Sample Sets of Draft and Revision Comments – AY11

D1 Comments—to “John” from Ricky Martin

Dear John,

In this essay, you point to a key point of tension between *Orientalism* and *Avatar*: the status of the scientists. As I understand it, the tension is that while Said characterizes scientists as Orientalists par excellence, your reading of the film suggests a disconnect between the two. There’s a lot of promising material to work with here. The next step is to solidify motive and thesis, so that you can then refine your analysis. Below are thoughts to consider as you begin to revise.

**Introduction, Motive and Thesis:** Your opening gesture is quite strong, setting up an analytic context – “imperialist themes in a space-age setting” (1) – orienting the reader to the intellectual task at hand so as to guide a reading of the plot with your argumentative motives in mind. The central tension appears when you ask: “to what extent can the humans be classified as Orientalists?” (2). It seems like you’re suggesting a split between the industrialists and the military on the one hand, and the scientists and Jake on the other. This move constitutes a departure from Said, who shows how academic writings aligned themselves with the imperialist project. In the draft, it looks like your thesis appears at the end of the paragraph on page 2. Yet, this point about the non-pairing of the two traits isn’t really the central focus of your paper. Rather, your central claim, as I understand it, emerges on page 6, where you point to the way in which the actions of Jake and the scientists to some extent contradict Said’s figuration. In draft conference, let’s solidify motive and thesis, since everything else will follow from them.

**Evidence and Analysis:** This paper includes many interesting points of analysis. I’d like to draw attention, though, to a central tension within your thoughts. On the one hand, you point to the significance of the fact that what is different about Jake is “his naïve curiosity” (3). This naiveté contrasts with the scientists, I would think, since (for example) they are professionally trained. Yet, rather than contrast Jake with the scientists, you align him with them, calling him an “ethnographer” (2) and referring to them as “his crew” (6). While I totally get the opposition between Miles/Parker on the one hand and Jake/scientists on the other, I wonder, in the context of your argument, what differences between Jake and the scientists might make a difference, especially since this coupling is being used in your argument to critique Said’s characterization of the academics. Alternatively put, one counterargument you’ll need to address in your revision would be the extent to which the differences between Jake and the scientists would trouble a straightforward critique of Said. We can talk more about counterargument in draft conference.

There are a lot of great ideas here, John! I look forward to seeing how you develop them.

Best,

Ricky
R1 Comments—to “John” from Ricky Martin

Dear John,

In this essay, you explore the relationship between science and imperialism. You suggest that the lack of overlap between the two in James Cameron’s film *Avatar* seems to complicate Edward Said’s argument in *Orientalism*, but, as I understand it, your point is that the differences between the two seem to vanish because the imperialist, not the scientific, vision is that which becomes official. If you were to revise again, the key would be to highlight the complexities of your argument, drawing together its various strands more effectively. Below are some thoughts to consider as you begin Essay #3.

**Motive and Thesis:** You do a great job elaborating your motive and thesis on page 2. First, you effectively set up what an Orientalist reading should do, and then show the ways in which *Avatar* doesn’t meet that expectation. Your thesis, though, seems to be a way of accounting for the discrepancy, and accounting for why it is Said would not differentiate between these figures despite the dramatization in the film that shows them to be quite different. You write: “even when science opposes the political sentiments of an empire, the vision of the empire reigns supreme” (2). The next step would be to spell out the ways in which this thesis provides a commentary on *Avatar* as an extension, complication, etc. of *Orientalism*, so as to place your argument in its intellectual context.

**Evidence, Analysis, and Source-Use:** Highlighting the intellectual stakes of your argument by refining your motive and thesis will help you further develop the implications of your analysis. As it is, your paper has many moments of analytic insight, and so the next step would be to elaborate further. For example, you do a great job explaining how Quaritch’s presentation of Pandora to newcomers exemplifies Orientalist behavior (3), but an even stronger articulation would show how this characterization contributes to your argument about the imperialist vision and its triumph over scientific dissidence. Moving forward, another area on which to concentrate is source use. Your use of Bourdieu to analyze Parker (6) is great; the discussion of Constable (4), though, would be improved if you highlighted how it is that you as a scholar are applying her argument to a different context. Doing so would make visible your own intellectual work, and the contribution your crossbreeding intervention is making.

