

LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1

Assignment 2: Formulating a Question

Word Limit	1000–1200 words
Weighting	20% 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, 2 November ; upload your Word documents to Canvas

The goal of this assignment is for you to improve your ability to formulate the questions that lead to a successful essay, since any essay is only ever as good as the question(s) it tries to address. In that spirit, you will craft a short essay that sets out an issue, in the form of a question, and then offers a response to that question.

For this assignment, you may focus on either the *Epic of Sundiata*, Sima Qian, or the *Malay Annals*. The issue around which you tailor your question should extend beyond a single episode/section of a work to embrace something that runs through the work more broadly.

Whatever text and issue you choose, the following structure will be useful in helping you to organise your discussion:

- (1) **Title:** Announce the Question. Choose a title for your assignment, in the form of a question, which reflects the issue neatly and precisely.
- (2) **Beginning:** Explain and Justify the Question. In this section, describe the issue and justify why it is an issue in which the text is invested: in other words, *in what ways* does the text indicate that your chosen issue is worthy of discussion? Suggest briefly a possible answer.
- (3) **Middle:** Depending on the issue you choose, there may be a number of ways to explore the answer to your question. You will not have time to explore all possible responses, so choose evidence that supports what you consider to be the strongest responses. This may well involve weighing up the pros and cons of any one response.
- (4) **End:** Practice a conclusion that does not just restate the simple answer you formulated in part 2 above. Show how your discussion in part 3 has deepened and/or complicated your initial answer.

You will, of course, need to refer directly to the text to back up your points. An appropriate referencing style for each of the texts would be:

Sundiata work + page number(s): e.g. '*Sundiata*, p.24'; '*Sundiata*, pp. 35-42'.

Sima Qian work name (or recognisable shortened form) + page number(s): e.g. '*Letter to Ren An*, p.231'; '*Basic Annals of Emperor Gaozu*, pp. 55-60'; '*Gaozu*, pp. 55-60'.

Malay Annals work + page number(s): e.g. '*Malay Annals*, pp. 25-7'.

For an assignment of this type, you do not need to consult secondary scholarly literature. You should base your ideas on your own reading of the set text and, where appropriate, the associated seminar discussion.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

Choice of Topic

You want to select an issue that is both manageable in a short assignment of 1000-1200 words and genuine: something that resists a simple answer, something (a particular theme/episode/character etc.) that is problematic, inconsistent, or otherwise intriguing in the text. By the same token, you want to choose something that does not rely on knowledge systems outside the world of the text and outside the lectures and associated seminar discussions.

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 your text who is looking for guidance on the specific question that you raise.

Relevance

Everything you say should shed light on the issue you have chosen. Any extraneous information or discussion, however interesting in itself, will detract from your focus and may confuse the reader. [PS. Avoid the temptation to use footnotes as storehouses for extraneous information!]

Grading Rubric

The following general rubric applies to assignments in Lit-Hums 1:

'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.

[Student name]

Professor [Name]

Literature and Humanities 1

[Date]

Nature and the Raja's Majesty

We are familiar with the depiction of the Raja in the *Sejarah Melayu* as a majestic and respectable ruler, but how exactly is his majesty conveyed to the reader? In this essay, I analyse paragraphs from pages 17-20 to suggest that portraying the Raja as being dominant over nature is essential to creating the majesty and kingliness of the Raja¹. I will illustrate how this is done in three ways: firstly, in creating a sense of overwhelming immensity of the Raja's forces; secondly, in the Raja's god-like ability to alter and mould natural landscapes; and lastly, in his ability to command the unwavering loyalty of both man and nature². The Raja's dominance over nature is particularly striking given its contrast to the prevalent association of nature with aspects of divinity, where natural phenomena is typically interpreted as messages or revered as blessings from gods. The Raja's reign over nature and its creatures thus strongly suggests a certain divine majesty that is to be found within the Raja.

The majesty of the Rajas is conveyed through the use of natural imagery illustrating Raja Chulan's immense military might and dominance over nature. One immediately gets a sense of the immensity of the Raja's armies thanks to the narrator's third-person point-of-view. The point of view provides a zoomed-out survey of the battlefield, allowing one to imagine the scene depicted in the text from a bird's eye view. This is seen from the use of plurals, as well as references to large-scale geographical features, in describing the "mountains", "summits", "rivers" and the "earth", all of which trigger images of grandiose natural scenery in one's mind³. This sense of immensity is

¹ *Malay Annals*, pp. 17-20

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20

extended to Raja Chulan's army, as natural imagery is invoked to give one an impression of the sheer number of men under the Raja's command, underscoring his prowess and majesty. For instance, the light reflected off his army's weapons is so "brilliant" that "dark nights became as bright as though there were a full moon shining in fine weather"⁴. This hints at the extraordinary number of swords and other deadly weapons his troops possess. Additionally, the emphasis on absence in describing the "boundless" forest that becomes "treeless plains" gives one the impression that the Raja's army is so overpowering that it cannot share the physical space with anything else⁵. But the Raja does not solely dominate physical space, he seems to even control time. His army spreads across such a vast amount of space that "Six months passed and the tail of the column had not yet appeared"⁶. Here, the text appeals to one's sense of time in evoking the image of the endless marching of his seemingly inexhaustible army, exhibiting the Raja's control over both time and space. Ultimately, the Raja's dominion over nature in his march to Temasek mirrors his conquering of any peoples he comes across, and the overwhelming strength of the armies is a clear indication of their ruler's majesty.

