**Sample Arc of Writing Assignments**

(in *Outlaw Women*, GSFS/WRPR 0303, a writing-intensive class)

Informal Response Papers

I describe informal (low stakes) responses as “thinking on the page,” “writing to think/learn.” In my classes informal responses are graded on content only; mechanics (spelling, grammar, etc.) aren’t evaluated. I provide minimal but critical feedback and give responses a check, check plus, or check minus. These informal interactions in the first half of the semester give me the chance to identify and quickly respond to concerns (students not responding to prompts, students not thinking analytically enough). They prepare students to think and write in the genres that inform upcoming formal assignments. And finally, they foster early student-professor trust and communication. Below are three out of the six responses I assign before midterm. After midterm, I no longer assign informal responses (I can’t keep up at that point!); informal work after midterm consists of pre-writing and drafts (note: this is for a writing intensive class, not a larger class).

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Early Informal Response prompt** (handed out in hard copy)

1. What are you most struck by in these first three chapters of the novel? (answer in 2-4 sentences)

2. Write about a particular image that stands out to you. Examine its relationship to place(s), local and/or global. What does the image suggest about a particular figure or relationship and/or what questions does it raise? Note: precisely quote the image or description in your response (embed/incorporate it), reflecting on word choice, tone, etc. so that you practice *close observation* and *critical reflection* in your writing-- a “close reading” of the text.

This is a 1-page double-spaced response, due in class Thursday.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Informal Response prompt** (posted on Canvas)

Write a page that explores/discusses a particular performance of sex and/or gender by a particular character in *The Pagoda* (chapters 4-9). If you want and have time to trace the character's performance across situations/scenes, please do. You may want to draw on or develop these observations later in a formal paper.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Informal Response prompt** (posted on Canvas)

1. Frydman argues that though The Pagoda initially appears to model itself on U.S. based ethnic literary texts, it departs from that model in several important ways. Identify at least one way in which The Pagoda mirrors or subscribes to U.S. based identity politics, and at least two ways in which it supersedes that "model." Then, in just 1-2 sentences, say something about your response to this article.

2. Write a few lines about the other critical article that you opted to read (from the list on the syllabus). What did the author argue and what did you think? This whole response (answers to questions 1 & 2) should be roughly equivalent to one double-spaced page.

(Note to faculty: there are several more response prompts in the first half of the semester of this class that I don’t include in this handout, as well as an informal 3-page critical narrative)

Formal Writing Assignments

**Essay # 1, Critical Literary Analysis**

In this 5-7 page paper you will engage in a focused discussion of one or both of the novels we have read thus far. Below are topics to choose from (or create your own). These are formal essays in which you should explore and develop possible interpretations based on evidence you collect from the text(s) and on engagement with the secondary literature. As these are literary essays, you should engage in a close reading of particular moments in the texts that are not the same as examples discussed in class or found in the assigned articles (if you need to refer to evidence mentioned in the articles, cite it as “qtd. in”). Whether you discuss one novel or both, you should provide context for your readers, including attention to geographies, time frames, sociopolitical landscapes, flows of people and goods. Much of this can be accomplished in your introduction and perhaps a body paragraph. Introduce characters briefly wherever they are first named, as in, “Liz, Lowe’s daughter,” and situate textual evidence and discussion of moments/scenes within the larger chronology of the books. You will have a chance to meet with me in conference and get feedback on your ideas or draft. Your essay should be written with care, edited and proofread (see handout on drafting, revising and proofreading). Your papers should have engaging titles, be double spaced, have page numbers, and use 12 pt. font. Use MLA style citation (in-text and works cited).

*Paper topics (there is some overlap in the topics; choose whichever angles/words speak to you):*

Explore the politics of sex in one or more scenes in either *The Pagoda* or *The Lover* or both. Consider the assigned sex of those involved as well as their performance of sex/gender. You might focus on the act of sex between people (or not). What is *at stake* in these scenes, and why/how does it matter in the larger context of the book(s)? Be sure to be intersectional in your approach to politics of sex, considering race, class, age, nationality, and disjunctures of diaspora as appropriate.

How do race/ethnicity/geography/ability/sexuality mediate the experiences of different women? How do acts of transgression, or being an “outlaw,” relate to experiences of trauma, loss and/or healing, and/or to experiences of alliance or solidarity?

Compare several figures of “outlaw women” in either/both of the books, identifying one or more transgressive/illegal acts to focus on and explore. What acts of transgression involve choice and what are acts of survival? How do you distinguish? In what ways do national, transnational and/or colonial systems inform the formation and/or dissolution of these acts? How do the acts inform the social status of the character, what do the characters gain and/or lose? What do your findings suggest about the idea of “outlaws” and/or “outlaw women”?

If queerness is to denaturalize the body (meaning that the body does not innately/naturally perform gender/sexuality along particular lines, but that such lines are socially constructed) in what ways are *The Pagoda* and/or *The Lover* queer works of fiction? You might think somewhat broadly here or you might focus on a few instances. What do the critics we’ve read say about this topic, and do you agree? Are there any limits to a queer reading of the text(s)?

Thinking about sexual desire, explore the relationship between Jason Frydman’s “anticolonial…queer desire…” as seen in *The Pagoda*, and Karen Reddy’s “colonial desire” as seen in *The Lover*. Do you agree with either or both of Frydman’s and Reddy’s arguments? Are their theories complementary, do they describe opposite kinds of desire? Does anything in the books trouble the distinction?

How do either or both of the novels represent the act of writing? What does writing mean to specific character(s)/narrator(s)/social group(s) in the book(s)? How do you read these fictionalized preoccupations with or representations of writing in relation to Powell and/or Duras’s projects as authors? Consider individual, collective and/or global angles when considering acts of writing and writer’s projects.