**Structure:** In your paper, you show a clear understanding of what structure should look like: you do a nice job constructing a logic of “now that we know A we can move to B.” The next step, though, is to make the progression motivated by the argument itself. On page 2, you write that establishing that Said’s pairing is “incorrect” enables you to establish “how and why the two human factions oppose each other,” but it is unclear how the second point contributes to your central claim, in which despite differences the vision of the imperialists “reigns supreme.” Again, this will follow from clarification of your motive and thesis. Always ask yourself how each paragraph is contributing to your argument and your overall thesis, and let the development of your argument follow from that.

Balancing its strengths and weaknesses, this paper earns a grade of B. An even stronger performance is clearly within reach, though, so I look forward to your continued progress – and promising project – as we move to Essay #3!

Best,
Ricky
Dear Anthony,

In this essay, you explore literary critics’ interpretations of Hemingway, focusing on his work *Death in the Afternoon*. Your draft moves through several topics and questions, including bullfighting, existentialism, and the historical contextualization of critical trends. Now that you’ve gone through the process of putting these ideas on paper, the next step is to solidify a motive and thesis – a task you suggest in your cover letter in terms of “making sure my argument stays focused, on point, and does not stray.” Below, then, are some issues to keep in mind as you work toward that goal in revising.

**Motive and Thesis:** As I understand it, the central question of this paper concerns the ways in which critical reception of Hemingway’s text transformed from when it was first analyzed in the 1930s to the postmodernist re-discovery of (t)his work in the 1990s. In your cover letter, you note that “the critiques were almost all centralized to [these] two time periods,” a fact that is quite intriguing and worth thinking about further. The opening paragraph sets up a thesis, in which you allude to a conflict in interpretation between the two time periods and side with the later works as “more encompassing.” The motivating problem or question could be spelled out further, though, and it seems like your paper does more than just side with the more contemporary critics, so these are places for further refinement. Likewise, the theme of bullfighting appears throughout, but as a reader it is unclear what the significance of this phenomenon is in terms of your argument, so you’ll want to make clear what motivates this focus.

**Keywords, Orienting, and Structure:** Once you have refined your motive and thesis, you’ll be able to more strategically engage your paper’s key terms. This paper focuses both on “bullfighting” and “existentialism”: both could use further elaboration, which would help orient your readers, since readers may be unfamiliar with either or both. You do give a brief definition of existentialism on page 6, but this could be taken further: not all considerations of life and death are considered existentialist, so you’ll want to get more into the specifics, which might require some more background research. In the draft, the paragraphs introducing both of these terms – bullfighting on page 2 and existentialism on page 6 – reads as abrupt, so you’ll want to think more about how you are using structure to build an argument, so as to enable the reader to transition from one point to the next.

**Evidence, Analysis, and Source-Use:** In addition to key terms, another place to pay attention to orienting concerns the use of sources. Be sure to identify an author’s qualifications, such as literary critic, and to specify the time period in which critical work is produced, especially in your case where chronology makes a difference for your argument. On pages 6-7, for instance, you cite “Josephs,” “Hicks,” and “Sanders,” and yet it is not clear who these people are: by convention, one provides first and last name, as well as disciplinary affiliation, the first time a source is cited in a text, i.e. “literary critic Rosemary Green” rather than just “Green” (although on subsequent occasions the last name only is fine). Another way to help readers follow your argument will be to provide primary source analysis. On pages 3-4, you reference the “old lady” conversation, and other critics takes on it, but you’ll also want to provide your own reading of these passages. Doing so will help you differentiate your reading from theirs, which in turn will help you refine your motive and thesis.
There are a number of promising moments here, Anthony! I look forward to seeing how you develop this paper.

