

LITERATURE AND HUMANITIES 1

Assignment 3: Writing Reflection and Comparison

Word Limit	1,500 words overall
Weighting	25% of overall course grade (NB: Part A will be graded S/U on the basis of earnestness of effort; Part B will be letter-graded and will form the basis for the overall assignment grade)
Presentation	MS Word format (no PDFs); regular font size (e.g. Times Roman 12); double spacing; 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, 28 November 2020 ; email your Word documents to me at ila.tyagi@yale-nus.edu.sg

This final assignment consists of two parts. Part A asks you to reflect on your progress over the semester as a reader and writer; Part B invites you to conduct a comparison between two texts, involving at least one of the texts from the final cluster: *1001 Nights*, *al-Khansā*, or *The Decameron*.

Part A: Short Writing Reflection (300–400 words)

Reread your previous two writing assignments for the course, along with the professor's comments. Offer an earnest reflection on your progress as a reader and writer during this course.

The sort of questions you might ask yourself include, but are not restricted to, the following: What progress have you made in specific skills? What surprises you about your development as a writer? What are you still working on? What common concerns, themes, or interests do you handle in your previous two assignments? Do they reveal anything about your strategies and approaches as a reader and writer?

Part B: Comparison (1,100–1,200 words)

You may choose either option B1 or B2 below. Choose the option that most appeals to you. There is no intrinsic advantage of picking B1 over B2, or vice versa; both options offer significant scope.

Option B1: Comparative Essay

Write a short essay, involving at least one of *1001 Nights*, *al-Khansā*, or *The Decameron*, in which you compare a particular aspect of one of these texts with another text that we have studied, and on which you have not previously written a paper.

A possible topic for discussion might be, for example, one of the following: the function of storytelling and recording events; boundaries between beasts, humans, and divinities; justice and vengeance; the role of physical journeys; food and eating as cultural practices; cleverness, rhetoric and wit. You are encouraged to devise your own topic beyond this list.

Option B2: "Creative" Comparison

This is an opportunity for you to take a short section from one of our texts and recast it in the words of another one of our studied texts. You should ensure that you tackle at least one of the texts from the final cluster (*1001 Nights*, al-Khansā, *The Decameron*) as either the primary material for conversion or the new "host" voice. Again, you may not use a text on which you have previously written a paper as either the source or host text.

In going about this assignment, you will (a) choose a suitable short section and analyse for yourself what its core stylistic and thematic elements are, and (b) choose a new "host" author and think about how that author would recast the material in (a) to fit their own stylistic and thematic priorities. For example, how would *The Decameron* deal with the intrigues of Sima Qian's Empress Lü? How would the adventures of the third dervish from *1001 Nights* differ if they were written in the epic mode of Homer's *Odyssey*? etc.

In addition to your creative narrative, you should include a justification, in which you explain (with references where appropriate) why your choice of theme, style, manner of speaking, and perspective is characteristic of the voice you are seeking to impersonate. This can take the form of a few paragraphs entitled "Justification."

A suitable format would be:

- (i) Introduction: cite clearly or print the section you wish to recast. This does not count towards the word limit.
- (ii) Creative Narrative (c. 400-600 words): offer your creative retelling in the voice of the new "host" author.
- (iii) Justification (c. 600-800 words): justify the choices you have made in the form of a few body paragraphs. This section does not require an introduction or a conclusion.

Note 1: you can be as creative and inventive as you like, so long as you can convince the reader that what you say is consistent with the stylistic and thematic priorities of the host author.

Note 2: the best narratives will consider both stylistic and thematic aspects of the texts: i.e. they will consider *what* themes/motifs/topics are important to each author, and *how* each author tends to articulate and arrange those ideas.

Assignment 3: Writing Reflection and Comparison

Part A: Short Writing Reflection

Throughout the LH1 course, I have been attempting to improve my ability to read closely, more specifically verbalize specific points I found from the things I read. This ability was one essential facet of my skills as a literature student over the years that I felt I was not competent enough in; being able to verbalize observations to me is key in picking out evidence for arguments, and by extension writing a good essay on literary works. While I feel I managed to do that during the LH1 course, I realized my mistakes in literary analysis in the past had nothing to do with a lack of ability to read the text and obtain conclusions, but rather a fear in not picking ‘strong’ evidence that my teachers and the essay markers would be looking for. Realizing that there was no ‘correct’ answer to understanding literary texts, and the idea that everyone could have equally compelling opinions based on method and context in which they read the text, really liberated me in terms of being able to write a good essay without fearing for mistakes. However, I feel like I could afford to go even further in my close reading in terms of both depth and breadth, as sometimes I find myself stuck on how to go further in analysis during essay-writing.

