

Practicing Literary Criticism Essay

Overview:

Throughout the semester, we have discussed some of the many different types of evidence that literary critics use to develop interpretations of texts. These include:

- the text itself (focusing on style and formal elements in particular),
- other texts (such as texts in related genres, texts written by the same author, texts written during the same period, etc.)
- documents relating to the author's life and writing (like journals, correspondence, etc.),
- documents relating to historical and cultural contexts (having to do with particular historical happenings or with social conventions and cultural understandings relating to gender, race, class, etc.)
- readers' responses (whether the recorded responses of individual readers or the documentation of broader trends in how a text has been received over time)
- the material text (including the book as object, paratexts, and textual variations)

For the **final essay (6 pages)**, you will build on the critical reading and writing skills you have practiced this semester to develop your own work of literary and cultural criticism. Your essay should advance a clear, overarching argument about *Little Women* that draws on at least one of the above types of evidence beyond the first (the text itself). The essay should also incorporate at least two scholarly sources.

Remember, you might think about a primary source as a source constituting the “raw” data or evidence that you're interpreting. A secondary source is a source that helps you think about the evidence that you're interpreting. Often, we draw on secondary sources, like scholarly sources, to position our interpretations in conversation with others.

In developing a topic, think about the readings and discussions we've had about *Little Women* this semester, and ask yourself the following questions:

- What have we (and the critics we've read) tended to agree on about the text?
- What have we tended to disagree on?
- What have we tended to focus on?
- What have we ignored?

Based on your answers to these questions, consider how you might enter ongoing conversations about *Little Women*. How might you complicate where critics have agreed? develop your own interpretation about what critics have tended to disagree on? or make the case for the significance of something that has been overlooked?

Process:

You'll prepare an **annotated bibliography** that identifies, describes, and evaluates 3-4 potential scholarly sources for your essay (either peer-reviewed journal articles or chapters in books by academic presses). For each source, the bibliography should provide a full and correct citation, followed by a description (150-200 words) of the nature of the source, what about the source will be useful to your research, and how you might incorporate it in your essay.

Later, you will submit a **draft of the essay for peer review**, and you'll be expected to read and respond thoughtfully to the drafts of two peers.

After submitting the essay, you will submit a brief **reflection post** (200 words) describing what came easily and what you struggled with during the writing process and how you met those struggles. The reflection post should incorporate one quotation—properly cited—from your essay along with a Works Cited page.

Relevant frames:

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Students deconstruct the perceived authority of literary author and text by situating the study of the text's linguistic and formal elements (the elements of literary analysis, traditionally conceived) in relation to contexts of the text's production, circulation, and reception.

Information has Value

Students focus on giving credit to the original ideas of others by practicing proper attribution and citation through the preparation of an annotated bibliography and in the draft and revised essay. In addition, as part of the reflection post at the end of the assignment, students must incorporate at least one quotation from their essay, document that quotation, and prepare a citation for their writing. Citing their own work—and having their work reviewed by others in the peer review process—positions students as not just consumers but also producers of information.

Research as Inquiry

Students formulate their own research questions within the parameters of the assignment by synthesizing ideas gathered from primary and secondary sources examined during the semester. In addition, students integrate sources relating to at least two different methods of literary criticism. In the concluding reflection post, students consider their successes and struggles during the writing process and the strategies they developed to meet the challenges of the assignment.

Scholarship as Conversation

In developing a topic, students reflect on what our class and the critics we studied tend to agree on, disagree on, focus on, and ignore about the text. By considering how they might want to complicate where critics have agreed, contribute to debate surrounding a disagreement, or make the case for the significance of something that has been overlooked, students conceive of themselves as participants in a scholarly conversation. Students cite the work of others in developing their essays by incorporating at least two scholarly sources. During peer review, students post written feedback on one another's drafts and discuss that feedback in conversation.