

LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1

Assignment 1: Close Reading

Word Limit	800–1000 words
Weighting	15% of overall course grade
Presentation	MS Word document (no PDFs); regular font size (e.g. Times New Roman 12) with double-spaced text; indent the first line of each new paragraph and do not include any blank space between paragraphs; do include an essay title, page numbers, and a Works Cited page
Deadline and Submission Instructions	11:59pm on Saturday, 14 September; upload your Word documents to Canvas

This assignment builds directly on the type of activity undertaken and skills employed in seminar class discussions. The aim of this assignment is for you to practice close reading skills by selecting a passage from the prescribed readings of either the *Ramayana* or the *Odyssey* and then analysing its key points of interest.

You should go through the following stages in order:

- (1) Select from the prescribed readings a short section (typically 1-3 pages) that you have found intriguing. Your chosen passage may present some 'problem' or inconsistency created by the text that seems to demand the reader's attention – e.g. a character behaving in an unconventional manner, a sudden change of theme/mood, etc. But your passage does not need to display any direct 'problem': the important thing is that you select a passage that invites meaningful discussion.

Note: You may choose any passage that you think is appropriate, though I recommend avoiding passages that we have already discussed extensively in class. You may consult me on your choice of passage in office hours.

- (2) In your introductory section, briefly set the scene for the forthcoming discussion by giving the context for your chosen passage (where does it come in the epic? What is going on in the passage?).
- (3) Analyse the passage by discussing key points of interest. Depending on your chosen passage, this may involve, e.g., aspects of characterisation, use of speech/rhetoric, metaphor, points of irony, etc. If you are discussing a 'problem' created by the text, you will want to explore responsible approaches that a reader might take to make sense of this problem. You will not have space to cover all points of interest in 1000 words – and no one expects you to – so focus on the issues that you think really matter in your chosen passage.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

Pitch

For an academic essay, you should typically think of your reader as a knowledgeable peer. Therefore, you can assume that he/she has a basic familiarity with the *Ramayana*/

Odyssey (so, e.g., there is no need to explain who Rama is). Your target reader is someone looking for guidance on your specific passage.

Relevance

Everything you say should shed light on the passage you have chosen. Any extraneous information or discussion, however interesting in itself, will detract from your focus and may confuse the reader.

Citing the Primary Text

Adopting a proper and consistent referencing style not only aids the reader but also adds to the professional polish of your essay.

When citing the *Ramayana* within your essay, you should use book, sarga number, and individual section number as indicated in the course pack: e.g. *Sundarakanda*, Sarga 37.15, *Sundarakanda*, Sarga 37.42-46, etc. You may abbreviate the book title to the first four letters (e.g. *Sund.*).

When citing the *Odyssey* within your essay, you should use book and verse numbers as indicated in the Wilson translation: e.g. *Odyssey* 12.120, *Odyssey* 13.12-26. You may abbreviate *Odyssey* to *Ody.*

When citing either the *Ramayana* or the *Odyssey* in the Works Cited page at the end of your document, you should use the following citations:

Valmiki. *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Translated by Robert P. Goldman et al., Princeton University Press, 1985-2019.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson, Norton, 2018.

Citing Secondary Sources/Modern Scholarship

For an assignment of this type, you are not required to consult secondary scholarly literature. You should base your ideas on your own reading of the set text.

Grading Rubric

The following general rubric applies to assignments in LH1:

'A' range work demonstrates sophistication and depth in analysis; compelling and reflective expression; insightful and original perspectives; professional polish in terms of presentation and referencing.

'B' range work demonstrates good comprehension of the materials; earnest engagement; shows potential to develop further in expression or perspective.

'C' range work and below indicates scope for improvement in a number of aspects as indicated by your seminar professor.

Book 5 marks a turning point in *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus leaves Calypso's island, Ogygia, to embark on the final leg of his long journey home. Having been trapped there for 7 years, Odysseus is finally released after Hermes arrives to deliver Zeus' order to Calypso. The confrontation between Hermes and Calypso, from verse 97 to 145, is an especially memorable scene. Here, Calypso makes an impassioned speech against Zeus' intervention to deprive her from her love, Odysseus, despite her helplessness in the situation. In this essay, I argue that a sense of tension is created in my chosen passage between Hermes and Calypso. I will support this argument by firstly analysing the hostile and accusatory tone created by the repeated emphasis of first- and second-person pronouns, subsequently examining the contrasting representations of Calypso between Hermes and herself, and finally investigating the competing accounts of how Odysseus ended up on Ogygia.

The heavy repetition of the pronouns of "I" and "you" throughout the exchange between Hermes and Calypso sets up a tone that is hostile and accusatory. We first observe this in Hermes' speech after Calypso asks him about the purpose of his visit, where he begins by declaring: "*You* are a goddess, *I* a god..."¹ Hermes distances himself from Calypso by using "you" and "I" to distinguish their genders. This precipitates his subsequent derision of Calypso for overstepping the behaviour expected of her by probing about his intent, and his patronising remark: "*I* will tell *you*"². Similarly, Calypso responds to Hermes with statements marked by "you"—to accuse him and the other male gods of being "cruel [and] jealous" and for "bear[ing] a grudge whenever any goddess takes a man...as a lover"³. The use of first- and second-person pronouns allows both deities to direct their frustrations towards each other, thus creating a head-on conflict between the two, which dramatically raises the tension in the passage.

