



## Poetic Minds (ASEM)

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### Original Assignment

For this assignment, you will select a contemporary work of literature or philosophy, and will write a 5-7 page (1250-1750 word) essay exploring your selected text in the context of the course. In so doing, you will explore some of the ways in which Enlightenment philosophy and Romantic poetry are still relevant to contemporary culture. You may interpret the categories of “literature” and “philosophy” as broadly as you wish; just be sure to justify your choices.

Your essay should display mastery of the course materials, both by citing extensively from course texts and by applying course texts to your topic in nuanced, complex ways. The application of course materials will help you develop a strong, analytical argument about the text that you have chosen. For help designing your argument, I recommend visiting the writing center and/or setting up an office hours appointment with me.

### Justification

In my ASEM, “Poetic Minds,” I concluded the quarter with a final assignment that asked students to analyze a work of contemporary literature or philosophy within the context of Enlightenment- and Romantic-era thought and in the context of class discussions about the ways in which literature responds to philosophical problems. My goals in crafting this assignment were threefold: 1) to ask students to invert their perspectives, i.e. to read the contemporary as intellectual historians; 2) to demonstrate knowledge of course texts via application of that knowledge to a thesis-driven close-reading; and 3) to generate new knowledge by analyzing a text of their choosing on which they would be the expert in our class. Student presentations of these final projects also provided an efficient way in which to expand a closing unit on contemporary literature.

### Paper One

Cole had a compelling interpretation of the assignment, choosing to analyze key texts from Scientology in order to develop a nuanced, dynamic argument about the ways in which

Scientology employs, complicates, and rejects strains of classic philosophical thought. While Cole did a good job demonstrating that Scientology “is a modern philosophy that builds from the foundations of Enlightenment philosophy while ultimately rejecting it,” I wonder if the constraints of the argument-driven analysis might have limited his engagement with the topic. Cole stuck closely to two texts by the movement’s founder and used Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, and Wordsworth to historicize treatments of progression, understanding, and the evolution of knowledge in these texts. While both application and argument were strong, there was no room in the paper for a discussion of other aspects of Scientology that might have been interesting to consider in relation to course texts—the role of Scientology in Hollywood, for example.

### **Paper Two**

Angelica, a senior environmental science major, brought detailed concepts from Blake, Kant, Spinoza, and William and Dorothy Wordsworth to bear on an in-depth investigation of one of her favorite books, Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*. I was amazed by the nuanced analysis of *Wild* that Angelica was able to craft by walking through the text with Enlightenment- and Romantic-era texts in mind. Her response to the assignment not only demonstrated mastery of course texts but also led her to take her understanding of course texts deeper. For example, an analysis of why one of Strayed’s encounters with nature was Blakean gave Angelica the opportunity to produce a new close reading of one of William Blake’s poems.

Again, argument seemed to be the sticking point here. Because she was drawing such detailed, nuanced connections between course texts and her chosen text, Angelica lost sight of an overarching intervention. While Angelica did manage to develop a complex argument about the connections among nature, spirituality, and education, as she went deeper into each text, she seemed to lose sight of the broader argument, and there is no good thesis statement.

### **Paper Three**

A third student, Beck, had a daring and creative interpretation of the assignment. Rather than marshal her analysis of a contemporary text into the structure of a standard academic paper, as the assignment asked her to do, Beck worked in the genre of the literary essay. She chose a rock song as her text of choice and wove analytical allusions to course texts in with the close reading of song lyrics. These connections are forged within a narrative about her own experience of hearing the song after reading course texts. The resulting paper is actually very beautiful (“Relief and Wordsworth wash over me”). In addition to freeing herself up for elegant, associative writing, Beck has shown me the intense degree to which she has internalized the course texts—she’s not only able to apply these texts to the contemporary, but is also thinking about them as she moves through her everyday life.

### **Plans for Revision**

Assessment of three sample papers has shown me that the main strengths of the assignment are 1) that it gives students an effective way to demonstrate their understanding of course texts, and 2) that it gives students the opportunity to write about a contemporary text that interests them. The main sticking point of the assignment seems to be argument, which either limited analysis or was limited by analysis. Beck’s creative take on the assignment, although a risk in this context, suggests another way forward, which is to ask students for a

literary essay. This revised assignment would meet the same goals while helping students think about what it might mean to write for a broader audience (via civic, literary, or other public writing) after graduation.

### **Updated Assignment:**

#### **Literary Essay: Investigation of the Contemporary**

##### **Task**

For this assignment, you will write a literary essay that brings your knowledge of Enlightenment- and Romantic-era debates about the mind to bear on a contemporary text, topic, or phenomenon.

First, you will identify a particular question related to the theme of mind that has been central to several course readings. Example questions might include the following: how does a person come to trust in the truth of their knowledge? how does a person come to believe in the divine? under what conditions does a person become aware of their own patterns of constructing knowledge or meaning?

Drawing extensively from (a) course text(s), you will then write a 3-5 page essay that uses the intellectual-historical context developed through class readings to generate a detailed analysis of an artifact of contemporary culture.

##### **Purpose**

The purpose of this assignment is three-fold: 1) to demonstrate mastery of course texts and of some aspect of the course's guiding theme; 2) to generate a fresh, surprising, or provocative analysis of some aspect of contemporary culture, supported by close reading; and 3) to create a piece of writing that will be interesting to our particular learning community but also relevant beyond our class.

##### **Audience**

By "literary essay," I mean an essay that you might enjoy reading in a journal, magazine, or online venue. It may help to have a specific publication in mind.

##### **Sharing component**

We will share drafts in groups of three one week before the final deadline in preparation for an in-class workshop. We will also read excerpts from our essays aloud on the final day of class.

##### **Assessment**

I will assess your essay based on the following criteria~

Your essay should display mastery of the course materials, both by citing extensively from (a) course text(s) and by applying course texts to your topic in nuanced, complex ways. In so doing, it is necessary to demonstrate a precise, detailed, capacious understanding of the course text(s) you have chosen.

The application of course materials will help you develop a strong, analytical argument about your topic. Remember that strength, in this case, refers to precision, nuance, and support. Given the genre for this assignment, you may choose to craft an analytical argument that unfolds inductively, rather than foregrounding a thesis statement. In any case, successful essays will leverage the application of course materials in order to say something new and interesting about their topic.

Clarity is key. Read your sentences and paragraphs out loud to make sure they flow. Try a reverse outline to make sure your organization and argument unfold in intentional, effective ways. You achieve form by discarding, so you might want to write a longer “discovery draft” that you then whittle down into a concise essay.