Consider the use of “costumes,” drag, clothing in the two novels. Do a close read of selected scenes to explore particular costumes/outfits in relation to the larger narratives. What are differences between trans, queer and/or prescribed performances of dress? You might think not just of gender and sex but of nation, age, race/ethnicity, etc.

One of the things that feminist transnational lenses attend to is how colonialism has impacted the lives of different social groups. How are either or both novels transnational in their approaches, and to what effect? What emerges in the interstices? What are the differences and commonalities across the affected groups that are represented?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\*The second formal assignment for this class is a research presentation (ask me if you’d like to see that assignment which calls for research written up in note form, not a formal essay)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Formal Essay #2, Narrative Criticism or Critical Narrative**

Narrative Criticism is a genre of essay in which a writer does a *close reading of a text through the lens of personal experience*. Critical narrative is more generally *a narrative that takes a critical approach* to its topic (in our case drawing on feminist, anti-racist, queer, transnational/global, anti-ableist perspectives). A critical narrative might not do a close read of a particular text (particular passages or imagery or a change in character, etc.) as much as engage with the ideas of several texts (not that narrative criticism can’t also refer to other texts, but it usually focuses on a close read of one). In this last formal assignment for class you will write a 10-14 page *narrative criticism*, or the same length *critical narrative*, that will undergo several drafts/revisions.

You might start by choosing a work or works of fiction or nonfiction that we’ve read that resonate for you in some way and that you have not yet or not sufficiently discussed in a formal paper. Think about what it is that you resonate with. Look for situations and ideas and/or lines, elements (characters, dialogue, setting, imagery, themes, etc.) in the text that stand out. Do a close read and/or think about those lines/elements/ideas within the context of the larger text.

Before, after, or simultaneously, consider some aspect(s) of your own experience that inform your interpretation/understanding of your selected text(s). Where do you connect up with (including contrast with) the text(s)? What particular story/experience/location of yours can you recall/narrate/investigate to illuminate your own and your readers understanding of the text(s) and/or the ideas raised by the text(s)? The point here is not that your experience needs to *match* the text, though in some cases that might be the case; you are exploring stories/situations (yours and the text) in relation to one another without a prescription for what that relationship is; think of the relationship as more of a question.

In drafting your narrative, go back and forth between the text(s) and your own story (some people do this more rapidly and some more slowly—trust your own sense of rhythm and experiment). You can open your piece with introducing something about a text or with your own story. Sometimes people open by writing a moment they encountered or re-encountered the text. Be sure to keep exploring the intersections between what you’ve read and what you’ve personally experienced or not. Especially if you are writing a narrative criticism, but even if not, work closely with the use of language in the text(s) with which you engage.

Delve deep into a reading/understanding/development of the text(s) via your personal story while being respectful of and transparent about *differences in context* (your personal context and the context of the text(s)). Use your space wisely so that you can provide an ambitious reading/understanding/discussion of the text(s) 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 are from or where you go to school, etc. You should be writing to a larger audience than myself and/or the class.

When introducing a text, you can be somewhat distant and authorial, as in “so and so’s novel or essay, xxx, focuses on…,” or, “feminist authors seem to be preoccupied with…,” and/or, as mentioned, you can situate your reading of a particular text in place and time as in, “recently, while sitting in the Middlebury College library, I read “xxx” by “xxx” for the first time, and…” Or, “during the month of March in Vermont, when it snowed and rained and occasionally the sun shone, I read a novel/essay 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.

A few other comments about drafting and outcomes. Your narrative should be both intellectually engaging and sensually (taste, touch, smell, sound, sight) evocative. In other words, you should take on an intellectually interesting/ambitious topic/question and also explore the sensual dynamics of place, people, etc. You might find yourself stronger in one area or the other in the early stages of imagining/drafting your piece. Especially early on, let yourself *experiment with both ideas and voice*. Along the way at different points, step back and think about strategies presented by Gornick’s piece on narrative. What are your “mixed feelings” about the situation in your life and the situation in the text(s)? What specific aspect(s) of your life are you drawing on to create your narrative persona? You obviously have no control over your race/ethnicity, your designated sex at birth, etc., but other aspects of your life are ones that you may be in the process of forging (your political/social/sex and gender/intellectual/national/global orientations, etc.) Any one of these might be the leader in considering what part or parts of you are primarily called upon to narrate this essay. Of course you will be intersectional too.

Writing Process:

* Regarding genre, see sample student narratives and re-visit *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.
* Brainstorm and draft a range of ideas for a paper topic, then focus on a few, get feedback
* Choose your topic, brainstorm more
* Read/write/think, get part of a draft down
* Get feedback
* Develop, revise, first for the larger shape of the piece and its meaning
* Revise further, pushing yourself to deepen and sharpen your ideas and to use fresh, vivid language, metaphors, dialogue, etc., refining and crafting the details of your piece

Narratives should be typed and double spaced and use MLA in-text citations and works cited.

Timeline:

* paper topic ideas are due on Canvas **by 8 pm** **Tues, 4/10** (see guidelines on Canvas)
* pre-writing/notes and a paragraph due on Canvas by **Thurs, 4/20** (see guidelines)
* 2-4 pages are due on Canvas & to workshop group (by email) either the **22nd or 24th** (we’ll discuss)
* 8-10 developed/revised pages due by email 6 pm **Mon, 4/30**
* full draft due by email 6 pm **Monday, 5/7** (or anytime after your conference)
* final revised draft along with your informal course and self-evaluation due in Chellis House, 5 pm, **Thurs, May 18**