

**Essay Directions #1:**  
**Close Reading Exercise on Characterization**

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**English 201 (Dr. Wheeler's Classes)**

**Due Date:** Thursday, January 26th by 4:30 p.m.

**Length:** 2-4 full pages, not counting the Works Cited page.

**The Problem of Characterization:** Most readers are familiar with the idea of characterization. An author can characterize the imaginary beings she creates through three principle methods: (1) **dialogue**, or what the character says or what others say about the character; (2) **action**, or what the character does; and (3) **description**, or what details the author or narrator provides about that character. Characterization shapes our reactions as readers; it can be positive or negative, sympathetic or repulsive, simple or complex.

Characterization can become a point of argument. For instance, we might argue that Polyphemus the Cyclops in *The Odyssey* appears on the surface to be a very different creature than the humans he encounters (and eats). Does Homer treat him as a foil, a cannibalistic contrast with the civilized Greeks? Or since the Cyclops speaks Greek, tames other animals, and uses tools, is Homer suggesting that the monstrous Polyphemus is somehow equivalent or similar to Odysseus and his crew in some horrific way? Is he merely an evil brute? Or is he somehow sympathetic?

**Your Objective:** In this very short paper, you will examine closely how Homer characterizes the Cyclops. How does he want his audience to react to this character? You might wish to focus on a specific scene, a bit of conversation, a particular action, or a particular section of description. You will then analyze that material very closely, as if with a magnifying glass, to gather your textual evidence, and you will quote particular words or lines as evidence to support your interpretation.

You will then present an argument about the Cyclops' characterization. This argument will be your thesis (the one-sentence statement of your position) in enthymeme format. Students who have had English 101 should know about enthymemes. If you did not take English 101 at Carson-Newman College, an enthymeme is a sentence containing two clauses—one clause asserting the argument itself and the other clause presenting evidence to support that claim.

Here are some examples of such theses in enthymeme format that could be the building blocks of a hypothetical essay. (You don't have to use these

yourself—these are just some examples to give you an idea of what I'm looking for):

- *Homer uses description in the first encounter to characterize Polyphemus as frightening because he wants us to admire Odysseus' bravery in overcoming such a scary opponent.*
- *Since the Cyclops has Greek invaders break into his house and steal his food, Homer clearly wants to characterize the Cyclops as an innocent victim injured unjustly by the Greeks before he seeks revenge.*
- *In the scene where the Cyclops eats his meal, The Odyssey employs description that characterizes the Cyclops as disgusting; accordingly, Homer wants the reader to root for Odysseus and scorn the nasty Cyclops.*
- *Polyphemus' dialogue with Odysseus illustrates how clever the monster is because Odysseus would have no opportunity to display his own intelligence without engaging in a battle of wits with a similar trickster.*
- *The scene describing the lifestyle of the Cyclopean race is important to understanding since it characterizes all the monsters negatively by emphasizing their barbarism.*

**Length:** This short essay must be at least two *full* pages in length, with a maximum of four, not counting a separate Works Cited page. You may choose only fonts like Times or Times New Roman at font size 12. I will dock essays short of this length by a few lines a full letter grade. Essays that fall short of the minimum by more than a half-page will fail automatically.

**Format:** Each essay should be typed or word-processed on high quality paper (no onion-skin paper or semi-transparent bond paper, please). Aim for a professional appearance. The essay should be written in the Modern Language Association format (MLA). You might find it useful to peruse pages 80-91 of *Writing at Carson-Newman College* for a brief overview. Do not use a separate title page for MLA-formatted assignments.

The body of your essay should be double-spaced and left-margin justified rather than fully justified (i.e., your right-side margin will be "ragged" rather than straight). Maintain one-inch margins all around the essay. On every page *including the first*, insert a header with your last name and the page number. By viewing "header" on most word-processors, you can set up your document automatically to include such a header on each page.

In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, please include the following material double-spaced and flush against the left margin: your name, your teacher's name, the course including the meeting time in parentheses, and the due date (not necessarily the date you finished the work). See this example:

Jane Doe  
Professor Wheeler  
English 201-G  
26 January 2012

After typing this material in the upper left-hand side of the first page, you should double-space and center the title of your composition. Be original. Be memorable. Make your title count. Note that the title of your own unpublished essay need not be underlined, italicized, or placed within quotation marks. Follow normal MLA conventions for capitalization.

#### **Work Cited or Works Cited:**

You should not do any outside research for this first essay except possibly consult dictionary entries for specific words that you want to define (if your argument hinges on some point about diction). However, you *must* include a Work Cited page in MLA format and an entry for Homer's *Odyssey* as it appears in our textbook. Here is a sample entry:

Work Cited:

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. *Literature in Context: Classicism, Middle Ages, and Renaissance*. Ed. Gerald Wood, et al. Revised edition. Vol. 1. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2004. 6-56. 2 vols.

Note that if you cited multiple entries, the title would change to "Works Cited" with a plural form, and you would alphabetize each entry by author's last name. MLA format also requires the usual header and page number on the Works Cited page, just like every other page in the essay.

#### **Final Reminders:**

(1) Grammar, mechanics, and neatness count. Because faulty grammar leads to miscommunication and sloppiness detracts from the essay's impact, your grammar, mechanics, and neatness are in many ways inseparable from content.

(2) Since you will probably use a word-processor, remember to use the spell-checker but also proofread visually. Your paper should be completely free of spelling errors.

(3) *I will not accept papers that are not paper-clipped or stapled together. Dog-earing copies together is unacceptable.*

(4) Note that when citing epic poetry, in the parenthetical citation itself you will cite not by the page number by the book number and line number. For instance, if you were citing the opening line of the poem, you would not cite them as (6) for page six in the textbook, but you would cite the opening line as (1.1) to indicate Book I, line 1.

Furthermore, to capture the line breaks in the poetry, if you have a short quotation of three lines or fewer, you will indicate line breaks by inserting a virgule or slash (/) between lines. If the quotation is four lines or longer, use "block format" in which you indent the material a full inch (2 tabs) inward on the left side and reproduce the text and line structure as closely as you can to how it appears in your textbook.

(5) Verb tense can be especially tricky in discussing classical literature. The convention is to use the present tense when discussing a character's actions or events in literature. For instance, "In Act I, Hamlet discovers his uncle has married in his mother. In Act II, his earlier confrontation with the ghost leads him to consider how best to test his mother's loyalty."