources*. You cannot use websites or any other non-academic sources as support for facts or claims in your presentation or your essay.
2. What is an academic source? Scientific papers that present the findings of scientific experiments in narrative form are published by *professional* scientists in journals like *Nature*. Social science papers written by *professional* sociologists based on social experiments, or on theoretical interpretations of data gathered about different societies or populations, or on methodically carried out social or ethnographic observation, are published in academic journals and in monographs (book-length studies). In the humanities, and in literary studies in particular, professional literary scholars publish articles or book-length monographs that are based on methodically carried out research. This research can include work in archives, reviewing the correspondence of an author or poet. Or it can include research into the historical context in which an author worked, or into biographical dimensions of an author's experience. Often, this research relies on first-hand sources: letters, birth certificates, unpublished manuscripts or

drafts of manuscripts, etc. Academic articles or monographs on literary subjects also rely on very close and extensive readings of an author's works, or on the works of various authors working in a specific time period or genre. Or perhaps, they rely on close reading of an author's work in parallel with close reading of sociological, historical, political theoretical, or philosophical literature, so as to put the literary work or works in question in a larger context of analysis. By relying on academic sources when making an argument you are making use of well researched and argued facts and claims. You can lean on these strong sources to provide context for your argument and strength to your argument.

3. It is important that when making use of academic sources in a presentation or essay that you cite these sources. Otherwise, you are committing plagiarism. In a presentation, you can simply make verbal note of the source from which you are pulling a fact, a claim, a concept, or an idea that is not yours. Essentially, unless you are an expert in Elizabethan England, if you are writing about *Hamlet* you will need to access an academic source in order to make any historical claims at all about the historical context in which Shakespeare wrote the play. In a visual presentation, you can list the source directly on the visual using citation methods like MLA. In your library you can find an MLA guide, which will walk you through the steps for formatting essays correctly and for citing sources correctly both inside the text and at the end of the text (the Works Cited page). In an essay, you want to use MLA citation methods to reference any time you are paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting, or referring to someone else's ideas, concepts, facts, etc. Any claim you make in a presentation or an essay that you wouldn't simply know off the top of your head or that isn't taken directly from our literary text, you need to back up with a source. If you tell me that during the Elizabethan period it was customary for women to marry when they were still teenagers, you need to tell me and the class where you got that information. That fact certainly did not sprout fully formed from your mind, like Athena from Zeus's head!
4. In the above explanation on form and content I used the following works: our *Hamlet* text in the Norton, Rush Rehm's *Greek Tragic Theatre*, Fredric Jameson's *Allegory and Ideology* and a chapter from *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* titled "Shakespeare and the Craft of Language," written by Margreta de Grazia. Using MLA format, I cited my quotations from that text by following these quotations with parentheses and either the last name of the author and the page number where the quotation is drawn from, or simply the page number if I mentioned the name of the author right before offering the quote.
5. A full citation for a Works Cited page of the Jameson monograph using MLA looks like this.

Last Name, First Name. *Title of Book*. City of Publication, Publisher, Publication Date.

Jameson, Fredric. *Allegory and Ideology*. London, Verso, 2019.

Note that the title of the book is italicized. If this were a journal article or a book chapter, the full citation would look different. For guidance find an MLA reference guide at your local public library or college library or see the following partial guide:

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