~Ricky

**R3 Comments—to “Anthony” from Ricky Martin**

Dear Anthony,

In this essay, you argue that post-modern scholars’ rediscovery of Ernest Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon* in the 1990s was able to shed new light on the place of this work in the literary and philosophical canon. Critically analyzing academic work as well as a primary source, your paper offers a nuanced interpretation of Hemingway’s work as “containing elements of existentialism” without being properly “existentialist.” Your work shows consistent progress throughout the semester, and your cover letter demonstrates good insights into the research and writing process, which will no doubt serve you well in future courses. Below are some comments to consider moving forward.

**Introduction, Motive, and Thesis:** As presented in your introduction, the motive of your paper consists in trying to determine what historical and critical shifts in Hemingway reception “mean in terms of its place in literature” (2). This motive is set up most effectively, though, on page 9, where you note: “a critical shift takes place, in which *Death in the Afternoon* is seen as the foundation for all his other works rather than an aberration from them.” In this sentence, you dramatize the puzzle that is the impetus for your research, which consists in trying to find an explanation for and analysis of this change. That is, the current introduction *tells* us the motive, but an even stronger version would *show* readers the problem to be solved, by dramatizing it textually. Doing so would help you craft a stronger thesis, since currently your thesis is presented somewhat vaguely: “In the end,” you write, “the postmodern readings of the work suggest that *Death in the Afternoon* blurs the borders between genres as it touches on not only bullfighting, writing, and Hemingway himself, but also on existentialism” (2). The next step would be to highlight your own contribution by differentiating yourself from these writers in your thesis statement the way you do in the body of the essay.

**Evidence, Analysis, and Structure:** Your paper does a nice job with evidence and analysis: you critically engage scholarship and offer your own original analysis of primary texts. Opening phrases such as “here we see that” (4), and “in this quotation” (6), are clear signals of original analysis, and your use of them really works in drawing the reader’s attention to your scholarly voice. If you were to revise further, I’d recommend extending your analysis even further, continuing to elaborate on the significance of what your interpretation of the evidence reveals. Focusing more on implications would help with structure, especially toward the end of the essay, where the readings of Hemingway’s other works appear rather abruptly. Be sure to show the reader what motivates your analysis in a given paragraph: be sure to make clear the argumentative function of each step. You do this well throughout most of the paper, but the trajectory is less clear toward the end.

Overall, this paper is very good and it earns a grade of B+. I look forward to reading your Dean’s Date Assignment!

Best,
Ricky
Dear Cindy,

This paper sets out to extend Gillian Beer’s claim about the optimistic and pessimistic elements in Darwin’s theory: while Beer suggests that authors responded to Darwin by registering these elements, your thesis asserts that *Trumpery* affirms optimism. However, the body of your paper develops a different argument about the characterizations of Wallace and Darwin and the way that the play portrays Wallace as dominant. You really have interesting things to say about Wallace, and I think that we should use your draft conference to figure out how those claims could become the basis for a new thesis.

**motive:** I’m not sure that the claim of Beer’s that this paper should engage with is her claim about optimism and pessimism, and we’ll have to talk this evening about what claim of hers your conclusions about *Trumpery* might challenge or extend. But however you decide to engage with Beer, you’ll want to use your introduction to not only state her argument and your response, but to establish what you see as a problem in her claims, a limitation or shortcoming of her arguments. Doing so will help your reader to see why your argument matters.

**thesis and key terms:** Your thesis claims that *Trumpery* affirms the optimistic viewpoint embodied by Wallace. But the body of your paper does not really discuss optimism vs. pessimism. Instead, the word that recurs is “dominant.” It may be that you could show, more systematically than you do here, how Wallace’s dominance demonstrates Parnell’s affirmation of optimism. I am also interested in your paper’s implications for what Parnell is doing with the struggle for existence in this play—as we’ve noted in class, he presents the relationship between Darwin and Wallace in terms of the competition that is so important to Darwin’s theory. Your paper suggests that although Darwin wins, Parnell presents Wallace as more powerful, physically and emotionally.