My previous two essays explored the liminality between divinity and humanity, as well as reader scepticism that arises from the divide between historical accuracy and dramatic liberty. While both themes seem relatively different from each other, it appears that my reading and writing priorities are more naturally inclined to competing themes that the text struggles to establish a clear answer for. I find that these competing themes make for an easier time in processing the text, as the texts do not provide a clear answer to them; Odysseus is depicted as a liminal figure between divinity and humanity, while the *Sejarah Melayu* functions as both a literary and historical text. Finding an answer to these themes usually require personal opinion, which makes it easier for me to commit to analysis without worrying about whether those elements of the text are up for debate.

Word count: 364 words

Part B2: “Creative Comparison”

Introduction

Zhang Tang was a native of Du. His father worked as an aide in the city government of Chang’an. Once his father went out and left Zhang Tang, who was still a young boy at the time, to mind the house. When he returned he discovered that a rat had stolen a piece of meat. He was furious and beat Zhang Tang for his negligence. Zhang Tang set about digging up the rat’s hole, caught the rat, and recovered what was left of the piece of meat. He then proceeded to indict the rat, beat it until it told its story, write out a record of its words, compare them with the evidence, and draw up a proposal for punishment. After this he took the rat and the meat out into the yard, where he held a trial, presented the charges, and crucified the rat. When his father saw what he was doing and examined the documents he had drawn up, he found to his astonishment that the boy had carried out the whole procedure like a seasoned prison official. After this he set his son to writing legal documents.

Creative Narrative

A boy is beaten by his father for a rat stealing meat under his watch. Seeking revenge, he catches the rat and sentences him by trial.

Dear all, it is well established that those who deceive and evade the law must eventually be brought to justice; this is a core tenet of good governance. However, the harshness of legal judgement is sometimes meted for its own sake to ridiculous proportions, especially by those without virtue. It is therefore my intention to tell you all about how a young boy sentenced a rat, as a warning that no one is spared from giving, or receiving, such abuses of power.

There once lived in Du a young boy named Zhang Tang, fathered by a government aide famed for meticulousness. One day, Zhang Tang was given the opportunity to mind the house while his father was out, along with the demand that the house must be perfectly maintained. Zhang Tang relished this chance, ensuring everything was as desired. However, when the father returned to

inspect the house, he noticed that one of the meat slabs in the kitchen was missing a piece almost too small to notice. Upon closer inspection, he realized that a rat had stolen the piece, having crudely ripped it off from the larger slab. Furious at the discovery, he called Zhang Tang forward and interrogated him on the theft, which Zhang Tang denied knowing about. Even more furious at his son's negligence, the father said to him, "Crooked son! Your negligence is unacceptable, and you must be punished!" The father then proceeded to straighten the boy out, until he could no longer move in retaliation.

Zhang Tang, now furious that one rat's dereliction caused him great pain, committed himself to bringing the rat to justice. Recovering from his punishment, he set about digging multiple holes in the ground where rats could live, each hole larger than the last. At last, he found an especially small rat nibbling on the crumb of meat which had been stolen from the kitchen. The rat, upon discovering that it had been found, screamed and tried to run away, but Zhang Tang quickly captured both the rat before it could do so. Chaining the rat to a pole while it was still holding the piece of meat, Zhang Tang proceeded to indict the rat, "Crooked rat! Your theft is unacceptable, and you must be punished!" Zhang Tang then grabbed a cane and started straightening out the rat, forcing the rat to confess.

Staring at the rat in anger, Zhang Tang said, "Rat, what's this thing I see sticking out in front of you, the thing I don't have?"

"Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!", the rat replied. "Squeak! Squeak!"

Then Zhang Tang said "Where did you get it?"

"Squeak!", the rat replied.

Of course, given that the rat could not speak our language, it only let out cries of 'squeak!' with every strike. Eventually, Zhang Tang stopped straightening out the crooked rat, and crying out to be released, the rat proceeded to scream "Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!" repeatedly. Taking the rat's

squeaks as a declaration of guilt, Zhang Tang grabbed paper and a brush, wrote “Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!” down as defendant testimony, brought the rat out to the yard and sentenced the rat to death.

Days later, the father chanced upon the defendant testimony Zhang Tang had written. The father was astonished at the remarkable level of detail, crying out ‘this is definitely acceptable!’. The boy was hereby sent to write legal documents for his father, and eventually became the country’s top official.

