

ADVANCED PLACEMENT LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION  
SUMMER ASSIGNMENT 2011: WHAT DO WE NEED FOR SURVIVAL?

AP LITERATURE & COMPOSITION HAS THREE ASSIGNMENTS, DUE SEQUENTIALLY OVER THE COURSE  
OF THE SUMMER.

ASSIGNMENT #1: NARRATIVE, STORY-TELLING, AND ITS USES  
(OR, “WHAT’S THE USE OF STORIES THAT AREN’T EVEN TRUE?”)

BOOKS: *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel; *Slaughterhouse-5*, or *The Children’s Crusade*; Kurt Vonnegut

I was in need of a story. More than that, I was in need of a Story. Something that would direct my life.

...

My novel is about the line between fiction and fact. It is about how we interpret reality, right? Reality isn't just out there; it's how we interpret it.—Yann Martel, from an interview with Ray Suarez of National Public Radio

If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams.—from the Introduction to *Life of Pi*

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All this happened, more or less. (opening sentence)

...

That was me. That was I. That was the author of this book. (repeated)

—Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-5*

All stories are a sort of contract between the author and the reader: writers are expected to produce an engaging and accessible version of reality which may ultimately be revelatory of some truth of human character or experience; readers are expected to look for clues as to the author’s purpose, and to follow details carefully, in their quest for understanding the story’s messages. Both *Life of Pi* and *Slaughterhouse-5* deal with the border between fiction and fact, the way in which in telling a story about something that has happened we inevitably shape and transform it. Martel and Vonnegut are both interested in what the reader’s reaction to the story reveals about our expectations. How can one story be “better” than others?

As the availability of “information” multiplies, we are expected more and more to know how to judge the truth of a story for ourselves, and to acknowledge that much around us is a construction—one person’s view of reality, filtered, rather than an “objective truth.” Because literature is an art, its purpose is not simply to tell us what happened. As a result, many fiction writers—like Flannery O’Connor—have argued that a deliberately distorted narrative reveals more about reality than any attempt to be “realistic.” Why?

- What makes us expect to find “truth” in what is obviously made up? Are reality and truth the same?
- How is it that we trust and expect truth from a narrator whom we know is not real?
- What expectations do we bring to any reading? What happens when our expectations are undermined or challenged?

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ASSIGNMENT #1 (CONTINUED):

NARRATIVE, STORY-TELLING, AND ITS USES

(OR, "WHAT'S THE USE OF STORIES THAT AREN'T EVEN TRUE?")

Books: *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel; *Slaughterhouse-5*, or *The Children's Crusade*, Kurt Vonnegut

**ASSIGNMENT:**

Start a reading journal. After each reading session, jot the date, the time you read, and the pages you read and write down your responses. Start with your reading EXPERIENCE. This is your 'pre-critical' response and should freely explore your impressions, emotional responses and questions. This is the key to AP Lit. This is 'writing to understand' NOT writing to explain. No interpretation, no plot summary. Not yet.

Now go back over what you read that day/night and throw down a post-it for any passage that connects to either of the three questions on the first page. Write on the post-it how it connects. If you have a big response to a passage and see it as potentially useful for your essay, you may explore that in your journal but first write in your journal MOVING ON TO INTERPRETATION for that day's entry.

After you have read both books, creating a trail of post-its that will answer and support your ideas about the three questions, write a MAXIMUM three-page paper in which you address the following, using specific evidence from each novel:

**Analyze and compare each author's sometimes unconventional methods of story-telling:**

- the use of humor;
- the presentation of alternative versions of traumatic events;
- the frame in which each author presents his book as "a true story";
- the improbable/"fantastical" plot turns;
- the insertion of the author's persona into the events of the narrative.

**How do these methods establish and explore the purpose of art as a means of offering a "better" story than the truth?**

**What is the purpose of imagination? How does it enable us to make sense of events that are otherwise unbearable?**

**What can we learn through symbol, metaphor, and the "fantastic," that we cannot through fact?**

THE ESSAY ASSIGNMENT MUST BE SUBMITTED TO ME VIA EMAIL BY JULY 31<sup>ST</sup>.

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I WILL RESPOND BY SENDING YOU THE 2<sup>ND</sup> PART OF THE SUMMER ASSIGNMENT  
BASED ON BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE*.

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ASSIGNMENT #2: PERSPECTIVE, MORALITY, SIN

*The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver

**ASSIGNMENT:** Using the study questions below as your guide, read *The Poisonwood Bible*, marking significant passages with post-its or if you purchase your texts, I encourage you to write in them. Once again begin by make entries in your reading journals - “writing to understand” - immediately after reading explore your impressions, emotional responses and questions. THEN move on to writing to explain. Look over the study questions – pick one for that day – and find passages that work well in helping you to a complex reading of the text. Write “MOVING ON TO INTERPRETATION” to separate the two forms of writing for that day’s entry.

