

CRITICAL EVALUATIONS

Matt Turner / Multicultural American Literature / Fall 2011

Assignment

Over the course of the semester, you are expected to turn in 19 critical evaluations, each 1½ pages or longer. These evaluations are due at the beginning of class as evidence of your preparation for class discussion. A critical evaluation can focus on one or more authors or selections, but I grade evaluations based on the quality of ideas and not the number of pieces to which you respond. These evaluations should be the starting point for our class discussions.

In each evaluation you will identify significant critical questions about the meaning of the literature you've read and then work to find answers to those questions. By looking at the central question of "what does this mean?", you are working to understand the literature. I do not expect polished thought or organization in a critical evaluation, but I do expect more than superficial reaction. I expect to see you challenging yourself to go beyond your initial thoughts and working to thoughtfully explore what you've read.

Each critical evaluation should follow this basic structure.

Evaluation Structure

- First, briefly summarize what you've read in a few short sentences. Summary demonstrates that you understand what you read and shows you read the entire selection. Keep this summary short—it should be no more than ¼ of the total of the entire critical evaluation.
- Second, generate several critical questions (1-3) that focus on the meaning of the literature. These questions can cover literary concepts, themes, character motivations, or historical context as presented by the author. Effective critical questions focus on "why" something happened rather than "what" actually happened. For example, critical questions address:
 - A character's motivation—"Why did the character do [action]?"
 - Impact of an event—"How does [event] impact the story?"
 - Author's style—"Why did the author tell this story this way?"

You want questions that you cannot answer easily. The point is to use the evaluation to write/think as you "wrestle" with the question. You should use these questions to explore the meaning of the work, not explain plot.

- Finally, respond to your critical questions and the issues or themes. Creating questions and responding to them is the majority of your critical evaluation. You are responding to the literature, not to issues. For example, I want a response to Grace's and Inder's marriage in "Grace." I don't want a response to the issue of interracial marriages in general.

Evaluation

I do not evaluate based on whether you are right or wrong in your answer to your questions—only that you are thinking critically about what you've read. If your critical evaluation is focused on what you've read; indicates that you've read and thought intelligently about what you've read; follows the structure above; and is submitted on time, then each will receive the available points.

Due Dates

You will lose points if the critical evaluation is:

- not on time. Any evaluation received after a class session is late. A late critical evaluation will only be accepted up to one class day after it is due.
- not long enough. Critical evaluations must be at least 1 ½ pages long using MLA format. If it is short, you should respond to more pieces listed for that date.
- not on at least one of the assigned selections for that day.
- does not clearly indicate to me that you read the entire selection.
- does not clearly indicate to me that you are thinking about what it is you are reading.