Word Count: 595 words

Justification

For this assignment, I chose to recast a section from the biography of Zhang Tang in *Shi Ji 122: The Biographies of The Harsh Officials*, written by Sima Qian, in the voice of Giovanni Boccaccio, author of *The Decameron*.

Zhang Tang is depicted as a villainous character in this story, eschewing Sima Qian’s more positive reception of Zhang Tang; this is to highlight Boccaccio’s disdain for authority throughout *The Decameron*. Both *Shi Ji* and *The Decameron* display a disdain for authority, albeit with drastically different foci and rationales. Sima Qian’s issue with authority leans more towards harshness in governance rather than the act of governance itself, providing a rather nuanced view on the officials documented in his work to illustrate this. He notes that ‘these men, by their schemes and strategies.....worked to prevent evil and block the path of crime’, even though they were famed for their harshness (*Shi Ji*, 407). Zhang Tang in particular is hailed as a good official, with Sima Qian acknowledging his actions were ‘often of benefit to the nation’ (*Shi Ji*, 406). Even though Sima Qian has positioned himself against the concept of harshness in governance, this acknowledgement of the officials’ positive contributions to maintaining order in China undoes any supposed notion of these officials as completely villainous, forcing the reader to isolate the concept of harshness as an issue beyond the proponents documented by Sima Qian. Boccaccio, however,

provides a less nuanced, more satirical view. The Church is depicted as the foremost authority in *The Decameron*. However, the clergy in the Decameron are depicted as a collection of scoundrels, only varied by the sins they commit. Abraham, in his trip to Rome, noted that all the clergy ‘committed the sin of lust in great wickedness’ in both ‘natural’ and ‘sodomitical’ variants (*The Decameron*, 40), and were also ‘gluttons, drunks and sots’ (*The Decameron*, 40). The monk and abbot in Day 1 Story 4 are also depicted as susceptible to their basest instincts, being fiercely ‘assaulted by carnal desire’ (*The Decameron*, 46) and feeling ‘the pricklings of the flesh’ while facing the girl in the monastery. Their actions in particular, where they give in to their carnal instincts with no remorse, seem to run in conflict with Dioneo’s declaration of the monastery containing ‘holiness’ (*The Decameron*, 46). In keeping with Boccaccio’s more universally negative depiction of authority in *The Decameron* where all clergy were declared as sinful, as compared to Sima Qian’s more nuanced view of its ‘villains’, I have deliberately depicted Zhang Tang and his father as villainous figures more worthy of mockery than admiration, eschewing Sima Qian’s more positive reception of Zhang Tang.

Euphemisms were also heavily used in this recast, with the word ‘beat’ in *Shi Ji* replaced by the milder ‘straighten out’; this is in line with Boccaccio’s use of euphemisms to construct a lighter tone. Sima Qian is fairly direct with the topic of assault, with the serious nature of the action condensed in the sentence ‘He was furious and beat Zhang Tang for his negligence’ (*Shi Ji*, 385). Its brevity stands out in a formal text where Sima Qian traditionally employs longer sentences, indicating a sense of speed similar to a strike that Zhang Tang would have faced. The sentence’s brevity also makes it easy to read over, and with clear rationale and emotional impetus provided for the action of beating Zhang Tang, the sentence almost seems to normalize the brutal action as an acceptable punishment. Hence, Sima Qian leaves the serious subject of beating one’s child out in the open, contributing to a more serious tone. Boccaccio, on the other hand, prefers the use of euphemisms to craft a lighter tone. One particular source of inspiration was Boccaccio’s use of the euphemism ‘put the Devil back in Hell’ (*The Decameron*, 292), used to soften the impact of its

scandalous subject matter. Boccaccio uses the euphemism as a cover, similar to how modern filmmakers attempt to evade censorship; it does not directly address the taboo concept of sex, but captures the imagination and fantasies of more discerning readers. Furthermore, the use of the specifically religious euphemism ‘put the Devil back in Hell’ renders sex almost as a noble pursuit (*The Decameron*, 292). Given our understanding of the Devil as an evil figure and Hell as his place of residence, the euphemism serves to package sex as a pleasant and fun pursuit returning a malevolent presence back to its rightful place. While the recast does not address actions nearly as scandalous, the act of beating another is still a deplorable concept. Hence, in line with Boccaccio’s use of euphemisms, I have replaced the term ‘beat’ used in *Shi Ji* with the milder ‘straighten out’.

Word Count: 784 words

Works Cited

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