



Coming of Age in Spanish Literature and Film (FSEM)

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Present your assignment and what you hoped students would achieve and demonstrate through it

The Assignment: Book Review

Your first extended writing assignment for the quarter will be a book review. In this short essay of 2-3 double-spaced pages (with 1” margins and 12” Times New Roman font), you must review either of the texts that we’ve read so far. Your book review should briefly summarize the primary themes of the text and evaluate the text’s quality. You must be sure to avoid any “spoilers” that will give readers too much information, like, for example, what happens at the end of the novel. The main purpose of the review is to give your reader a recommendation as to whether or not s/he should read the book. You should imagine that you’re going to publish your book review in DU’s student newspaper *The Clarion*, so your audience is other DU students. While it is not necessary to include a bibliography with your book review, you should give full bibliographical information on the book you are reviewing as part of your header for the piece. More detailed instructions will be given closer to the due date of the book review.

I decided to include this assignment in my FSEM course after a December 2014 workshop that Doug Hesse led. In that workshop one of the topics we discussed was the types of writing students typically do in high school, with Doug encouraging us to keep this in mind as we develop writing assignments for our FSEM classes—thus avoid assignments that are significantly more challenging than ones they have done in the past. What I learned from our discussions that day was that my expectations for students were likely too high, especially on the first two writing assignments that I had typically assigned in my FSEMs up until that point—writing short literary analysis essays. The other aspect of student writing that we discussed back in 2014 that resonated with me was that creating “real-life” writing assignments that students may encounter outside of an academic context often motivates them more because they are able to engage more fully with an assignment that could have a purpose outside of the classroom. For these reasons, I decided to incorporate a book review

as the first essay assignment for students in my FSEM class.

In this assignment I am hoping that students can do four primary things: (1) distill out the primary themes and relevant socio-historic context for the texts we've discussed in the first few weeks of class and present them in an organized and interesting way; (2) use appropriate voice, and solid stylistics; (3) give a convincing recommendation to their reader; and finally, (4) that students are capable of discerning how much plot description is appropriate in a review, and the importance of avoiding "spoilers".

Explain strategies or approaches that the students used, citing aspects of the responses you chose for analysis

I chose two student papers, one by Olivia and another by Michelle. Olivia's paper is quite strong, while Michelle's is weaker, although not a bad essay. In general Olivia's paper has a stronger personal voice and her prose flows very well for a first-year student, in my opinion. It seems likely that Michelle did not devote much time to editing her work because her prose is a fair bit less fluid than that of many of her classmates with some odd word choices, and she also includes some "spoilers."

More specifically, Olivia's essay opens with a helpful introduction of the author and her work, which was appropriate to the assignment:

The author of the novel was born in 1851 and had a strong passion to write. However, in Spain during this time period, women were suppressed and their writing, if they did any, was not appreciated in the same way as would a man's. Bazán was an individual who fought for what she believed in, and she believed in equal opportunities for women. She continued writing and wrote several novels and short stories. She is most known for *Los Pazos de Ulloa*, *La Madre Naturaleza*, *La Cristiana*, and others. *Midsummer Madness* is consistent in the theme of feminism and women's rights ...

In my opinion, this information is essential for a reader to gain a sense of the novel's content and themes, and Olivia does a good job summing up the socio-cultural context and the author's works in a brief paragraph. Likewise, Michelle gives similar information about the author and novel, but her writing style is notably weaker than Olivia's, and she is also less successful in giving her reader a sense of where this novel fits into the author's fictional corpus:

This book was written by Pardo Bazán in 1889. It was not her first book, but one of many that dealt with the feminist theme and more specifically, a woman's role in society during that time. Pardo Bazán's experience and struggle with being female can assure readers and those interested in this piece that she is no amateur on the subject. She had a desire to belong to the literature societies during that time, but the members were male, and she, of course, was not. This struggle led to her writing and being an advocate for woman and their

aspirations. Many of her stories, whether they be novels or short stories, were written in many different styles, for example third or first person or who the narrator exactly is, but many of them are centered on women's role in society.

Another aspect of Olivia's essay that sets it apart is her description of the novel's important themes as well as its general strengths:

The novel is an original piece of writing that highlights the role that women play in society through the perspective of a woman who constantly worries what society will think or say about her. Status was very important during this time period, and determined what was demanded from an individual. The characters are well rounded and believable: they truly demonstrate individuals during this time period from different parts of Spain.

In contrast, Michelle's essay focuses more on plot summary, even divulging some spoilers, and she does not discuss general themes of the novel.

One thing that Michelle does more successfully than Olivia is give a more nuanced recommendation based on a reader's interests:

This book for me was more about the theme of feminism rather than the plot itself. As a person that is interested in feminism and issues surrounding it, this novel provided an engaging way to look at it. I got to gain an understanding of this issue not only in itself, but in another culture and during another time. I would recommend this book to anyone who, like me, is interested in studying and looking at feminism. If you are someone who just wants a good read, perhaps this is not the best book for you. This book is not just for entertainment, but for society to learn from it.

In the handout for this assignment I had suggested that students could describe a particular audience that might enjoy this work more than another, which Michelle successfully does here.

Explain what you thought was successful—or less so—and why. Discuss possible implications, including any changes you might make on this assignment or in any instruction or scaffolding you might provide.

I think both essays are fairly successful in giving general introductions of the author and her work and very briefly the socio-cultural context of Spain's nineteenth-century. I devoted some time to an overview of class, gender and social norms during Spain's nineteenth-century during our discussions of these works in the first few weeks of class so I was glad to see that students seemed to assimilate well that information and present the relevant aspects of it in their book reviews. In the handout I gave students that describes this assignment, I also suggested that they place the author and her works within this context, which these two students did successfully. In addition, I believe that the sample book review we read and

discussed in class did this very well, which may have helped students by giving them a model of what to do in a successful review.

In both of the essays I can see that the students used more plot summary than they should have, with Michelle even including some spoilers in her description of the plot. Avoiding spoilers was addressed both in class and in the assignment handout, but I don't believe I emphasized enough that they should dedicate only a sentence or two to plot summary. I can refine the handout and also modify my discussion of this assignment in class in order to highlight this aspect of the essay.

The main difference I see between these two essays is the more refined stylistics of Olivia's piece versus the fairly choppy nature of Michelle's prose. To some degree I think this is something that all writers naturally develop over time, so I'm not sure that there is a lot that I can do in class to help with this particular issue. As we discussed in the workshop, I think the quality and variety of what the students' read also determine at least partly the sophistication and refinement of their writing. Nevertheless, I do think there are some common stylistic issues that come up regularly with FSEM students that I could highlight and ask students to avoid, such as including transitions, solid word choice, ending sentences with a preposition (something I see somewhat regularly in Michelle's essay, for example).

In order to address these stylistics issues in the future I could include a less successful example of a book review for evaluation by students and ask them to edit it so they can start to see these issues first hand. I also think that reading an essay out loud is essential to catching different stylistic issues, which I could have them practice in class with some writing samples I bring in. I always encourage students to use this technique during their editing process but I'm not sure they actually do it.

Another technique that I could implement for this assignment is peer-review. It seems likely that this could be a helpful tool for a few different reasons: (1) I've found over the years that student work is often of higher quality when they know that their work will be read by their classmates; (2) students will get a sense of what another classmate at their same level is capable of, so the weaker students will see that they have work to do to improve their writing (and the stronger students will likely gain more confidence in their writing ability); and, finally, (3) the process of peer-review allows students to look at writing critically, thus helping them to view their own writing in a more critical way.