Narrative Criticism Essay Assignment
(Writing Race and Class, ENAM/WRPR 0288)

Narrative Criticism is a genre of essay in which a writer does a close reading of a text through the lens of personal experience. You will write a 6-8 page narrative criticism that will undergo several drafts/revisions. The narrative you write should have something to do with race/ethnicity and/or socioeconomic class, and be intersectional in its approach.

First, choose a short story (preferably) or perhaps a poem that resonates for you. Think about what it is that you resonate with. Notice what lines or elements of the text stand out. Interpret/closely read those lines within the context of the text.

Now, consider what aspect(s) of your life experience inform your interpretation/understanding of those lines. Where do you connect up with the text? What particular story/experience of yours can you recall/examine to illuminate your own and another person’s understanding of the text?

In writing your narrative, go back and forth between the text and your own story (some people do this more rapidly and some more slowly—trust your own sense of rhythm and/or experiment). You can start with either the text or with your own story. But be sure to keep exploring the intersections. Also remember to work closely with the writer’s use of language; what do specific words bring to mind? Why?

Delve deep into a reading of the text via your story while being aware and respectful of differences in context (your context and the story’s context). Use your space wisely so that you can provide an ambitious reading of the text and still have room to take us into your own story. Don’t assume that we know anything about you. Don’t assume that your readers know your age or where you go to school, etc. You should be writing to a larger audience than myself and/or the class.

When introducing the text, you can be somewhat distant and authorial, as in “so and so’s short story, xxx, focuses on...” and/or you can situate your reading of the text in place and time as in, “recently, while sitting in a café, I read “xxx” by “xxx” for the first time, and...” Or, “during the cold and rainy month of January I read a story for a class that made me think about/remember...” Your tone can change in your piece, so that at times you are more formal and other times more casual. Let yourself experiment with voice. Be creative. Use fresh, vivid language, metaphors, dialogue, etc. You can focus most on language in revision. At first, get a draft down. Then revise for the larger shape of the piece and its meaning. Then you can refine and craft the details of your piece.
**Workshop Questions** for first draft of this assignment; students read one another’s texts and responded to the following questions (I sent questions out by email to the small groups and they exchanged texts via the same email; I sometimes hand out slips of paper with these same questions during workshop)

- what did you most like/love about this piece of writing thus far? (note at least 3 *specific* things, concisely--highlights are fine)
- what, so far, would you say the piece is *about*? (hazard a 4-6 word topic description)
- how would you *describe* the writers voice, or narrative persona? (jot down a few observations)
- how did the piece make you *feel* as a reader? and/or what did it make you *think/wonder/reflect* about? (emotional or cognitive, either/both)
- what are you hoping to *learn* more about? (tangibles and intangibles)

**Syllabus Excerpt** (for larger context of the assignment, how they built up to it)

Monday, Jan. 6
Introduction to the Course

*Read:*
“Shooting An Elephant,” by George Orwell
“Here Be Dragons,” by James Baldwin
“Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan
“How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” by Gloria Anzaldua

*Write:*
Jot down some observations about the *narrative persona* of Orwell and/or Baldwin; also jot down some observations about the *relationship between time and story structure* in the two essays (1-2 pages, informal).
For the other two readings, on writing, take notes/highlight key points.

Wednesday, Jan. 8
Discuss essays

*Read:*
excerpts from *Zami*, by Audre Lorde
“Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation,” by Toni Morrison
“The Situation and the Story,” by Vivian Gornick

*Write:*
A short scene (nonfiction, fiction, or biomythography), or a poem, with an ancestor in it (1 page, informal)

Note: Angela Davis Reading Group, 4:30-6 pm, Orchard Room
Thursday, Jan. 9
Discuss assigned essays

Read:
excerpt from *White Like Me*, by Tim Wise
“The Complexity of Identity,” by Beverly Tatum

Attend:
Angela Davis Keynote, 7-9 pm, Mead Chapel

Friday, Jan. 10
Discuss readings and Davis keynote

Read:
“Dear John Wayne,” by Louise Erdrich
“First Writing Since,” by Suheir Hammad
“America,” by Tea
“Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink,” by Gloria Anzaldua

Write:
A 2-3 page formal paper that explores an aspect of race/ethnicity/class in one or more of the above poems. Do not summarize or attempt to analyze/discuss everything in a given poem. Focus, choose your angle. But situate your discussion within the larger sociopolitical context of the poem and be observant of literary elements: the speaker’s position and voice, figurative language, image, tone, irony, word choice, punctuation, structure etc. This paper does not require a long intro and/or conclusion, but does require a thesis up front and a brief “so what” at the end. Be sure to annotate the poem first and then do some pre-writing so that you can use your space well in the formal draft. This paper should be revised and proofread, 12 pt. font, double-spaced, typed and stapled. I suggest you spread this over two days, even though you should be able to write it in 2-4 hours, including everything from annotation to proofreading.

Also write:
An informal response to one of the poems that explores/discusses how it affects you personally. What do you “relate to” or not, in the poem? What questions does it raise for you? How does it challenge, affirm, complicate ideas/perceptions that you have or have had? (1-2 pages)

*Catharine Wright, Writing Program, Middlebury College, 2014*