

English 207: Intro to Cultural Studies

Midterm Essay

Length and Due Dates

Length: 4-5 pages, double-spaced, titled, and paginated, with one-inch margins

In-Class Draft: Monday, October 27

Draft Conference: Individually scheduled from October 28-31

Revised Draft: Monday, November 3, by 5:00 p.m. in hard copy at Padelford A-305 or via E-Submit

Assignment

You will have one hour and thirty minutes to draft an essay that addresses one of the following questions:

- 1) Compare and contrast the construction of masculinity or femininity in two of the following films: *The Birth of a Nation*, *Our Dancing Daughters*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Double Indemnity*. How do the films' narrative and cinematic codes communicate particular ideologies or ideological tensions?
- 2) Compare and contrast the ways in which two of the following films articulate national identity: *The Birth of a Nation*, *Our Dancing Daughters*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Double Indemnity*. What defines characters as "American"? What symbols and icons are associated with "Americanness"?
- 3) Compare and contrast the construction of race in two of the following films: *The Birth of a Nation*, *Our Dancing Daughters*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Double Indemnity*. How do the films' narrative and cinematic codes work to represent whiteness or blackness? Why does race function as it does in the films?
- 4) Compare and contrast the ways in which two of the following films construct the couple or the family: *The Birth of a Nation*, *Our Dancing Daughters*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Double Indemnity*. How do the films' narrative and cinematic codes work to represent the couple or family? Why do these social units function as they do in the films?

Guidelines

1) Although I have provided questions, you will need to develop an angle of comparison/contrast. For example, one could approach national identity question in terms of how corrupt political systems threaten "American" values or how race determines how characters can participate in the nation.

2) Effective comparison/contrast essays highlight how similarities and differences reveal something important about each film. As you develop your essay, consider how each film "unlocks" the other. Ask yourself why it is important to examine these films together in terms of ideology.

3) Rather than offering a catalogue of your observations regarding the films' similarities and differences, your essay should pose an argument about the significance of the connection. Your thesis should not simply state that "films X and Y treat ideology Z similarly and differently."

4) While you can organize your comparison/contrast essay in several ways, you should avoid discussing one film in full, then turning to the other. This format relegates the comparison/contrast to the second half of the paper. Instead, you can structure the first part of

the body around similarities, moving from one film to the other, and the second part around differences, discussing each film in turn. You can also focus each paragraph on one similarity or difference, discussing examples from both films.

5) Although the comparison/contrast essay examines large-scale ideologies, close textual analysis will serve as your main source of evidence. In supporting your argument, you will need to pay attention to how the films code ideology through narrative and/or cinematic techniques. Focus on specific shots or scenes and the narrative and cinematic codes at work in those shots or scenes. You may also refer to readings from the packet as they help you to develop your analysis.

6) Remember that you are writing to an audience who has already viewed the films. Therefore, your essay should not offer plot summaries. Instead, any reference to the films—dialogue quotations, scene descriptions, explanations of narrative movement—should support your analysis.

Grading

I will distribute grading criteria during individual conferences. Generally speaking, successful essays will have a substantive, defensible thesis, a logical pattern of development, detailed support for all arguments, and a sophisticated, grammatically correct writing style.