“Managing the Paper Load”
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Sample Comments

From a Student Essay on Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood

XXXX XXXXX
“What is One Without the Other?”

Dear XXXX,

This is, far and away, your best work of the semester. It is gracefully written, incisive in its observations about Capote’s “novel,” and demonstrates a willingness to really stay with an idea until you work it out in detail. The sense that Dick and Perry have a kind strange dysfunctional functionality (or is it functional dysfunction?) seems intuitively right, as each of them exhibits a range of ways they need the other, even when that “need” is measured in a kind of utility. They are a mass of contradictions: they indulge in a kind of homoerotic banter, while plotting to kill each other; they both aspire to some kind of perverse ideal of go-it-alone masculinity, while existing in a codependent relationship, and so on. I particularly like your sense that Dick exploits Perry’s pathologies in order to actualize his scheme while also keeping him around in order to convince himself of his “normality”: there is a kind of emotional traffic between the two of them, a sense of each quietly extracting something from the other in the name of “friendship.” In a way, I think you are so right to argue that there isn’t an “intimate…relationship” here, and yet that this might be the most intimate relationship either of them has ever had. What does intimacy come to mean when this is the case? I think this essay is at its best when you do a kind of micro-analysis of the moment when Perry kneels beside Mr. Clutter: you manage to weave together all of the tiny shifts in Perry’s sensorium in that moment—the pain in his knees, the disgust at Clutter’s groveling, the State’s condemnation of the act he has both committed and has not yet commit, etc.—and we suddenly begin to understand how it is that a man can slit another man’s throat and perhaps not know how it happened. It is the weird and awful confluence of a great many impressions, sensations, and sufferings that make—as Perry puts it on a number of occasions—the Clutters pay for a life’s worth of suffering and abuse. Keep your rendering of that moment in mind as a model of close reading and detailed analysis throughout the semester, and look to capture its rigor and intensity in future papers.

I like that you don’t separate Dick or Perry off from the other, even as you speculate about how we might evaluate the question of who is more “dangerous” (although that question sort of disappears as the essay unfolds). As you will see in the margins, there are some moments here that need more clarification or development, and as I was reading I did want to gain a clearer sense of the stakes of this argument: what do you think Capote is saying through Dick and Perry? Does the sense of a kind of poisonous relationship make the murder of the Clutters seem more or less contingent, a bit of poor luck, or is Capote trying to get us to reframe what intention/motivation means in a case like this? In a moment like the one where Perry asks whether “something is wrong with somebody” who commits such atrocities, we glimpse the possibility of some kind of self-awareness, some modicum of ownership of one’s actions, but then Dick’s insistence on his own “normalcy” and “balance” seems to short-circuit any chance for real moral assessment. What do you make of that moment? What are we to make of a dysfunction that insists that it is “normal” (a term that almost always comes up in relationship with modes of masculinity and sexual desire)? There are a few threads here that might be tied off more successfully, but on the whole this is one of the best close reading essays in my stack, and a magnificent turnaround since your first meditation assignment. I look forward to continuing improvement as the semester progresses!

A –
From a Student Essay on Dorothy Hughes’ *In a Lonely Place*

**“The Lover and the Beast”**

Dear XXXX,

This essay has a lot of potential, but there are also a few opportunities missed. I really like the notion expressed here toward the end that Hughes is exploring the fragile line between tropes of romantic love (the desire to make “two into one” as Dix puts it) and a logic that describes something much more deathly and destructive (the desire to possess, absorb, or negate the other). In some ways I wish you had started with this premise at the beginning of the paper, not only so that your audience knows where you are heading, but so you can move much more quickly to how and why Hughes is interested in understanding the intricate relationship between love and hate, which suddenly appear less as stark oppositions and more like dispositions that share some kind of weird emotional DNA. What results when we recognize that much of our romantic language and imagery is laced with ideas or feelings that, pushed a bit too far, become unhinged, and set the stage for the possibility of jealousy, possessiveness, and at the far end of its logic, ruin? Is Hughes suggesting that there is something in misogyny that is a perversion of romantic desire; or, looked at the other way around, something in Dix’s serial killing that he perversely mistakes for love? What does it mean to even entertain such possibilities? Can we locate or at least speculate about how Dix’s longings are converted into violence (i.e. what is the trigger or transition between one state and the other, and why is that triggering significant?)? If it arises at first as a form of common jealousy that morphs into something uglier, what does that tell us about the psychological and emotional boundaries being crossed? What is it that makes Laurel the figure who seems to exist right on that uneasy border for Dix? And, connected to that, why does he generally kill strangers when he feels this murderous impulse? What is involved in that seeming substitution? In other words, I feel like your essay might best begin where it ends, in order to really move from describing what occurs to making sense of its consequences. One way of helping yourself frame the project here is to ask yourself: what is the “argument” of *In a Lonely Place*?