**evidence and analysis:** You incorporate a lot of evidence from *Trumpery* into your essay, largely by way of short quotations (which you do a good job of integrating in your sentences). It’s great that you’re working closely with the text of this source. But the problem is that in the first half of your paper especially, this evidence serves to allow you to summarize events of the play and to show how characters are depicted. It does not serve as the basis for analysis—that is, as a basis for arguable claims or surprising insights about Parnell’s text. And, as I’ve said above, the key terms presented by your thesis (optimistic and pessimistic) pretty much disappear from your discussion of events in the play itself.

Where this essay does shift into analysis mode is in the discussion of Wallace and in the comparison of Darwin and Wallace that develops starting around p. 7. Here, you begin to make claims that go beyond what a casual reader of *Trumpery* would notice—such as what you say on pp. 4–5 about the way that Wallace speaks. However, there are many places where you make such claims without fully supporting them with evidence and/or analysis. And in the final page and a half, you quote at length from
Trumpery without saying very much about that quotation: it does seem that these passages could be important for your paper, but remember the 1:2 evidence: analysis ratio if you’re going to include them.

structure: It’s because your paper presents a lot of summary that you feel that the paragraphs don’t build on one another by adding new pieces to your argument. But in order to fix this problem, you’ll need to start by deciding what you want to argue.

I look forward to developing that argument with you in our conference!

All the best,

Anne

R2 Comments—to “Cindy” from Anne DeWitt

Dear Yapei,

This paper builds on Gillian Beer’s theory about the way that literary authors are influenced by the dualities present in Darwin’s work. While Beer suggests that these dualities are also present in literary works, you argue that authors can choose one side of the duality over the other, and you demonstrate that in Trumpery, Peter Parnell affirms optimism over pessimism by showing how Wallace, who represents optimism, comes to dominate Darwin, who represents pessimism.

This paper is doing so many things successfully. The introduction sets out a clear motive and thesis by establishing the status quo (Beer) and explaining how you will challenge and build on Beer’s claims. Then there’s a real sense of progression and development in your argument as you present it over the course of the paper. I’m delighted to see from your cover letter that you worked with a reverse outline (which is like a line-of-thinking) and thought of your paper in sections—those are strategies that can help keep a long essay organized, and definitely something to come back to in the research paper! Finally, and perhaps more strikingly of all, there’s terrific analysis of evidence from Trumpery. Your attention to the details of Parnell’s play is truly impressive, and makes your paper fascinating to read—I learned so much about how Trumpery is constructed. Thus you’ve eliminated summary and presented analysis that’s always relevant (and explicitly connected) to your thesis.

Keep doing all of these things this well in the research paper! My comments about this paper interrogate your motive and argument, and they aim to suggest how you might take your writing to the next level.

First, at moments in reading the body of your paper I found myself—and I think many readers would feel the same way—wanting a return to your motive. That is, while motive is something that must be established in the introduction, the strongest papers
come back to the initial motivating move at key moments in the body of the essay. Another way to put this: Beer is your argument source, and ideally you should return to your argument source in the course of the paper. Often, a good place to do so is in the transitions between sections of the essay. So, for example, when you shift from showing that Wallace=optimism and Darwin=pessimism to showing that Wallace dominates Darwin, you might tell your reader how Beer’s theory would see these two allegorical figures—presumably, it could account for their presence in the play, but not for what Parnell does with them. Another place to come back to an argument source is in the final body paragraphs. On pp. 7–8, for example, you show that Parnell’s Darwin chooses to see the beauty of nature—whereas in Beer’s view (and maybe in the actual Darwin’s work) beauty and struggle always exist simultaneously.

It’s possible that it would have been easier to bring Beer back more frequently if your initial definition of your key terms made clear that that definition is also, essentially, the one that she uses. A second issue regarding key terms: they largely disappear from the discussion of how Parnell shows Wallace to be dominant. This may leave the reader wondering—is Wallace’s dominance a product of his optimism? Is there a cause-and-effect dynamic here that’s not being fully described? A related question may arise with respect to Darwin’s transformation at the end of the play: how does Wallace convert him? What happens in that conversation between them that changes how Darwin sees the world? Maybe the way to put this into more general terms is to say that this final scene of Trumpery, as the culminating piece of evidence for your argument, deserves more analysis that it receives.