The likening of his military prowess to natural phenomena is but one indicator of the Raja's majesty; he is also unquestionably powerful in his ability to mould nature to his liking. The hyperbole used to contrast light and dark in the previous paragraph is similar to the many instances of juxtaposition used to describe the altering of natural landscapes, caused solely by the Raja's armies marching across the land⁷. "[S]ummits", the tallest point of mountains, "came tumbling down", the "highest hills were brought low" and "mighty rivers ran dry"⁸. The emphasis on the greatness of these natural features – their being "highest" and "mighty" – adds to the sense of grandiosity in the unnatural inversion of natural phenomena⁹. Furthermore, just as how his armies level the trees and the flatten the hills in their march toward Temasek, the Raja's superiority over

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 17

⁶ Ibid., pp. 20

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

nature is also seen in his ability to mould nature when building his city¹⁰. A sense of craftsmanship and architecture is first built through the use of jargon, like “interstice” and “masonry”, and the naming of specific building materials, like “black stone” and “hammered gold”¹¹. Here, the moulding of the city extends into the moulding of nature, where the Raja’s power is demonstrated in his ability to control the biodiversity of his natural environment¹². A slight tension is created between the overall restrictive and controlled sense of moulding the new city’s biodiversity and the freedom of “[releasing] fish of every sort” and “wild beasts of every kind” into the natural environment¹³. Importantly, the pretence of releasing the animals for the king’s “pleasure” hints at the god-like status of the Raja, one who wields nature to suit his own liking and kills animals for pleasure¹⁴. The idea that the Raja plays god is similarly found in the “uproar” of his army – a deliberate triggering of one’s sense of hearing – that is so loud that it triumphs over the “thunder in the heavens”¹⁵. The Raja’s might seems so immense that it overwhelms even the divine happenings of the heavens, suggesting that the Raja shares the same playing field as the gods. This idea is also reflected in his ability to name the place he builds, thereby proclaiming ownership over an area which had never belonged to anyone but nature herself¹⁶. Thus, the Raja’s moulding of and ownership over nature informs us of his power and majesty.

While the Raja is indeed majestic in the powerful armies he commands and his god-like manipulation of nature, a true leader leads not solely through domination but further by inspiring awe and loyalty in his or her followers. In that sense, the core of the Raja’s majesty lies in his ability to command loyalty from both humans and nature alike¹⁷. One has already seen how the Raja fuses the natural and artificial together in building his city around a lake; the same coming together of man and nature is reflected in the composition of the Raja’s forces¹⁸. The Raja’s men

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 19-20

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 19

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 19-20

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 20

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 18-19

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 18

are described as “a sea at full tide”, “full tide” suggesting that his innumerable men seem to overflow onto the battlefield, while the elephants and horses are described as “islands in the sea”¹⁹. The resultant image created is that of great animals embedded within the masses of troops. Additionally, the parallel sentence structures in the description of both animals and men at war – “Those who had elephants pitted them against those of their adversaries...those who had bows plucked the strings of their bows...” – further entrenches the sense that there is no division between humans and animals; all fight together as one for their ruler²⁰. Most significant is the sense of togetherness between the Raja and his elephant ride, as the two almost seem to fuse together with the single-minded goal of defeating their opponent²¹. Importantly, it is established that the elephant is serving the Raja not because it is forced to do so, but because it is loyal to his ruler²². The elephant is intentionally described as “no coward” and refusing to “own defeat”, his might demonstrated in the “clash of tusk on tusk [that] sounded like that of a thunderbolt splitting a hill”²³. By again utilising the majestic natural imagery, the elephant is shown to share his ruler’s adrenaline on the battlefield. Thus, not only does mounting the elephant enhance the Raja’s majesty given its massive size and the royalty associated with elephants in Malay culture, more significantly, the Raja’s death and subsequent fall from his elephant can be interpreted as both a literal fall from height, “eight cubits at the shoulder” to be exact, and a figural fall and loss of power²⁴. Thus, the fusion of man and animal on the battlefield points to the idea that the unwavering loyalty that the Raja commands extends beyond mankind to nature and animals, thus giving him unquestionably authority and majesty.

In conclusion, though domination is typically shown to be antagonistic and overwhelmingly domineering, the Raja’s majesty is not just derived from the immense power he possesses in this dimension. While an oppressive top-down relationship needs only physical prowess, the domination

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 19

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

of his subjects' hearts, that is, their loyalty, is considerably more difficult. That the Raja commands even the loyalty of nature, which some might revere as part of the divine, and is capable of manipulating nature at a seemingly god-like level suggests that the Raja is so worthy of one's loyalty that there can be no question of his greatness²⁵. Thus, as is evident from the voluntary submission and undying loyalty of his subjects at war, the Raja's majesty is derived from his domination over both man and animal, and importantly, over both their bodies and their minds.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 17-20

References

Malay Annals. Translated by C. C. Brown. Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2001.

Hi [name],

This is a lucidly written account of how the natural world captures the totality of the Rajas' power in the *Sejarah Melayu*, featuring careful, compelling close reading. You also do a good job of building effective transitions between individual paragraphs, carrying the reader on a smooth ride from the start of the essay to its finish.

A few minor areas to work on in future essays are below.

1) If you are trying to indicate to a reader which part of a text you are talking about, it is better to use a description of what is happening in it than to use page numbers. In other words, the essay's second line would sound more sophisticated if it said something like "In this essay, I analyse the battle sequence between Raja Chulin and Raja Shulan to suggest that portraying . . ." rather than "paragraphs from pages 17-20." Page numbers should only appear when you are citing quotes taken directly from a text in brackets, or in footnotes at the bottom of the page.

2) Always italicize the name of a text: not "Sejarah Melayu" but "*Sejarah Melayu*." Additionally, the footnote number should appear at the very end of a sentence, after the full stop, not before it.

Shadow grade: A-