This linguistic evidence guides us to uncover a deeper underlying conflict that involves two contrasting representations of Calypso: one by Hermes, one by herself. As mentioned earlier, Hermes dissociates himself from Calypso from the beginning of his speech, setting up his depiction of Calypso as an inferior deity in the following verses. In a condescending tone, he further belittles Calypso as an outcast by not concealing his unwillingness of being in Ogygia, underscoring her isolation from the other Olympian Gods by "an expanse of endless salty sea", and highlighting that nobody venerates her as a goddess as there are no towns nearby for humans to make "fine sacrifices"⁴ to her. Calypso, in response, immediately seeks to reclaim her equal status to Hermes, by establishing herself as a spokesperson for female goddesses. She does this by firstly by vilifying Hermes and the male gods as evil adversaries of female goddesses, and secondly by drawing parallels between herself and two other famous goddesses—Dawn and Demeter—to support her legitimacy. Calypso's use of beautiful adjectives like "rosy-fingered" and "golden" in describing the two goddesses and associated things are intended to portray them as pleasant and innocent deities, which in turn enhances her own image⁵. In contrast, she characterises male gods as nasty beings who possess undesirable qualities such as pettiness, and are prone to violent acts—like how Zeus "hurled flashing flame" to kill Demeter's lover, Iasion⁶. In placing the male gods in a negative light, she makes herself look better in comparison. These opposing portrayals form the very core of the tension between Hermes and Calypso, and they serve as the foundation upon which other conflicts in the passage are built.

Hermes' and Calypso's competing accounts of how Odysseus ended up on Ogygia is one such conflict. Both accounts describe the same event—Odysseus' shipwreck—but differ fundamentally in tone and plot. In Hermes' narrative, delivered matter-of-factly, it was Athena who "roused the

¹ *Odyssey* 5.97

² *Ibid.* 5.98

³ *Ibid.* 5.118

⁴ *Ibid.* 5.100-102

⁵ *Ibid.* 5.122-123

⁶ *Ibid.* 5.128

wind and surging sea”⁷ that led to the destruction of Odysseus’ ship and the deaths of his crew members, after they offended her for reasons unknown. In using the word “and” to precede the statement “all his brave companions were destroyed”⁸, Hermes seeks to dismiss a direct causal relationship between Athena’s actions and the tragedy that befalls Odysseus and his crew. On the other hand, in Calypso’s narrative, delivered using passionate language, it was Zeus who “pinned [Odysseus’] ship and with his flash of lightning smashed it to pieces”⁹. Calypso illustrates Zeus’ direct involvement in the tragic event, by drawing straightforward links between his actions and the devastating effects on Odysseus’ ship and crew. This narrative provides good support for her characterisation of male gods as vile and violent individuals. After labelling Zeus as the culprit for Odysseus’ suffering, Calypso paints herself in stark contrast to him in the final segment of her narrative that is absent from Hermes’ version of events—as a saviour, provider and lover to Odysseus. The striking differences between the accounts, namely Zeus’ involvement in the shipwreck and Calypso’s subsequent treatment of Odysseus, adds significantly to the tension between Hermes and Calypso.

In closing, we can observe that Homer creates great tension in this passage to dramatise Calypso’s final struggle against Hermes to keep Odysseus. The significance of this tense exchange between the two deities lies in it being an illuminating example of a female standing up to a male figure in *The Odyssey*. Hermes and Calypso can be seen as a proxy of the conflict between the patriarchy of Olympian Gods and deviant female goddesses, with the former seeking to tame the latter and impose conformity. This conflict is a thread that runs throughout the rest of *The Odyssey*, appearing again with different proxies—Hermes and Circe, Hephaestus and Aphrodite, and Orestes and Clytemnestra. It reminds us that the women in *The Odyssey* possess strength and agency, in defiance of a male-dominated world that seeks to suppress them.

(982 words, without footnotes)

REFERENCE LIST

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson, Norton, 2018.

⁷ Ibid. 5.109

⁸ Ibid. 5.110

⁹ Ibid. 5.131-132

Hi [name],

This essay features some strong close-reading of the text, such as when you note that the proliferation of first- and second-person pronouns in your chosen passage puts Hermes and Calypso at loggerheads with each other. You also do a good job of transitioning seamlessly between paragraphs, as when the line “other conflicts in the passage” at the end of your second body paragraph leads smoothly to “one such conflict” at the beginning of the third body paragraph.

In your next essay, a few minor areas you could work on are:

1) follow the formatting guidelines provided in the essay prompt. Give your essay a title, as a title helps the reader grasp what the main topic of the essay is, and thus better understand what their main takeaway from the essay should be. Double-space your text, as double-spaced text is easier to read. Indent the first line of each paragraph, as indentations visually signal to the reader that you are starting a new paragraph, and thus moving on to a new main point. Don’t leave a blank white space between paragraphs.

2) single-digit numbers between zero and nine are usually spelled out in letters, and double-digit numbers from 10 onward are written numerically: in other words, not “7 years” but “seven years.”

3) italicise the name of a text: not The Odyssey but *The Odyssey*.

Shadow grade: A-