

Essay 1 Assignment Sheet: New Criticism

Donath — English 102

For your first assignment you will assume the role of a New Critic, using the literary “lens” of New Critical theory to explicate one of the works below. In other words, you'll have a chance to do some poetic detective work of your own—analyzing the patterns of language that combine to make a literary work of art appealing to the ear and the intellect. How do various poetic elements combine, and to what effect? Your essay should first *briefly* introduce the surface-level characteristics of the work that are readily apparent—describe the setting, characters (or speaker/addressee), plot, etc. Then explore the poem's language, theme, and structure to show how the poetic devices function together to create intricate layers of meaning.

Assignment:

Write a four-to-five page essay on one of works listed below. Read the work closely, and, without reference to outside sources, analyze the structure of the text in detail. In so doing, make an overall claim about what the poetic devices achieve. (This can be a straightforward statement asserting that the poetic devices do in fact create a complex work of art!) Remember that while there are many facets of meaning in a text, not all analyses are tenable; be sure to provide evidence from the text to back up your claim(s). Also, since you will need to quote from the work in order to present evidence, refer to MLA guidelines for citation and Works Cited format. You may choose one of the following poems:

“Primal Sun, Primal Moon” by Fred Dings (*WAC* p56)

“Forgiving My Father” by Lucille Clifton (*Texts* p50-51)

“My Papa’s Waltz,” by Theodore Roethke (*Lit.* p762)

“Spring and Fall,” by Gerard Manly Hopkins (*Lit.* p867)

Important Dates:

- **W 1/29: Bring to class a completed journal entry with an explication of the piece you chose. Provide a thesis, along with reasons for your claim, and supporting textual evidence.**
- **F 1/31: Come to class with the first three paragraphs of your paper—typed!**
- **M 2/3: Essay 1.1 due at the beginning of class.**
- **W 2/12: Essay 1.2 due (highlight or underline changes/additions; staple original draft on back).**

- **READ CLOSELY and READ OFTEN** (*See the hand-out “How to Read Poetry” for general tips*). 1) Read it aloud. 2) Read again, and again, jotting notes in the margins. 3) Sketch out the patterns you observe. 4) Ask questions about those patterns and suggest possible answers. 5) Create an outline, including a thesis statement, for how you might organize your essay.
- Remember, New Criticism values unity—what does the poet do to create a seamless, unified work of art? Is it a theme, an overarching metaphor, something else?
- New Criticism also values *complexity*—are there tensions or ambiguities that complicate the poem’s meaning? What elements of the language lend the poem complexity?
- Use the handout on poetic terms (or pp 475-498 in your anthology) as a guide for what poetic devices to look for in the text. Refer to the sample explications that are provided in your textbook(s) and in *WAC* as models for your first essay.
- Finally, remember that New Critics value the work and the work alone—don’t use any outside material to write this essay. A New Critic would say you don’t need it.