Dr Brian Donnelly
ENGLISH 180, SPRING 2009.

Course Requirements:

Attendance:

Absence from class may result in a grade penalty. Students are required to inform me of any anticipated absence prior to missing the class. If absences number higher than 3 classes, an automatic grade penalty will be applied. This also applies to students who persistently arrive late to or leave early from class.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is an intellectual crime and will not be tolerated in any form. If students are in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, or how to avoid it, they should contact me. Any incidents of plagiarism or cheating of any kind will be reported to the Dean.

Grading:

Class Participation/Attendance 25%
4 x Essay Assignment 25% for 3/4, as stated below. Due dates are noted on the class schedule.

ASSESSMENT GUIDELINE

For this class you must write four essays, with a word limit of 1800 words. The best three of your grades will count towards the final mark. This method is intended to enable students to work on developing their writing in close consultation with me over the quarter. I encourage you to attend office hours or make appointments for essay guidance before writing, and for feedback after grades are awarded.

You will also be graded on your participation in class discussion.

Essays should be typed, double-spaced in font size 12, and should conform to MLA citation style guidelines, with a Bibliography of works consulted.

Presentation and Grammar:

One rule that is not up for debate: it is absolutely vital that essays are presented correctly. Check and re-check spelling, grammar and quotations from primary sources. All essays should be word-processed and double-spaced, and should include a WORD-COUNT and BIBLIOGRAPHY. You should carefully re-read your essay at least twice after you’ve finished it to check for grammatical errors and/or poor phrasing. An excellent way of spotting mistakes and moments of clumsiness is to read your essay aloud: it forces you to slow down (you can’t skim over the prose), and – usually – if an
essay sounds clear, composed and in control when read aloud, that’s because it is. One pragmatic reason for paying so much attention to the style, presentation and grammar of your work is, simply, that marks are deducted for errors. But there’s also another, better reason: by getting yourself to focus on the little details of your own writing, you quickly get into the habit of seeing the importance of little details in the literature you’re reading and responding to. In my experience as a marker, those essays that are presented and written carefully are often the ones with the most interesting things to say: it’s as if a habitual attentiveness to the little things, to accuracy and clarity in one’s own writing, directly helps to foster an attentiveness to the complexity of the literary texts one is writing about. Put simply: training yourself to be a thoughtful, accurate writer can have a knock-on effect – it can help you to develop as a thoughtful, accurate reader.

Essay Topics:
The emphasis for this class is to encourage independent thinking, so when you are trying to figure out exactly what your essay will be about, try and decide where your own interests lie, whether a particular piece of work appeals to you, or perhaps does not appeal, and try to figure out why this might be. For the first essay on poetry, you will need to produce a close reading of the kind we have been attempting in class. If you focus on one of the poems we have already covered, I suggest you also choose another poem that relates in some way to your argument, make sure you are not just repeating class discussion, but building on it. A good way to think about your essay and its subject, is to think of a title. Titles should sound like other titles of published books or articles, not like exam questions. So – for instance – try and come up with a title that is open to debate, a debate which your essay will examine. The first paragraph of your essay will develop the debate of the title, lay out the grounds, or the reason why this might be an interesting way of looking at a particular text or texts. In short, it will suggest a hypothesis, which the essay will then scrutinize and offer an informed opinion on. The essay should end with a concluding paragraph that revisits the thesis suggested at the beginning. This paragraph does not exist to restate that thesis, but to evaluate it in light of the material discussed during the essay. A good question to ask here is: What has changed from beginning to end?

Close Analysis:
This is, I think, the most important aspect of essay-writing. Literary writers have choices, and the fundamental question to ask yourself whenever you are writing about a piece of literature is: “Why these words in these places?” What distinguishes a very good essay is a willingness to engage in detail with the way in which literary style enriches and communicates meaning. In other words, good essays tend to focus frequently on how something is being said, rather than just on what is being said. With that in mind, try to avoid extended, generalized summary; the more specific your analysis of a particular text, the better. A very good guideline: immediately after quoting a passage from a text, stop and examine the language in detail - focus on the style as well as the content of the passage you’ve quoted. Look closely at, for instance, individual words, phrases, syntax, tones, rhymes, stanza forms, rhythms, metaphors, images, narrative voice(s) and perspectives, representations of speech, sentence structures, etc. Do not end paragraphs with dangling quotations, but instead make sure you comment on the quotation. When you think you’ve made an important point from a good reference or quotation, or when you suspect you’ve exhausted the passage, go back to the text again and make at least two more points. Look again for peculiarities of syntax or vocabulary; get at the linguistic mechanics of the passage, as well as its semantics. To repeat all this yet another way: make sure that you don’t just describe a passage you’ve quoted, but analyze the way it’s put together.

Use of secondary criticism:

Writing on literature is a little bit like joining a conversation that’s already been started in your absence. It’s a good idea, then, to get a sense of where the conversation has come from before you launch straight in with your own opinion. Reading around in secondary criticism has an important part to play in your essay preparation and writing (it will help you to situate yourself in relation to the subject) and you should try to get a sense of what other literary critics have thought of the works you’re studying. However, do not allow your essay to become swamped by other critics’ responses to a text. It is very important to remember that reading and quoting other critics is not a substitute for your own argument. Use criticism only as a sounding board for your own particular response to the text. A golden rule: never just passively quote from a critic without engaging with what they are saying. What you need to do is to try to find ways to develop and/or qualify what a critic has written by relating their general statements to your own specific findings. Whatever you
do, never simply present another reader’s judgment of a text. You should always be disagreeing
with, qualifying or developing their case; make it your own. One more tip: secondary criticism has
its place in your studies, but time is often very profitably spent reading more primary material and
building this into your essay: e.g. if you’re working on a particular author, read more of that
author’s work, or his/her letters, journals, criticism, etc. You might also read other types of
primary material: e.g. other contemporaries of the author who commented on his/her work, or
other primary texts written around the same time.

A thought:

A good place to end is with the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Here are some of its definitions of the
word ‘essay’:

*Essay* (after French, *essayer*), n:

I. The action or process of trying or testing.
   1. A trial, testing, proof; experiment;
   II. A trying to do something
   5. An attempt, endeavor.

8. A composition of moderate length on any particular subject, or branch of a subject;
   […] a composition more or less elaborate in style, though limited in range.

*Oxford English Dictionary*

‘Essay’, then, from the French verb ‘essayer’, meaning ‘to try’, is not just a type of writing, but a
form of activity – a trial, an experiment, a testing of the waters.

The essay, from this perspective, might best be considered as a mode of careful exploration rather than a
string of constant assertion. Think of the essay as not so much a final word on things, but more as a
considered development of related ideas. To put it another way: a good essay will often display a
willingness to journey around many sides of a question, rather than an eagerness to express a one-sided
answer. This is not to say that an essay shouldn’t have an argument – it should – it’s just that it’s a good
idea when you’re writing to remember that there is often more than one way of looking at it.