**Study questions**

1. How does Kingsolver present the double themes of *captivity* and *freedom* and of *love* and *betrayal*? What kinds of captivity and freedom does she explore? What kinds of love and betrayal? What are the causes and consequences of each kind of captivity, freedom, love, and betrayal?
2. There are numerous references to sight/eyes in *Poisonwood Bible*. Who is “blind”? Who is visionary? How do these differences illuminate the messages of the book?
3. Studying a work with multiple narrators offers the ultimate opportunity to demonstrate juxtaposition of **style**. For instance, in *The Poisonwood Bible*, each daughter’s voice/distinctive point of view is created clearly by her **syntax** and **diction**. Make note of distinctive examples of word choice and sentence structure that aid in creating attitude, tone, and mood.
4. One of the effects of the novel’s shifting perspective is also its unusual style of characterization: for example, Nathan, one of the major characters in the novel, is revealed to us only via others’ view of him. What does this say about the effect of social environment on identity?
5. Says Kingsolver, “I’m a biologist. I know that everything eats something else.” Kingsolver utilizes a great deal of animal imagery in this novel. How do the realities of the natural world permeate the novel? Make note of key examples. What role does biology play in each of the character’s experiences? What messages are revealed through these repeated references? What is the human relationship to nature? Connect the theme of predator-prey to *Life of Pi*.

**ASSESSMENT: Oral/Group Presentation** (NOTE: *You will need your reading logs to complete this—but you do not need to prepare this over the summer; you will have time to prepare when we study the novel in class later this year.*) Each group will focus and analyze one of the protagonists for their presentation.

**Orleanna:** Jules, Elena, Nell, Audrey, Natalie

**Rachel:** Melissa, Amanda, Sophia, Nancy, Elisabeth

**Ruth May:** Maeve, Michael, Carmen, Neda, Matt

**Leah:** Harry, Anastasiya, Benjamin, Stephanie, Danielle

**Adah:** Haley, Leah, Camille, Rachel

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**ASSIGNMENT #2: PERSPECTIVE, MORALITY, SIN (CONTINUED)**

1. Analyze your character's voice using the following literary devices: diction, style/language, syntax, tone, figurative language, etc. Address how she tells her story and/or how she rationalizes/explains her self. (In other words, What is the relationship between form and content?)
2. Through your character's voice, analyze her philosophy towards:
  - a. self;
  - b. sisters/daughters;
  - c. parents;
  - d. spouses/significant others;
  - e. Africa: Read Barbara Kingsolver's quote and apply to the individual character:
    - i. "What have we done as a nation, as a culture, to Africa? There is a cultural arrogance, a spiritual, agricultural and political invasion. How do we make our peace with that ... That's why there are 5 narrators. Each represents a different approach."
    - ii. What is your character's approach to this above quote.
3. What does she carry? How does she survive? How is her perspective essential to our understanding of the messages of the novel?

**Presentation will include, in written form: (powerpoint, poster, etc.)**

1. Thesis (combines answer to #1, #2 and #3 in succinct, thorough way)
2. Evidence
3. Each student must present in a COHESIVE AND ORGANIZED manner in relation to the other group members and in relation to the thesis.

YOUR READING JOURNALS WILL BE COLLECTED  
ON **SEPTEMBER 8<sup>TH</sup>**  
(THE FIRST DAY OF CLASSES).

PLEASE NOTE THAT PART 3 (WHICH FOLLOWS)  
IS DUE VIA EMAIL ON MONDAY, AUGUST 28<sup>TH</sup>!

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ASSIGNMENT #3: SENSE OF PLACE - THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

**Books:** *Seize the Day*, Saul Bellow; *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton

One of the crucial themes in American history and literature is the way in which writers and thinkers have responded to their immediate environment—whether rural, urban, or suburban—and to the American landscape. Often, American novels and plays depict this landscape as intimately connected to character development and experience. This overwhelming “sense of place” is reflected in the two above texts. Though the books are set in different places and time periods, each explores the many ways in which where we live shapes and influences character and our perception of society.

**ASSIGNMENT:**

Once you have read both texts, write a letter in which you compare and contrast the settings of *Seize the Day!* and *Ethan Frome*. What issues do the protagonists face that seem to be a direct result of their immediate surroundings? What is the effect of environment on character? How does environment shape and establish basic definitions of survival?

Select a key scene in each of the novels and use it to explain what the particular interaction between character and environment is in the text. Why do you think setting is so important in these books? What conclusions can you come to about Americans’ relationship to their environment and surroundings? Most of all, what do **humans need in order to survive and to thrive**, and how does environment affect this?

Your letter should be **no more than three** typed pages, and must incorporate evidence from each text.

I am not enforcing journaling for these two books, but I encourage you to continue the pattern if you have found it useful. If you choose not to journal, it will be interesting for me to see how much of your reading experience makes it into your letter (and hence how engaging it is)!

**THIS LETTER MUST BE SUBMITTED TO ME VIA EMAIL BY AUGUST 28<sup>TH</sup>.**  
**[RGLADDING@ERHSNYC.NET](mailto:RGLADDING@ERHSNYC.NET)**