Despite these issues, this paper is a real accomplishment, Yapei. I look forward to seeing how you’ll build on these achievements in the research paper!

All the best,

Anne

Grade: A-
D3 Comments—to “Kim” from Andrea Mazzariello

Dear Kim,

Your paper is full of quite elegant, specific, rigorous musical observation! You clearly have great ears and a sophisticated musical vocabulary; the question is how one deploys these skills to argumentative ends.

You articulated a particular motive in your cover letter, namely the ability of text-free music to convey political or narrative messages. This is the beginning of the answer to the ‘who cares?’ question. As it stands, though, there isn’t much in the paper that would indicate this larger concern and, further, the complexity of the question isn’t really engaged. I think there’s a whole lot to say about this sort of approach, and this can lock very nicely into thesis as you continue to develop your thinking. Speaking of thesis, it’s currently very general and slippery; in fact I’m not really sure what the overall argument might be. Taking up this question of music and narrative or the idea of ‘mickey mousing’ which I talk about in my marginal commentary might really lead somewhere promising.

In terms of evidence and analysis, I am quite enthusiastic, as I said repeatedly, about the depth of your musical description! The issue for your reader is going to be to what ends these excellent observations are deployed. This is really a thesis issue more than an evidence/analysis issue. Once you have a singular argument, you can invoke it in your analyses and interpretations; that way we won’t feel as though these musical moments are floating in uninterpreted space. For your revision, try to make the moments you’ve focused on really work for you in argumentative terms. While this will take some thinking about your overall concerns, putting some pressure on the moments you’ve chosen might prove productive in terms of figuring out what those concerns might be.

Your paper would likewise benefit from a different approach to sources. Right now there isn’t any sort of theoretical source underpinning the argument; this is partly responsible for the sense that there are no anchors to observation/interpretation. As I said in the marginal commentary, looking into some scholarship on music and narrative could be really helpful to you. Specifically, what do scholars say about the pitfalls and benefits of musical narrative, of ‘literal’ depiction of events in musical terms? This would be a nice area of exploration for you.

I’m looking forward to talking through this with you, and to seeing how your thinking develops!

All best,

Andrea
R3 Comments—to “Kim” from Andrea Mazzariello

Dear Kim,

Your paper argues that Terence Blanchard’s *A Tale of God’s Will: A Requiem for Katrina* does something quite profound; while Blanchard steeps the music in narrative, the presence of this program never blunts the spontaneity of the music and never prevents it from being taken on its own terms.

**Motive** was nicely staged, both in terms of what the text itself is doing (i.e., that there’s an internal mystery that needs to be resolved) as well as the way this text relates to a scholarly point of interest. On the latter, I wanted for a bit more reference to these scholarly voices as the paper progressed; they were certainly effective as framing devices, but could have had an even greater impact were they given some space to breathe, reinvoked. **Thesis** was also strongly stated, though I wondered a little bit about the ‘new standard for jazz music’ language. There was definitely opportunity to be even more specific about what sort of innovation this might constitute.

Your **evidence and analysis** was superb with respect to the way you handled musical observation and interpretation. It was obvious from the draft that you have great ears, but besides the ability to recognize what’s going on, the paper makes nice interpretive moves throughout based on this excellent observational capacity. As I said above, I think it would have been really nice to apply this keen eye to some of the scholarly literature that you used to stage the argument; some close reading on par with the level of detail of the musical observation/analysis would have gone a long way.

With respect to **key words**, there were a lot of very big concepts (authenticity, narrative, etc.) that were being utilized in the paper, and a reader might have appreciated some time and space dedicated to defining them (provisionally, since getting a definitive ‘meaning’ is going to be pretty impossible!)

Finally, I wanted to say a quick word about **structure**. I really like the way this paper was set up. You’re able to create an intensifying argument through the way you’ve chosen and laid out your examples. They build throughout from a subtle programmatic content to an almost ‘mickey-moused’ example, so you’re able to refine and develop your argument in a way that’s really satisfying for the reader.

This is such a huge improvement over the draft, and your best paper to date. Way to end on a really high note!

Grade: A-

All best,

Andrea