

ENGL 201: World Literature

Essay Topics

Your essay should begin with a strong thesis paragraph, and your arguments and claims should be supported by a careful analysis of specific episodes and passages in the texts we've read. Please use MLA format for all citations (and remember that poems are cited by line number rather than page number). You do not need to consult secondary literature in your paper, though you should feel free to use dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference sources. There are a number of useful handouts and links for writing about literature in the "handouts" section of my web page (<http://www.longwoodshakespeare.org>). Consult *The Grainger Review* for model essays. I am always happy to look at a draft of your paper before the due date. If you would like to write about a topic not mentioned below, please discuss it with me first.

1. Using examples from any of the works we've read this semester, discuss the different ways in which poets and other writers depict mortals interacting with, or trying to understand gods or other divine forces, and the roles these gods and divine forces play in their lives. How do the two interact? How do mortals and gods perceive each other? What powers or characteristics are unique to each? What powers or characteristics are shared by the two? To what degree are mortals or gods responsible for particular events in any given situation?
2. Explore the different ways in which the writers we've read depict heroes and the idea of heroism. Compare and contrast at least two "heroes" in your analysis. To what extent is heroism defined culturally? Why do writers (and characters) sometimes critique the idea of heroism? What is the relationship between the hero and his society?
3. Explore Dante's use of allegory in the *Inferno*. Don't simply identify allegorical episodes and paraphrase their meanings—develop an argument about how Dante creates and uses allegory. What is distinctive about his allegorical method? What is complicated about his allegories? Why doesn't Dante make the meaning of his allegories as clear as he might? Your essay should analyze at least three allegorical episodes. Make sure you carefully analyze the imagery and details of these episodes as you develop your argument.
4. Compare and contrast one of the Eastern literary works we've read (Li Po and the *Bhagavad Gita*) with one or more of the Western works we've read. Your essay should develop an argument that focuses on one of the following areas: Spirituality/Religion, Nature, War, or the relation of the individual to society. (Feel free to explore some other topic—but please clear it with me first.)
5. The Renaissance historian Jacob Burckhardt has argued that the Renaissance is the period in which Christian Europe witnessed the "development of the individual":

[In the Middle Ages] Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy [during the Renaissance] this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such. (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [Penguin ed., trans. Middlemore], p. 98)

Develop an argument for or against this proposition that is supported by a careful and detailed analysis of one or more of the Renaissance works we've read. If you argue against Burckhardt, you might want to discuss Dante or some other medieval poet as a point of comparison.