I think you are right to note Dix’s seemingly split personality, or perhaps, more accurately, his sense of existential detachment, disaffection, a floating free of his grounded self. As I note on the first page, I feel like his version of serial killing isn’t some sort of “cold, calculating” strategist, but rather someone whose life is governed almost entirely by the aftermath of his mysterious impulses: what “planning” we see is nearly always and entirely the cover up. The violence is impulsive and barely comprehensible to him. You are at your best when you are really beginning to dig down into the specifics of Hughes’ language, but there is too little of that kind of mining the evidence here, especially for a close reading assignment. For instance, I really thought you might have worked through that chilling “She didn’t know it was to be just these two. Two that were one. Until she understood as he did, he couldn’t be disturbed that she had other obligations” (89). There is so much going on in that little passage: the way in which the phrase “just these two” seems so cold and detached, as if he were describing objects on a table. How these sentences insist that the melding of two into one is not something Laurel will participate in, but rather just something she “didn’t know yet.” The weird sense that he acknowledges that he can’t be “disturbed” by her fuller life, until she “understood,” a gesture that suggests that he does have some sense of the protocols involved in his vision of romantic possession. If you can linger longer and more productively in the *how* and *why* Hughes is worrying the line between desire and death, I feel like this essay could get some serious critical traction and say something quite profound about Hughes’ nasty little novel. Instead, I feel like you kind of run out of steam near the end, or at least I had a hard time trying to figure out what conclusions you were trying to draw. Anyway, look over the remarks here and in the margins carefully and don’t hesitate to drop by the office if anything needs further clarification. I look forward to reading more of your work in the weeks ahead...maybe even this essay again!

B
Dear XXXXXX,
This is at times both a fascinating and frustrating essay. I love that you’ve chosen “The Tell-Tale Heart” as a place to think more complexly and purposefully about the concept of guilt, and especially how the mind (and specifically an instinctive form of conscience) might serve as the best police force available. Of course, one of the difficulties here is that the story is so obviously about the operations of guilt that you need to find a way to make an argument that doesn’t simply rehearse what is apparent, and far too often here it feels like you are doing just that. Similarly, it is clear that you have a certain relish for close analysis, which is terrific at times, but too often here the observations you make about textual details either pull you away from a coherent argument, or just seem to operate as free-floating “symbols” that aren’t really connected to a broader argument. At times this feels too much like a list of observations and not enough like a coherent, carefully integrated critical argument.

While the marginal comments get at many of these issues, let me touch on a few specifically. Take your analysis of the first passage: while I am certainly in favor of trying to determine the inner workings of the narrator’s compulsions based on how he narrates, it seems odd to me that your discussion never actually tries to figure out why he is obsessed with the old man’s vulture-like eye, especially when he remarks that “I loved the old man. He had never wronged me.” What are we to make of a violent act that isn’t violence against a subject, so much as a fetishized part of the body? It seems to me that this is the great mystery of the early parts of the narration, and the fact that the narrator is himself obsessed with his own issues of visuality seems incredibly suggestive and worthy of some attention (e.g. “You should have seen me”; with what “foresight...I went to work”; the lantern as a kind of eye with lids, etc.). Why the eye, and what might the fear of a largely de-subjectivized (or soon to be disembodied) eye have to do with his sense of guilt and surveillance? What is the relationship between the narrator’s claim to hypersensitivity, and his fear of another man’s sense of sight? Instead it feels like you get distracted by things like the color blue meaning “peace,” or the “chill” he feels, which feels quite tangential in the first case, and quite obvious in the second. It just feels odd to me that you would discuss the narrator’s obsession with the eye, and not, in a sense, discuss the narrator’s obsession with the eye.

Part of the problem with this jumping from symbol to symbol is that often they don’t add up to something coherent and integrated. So, for instance, you seem to equate instinct to animality throughout (a connection I never quite followed, since it’s not like humans aren’t instinctual...more on this below), but at the same time you sequentially compare the narrator to an animal, a machine, as well as to a dutiful soldier; these would seem to pull in three somewhat different directions when it comes to intention and responsibility, and as a reader I have little idea how they are telling us something about guilt. Or likewise, when you dabble in numerology, the claims you end up making not only feel imported in (i.e. they don’t emerge from the text itself), but they are not developed in any sustained way: it just seems like a proverbial shout-out to Genesis and scriptural “Creation,” with little sense of what they are telling us about guilt. Compare this to the repeated echoes of Lady MacBeth—which you smartly catch—which emerge directly from Poe’s language and could, if carefully developed, produce a very interesting argument about how Poe is rereading/revising Macbeth on the question of guilt. This is an opportunity you might have developed into a whole paper, if not at least an integral part of the argument you are trying to make here: instead, it feels like you quickly move on without developing this rich connection. Every observation and claim you make should help advance the argument, and feel as if they are connected with each other through a strong internal logic that is setting out to prove something. I know the paper is about guilt, but I don’t know what it argues. If you revise, think about that distinction and focus on the latter.
There are also, unfortunately, some problems of logic here as well. For instance, the entire narrative is retrospectively told, so that it is hard to say that the narrator doesn’t feel guilt because the crime hasn’t been committed, when the crime has been committed before the narrative begins. In fact, one might argue there is guilt built into the telling itself. Similarly, it feels like your insistence on the narrator’s animal instincts might actually hurt your argument about guilt: if this is a matter of animal involuntariness, then how is it also a matter of the moral judgment of humans, when morality is in some sense deliberative? Is he mad if he morally self-regulates (keep in mind that the ability to tell the difference between right and wrong is often the legal definition of insanity)? Other such moments are marked in the margins. Should you decide to revise—and I certainly hope you do—then I would advise that you begin to move beyond what is readily available to the reader, and focus on things that the story doesn’t entirely resolve or explain (i.e. for instance, the relationship between visuality and guilt? Or the way in which the story uses Macbeth to revise or develop a tradition of thinking about guilt). At the end of the essay, you should be able to conclude by drawing conclusions, rather than simply summarizing what you already said.

I’ve provided a great deal of feedback here (more than most), which is a testament to how suggestive this could be and my sense that once you have a clearer and more well-executed argument, your skills as a reader, writer and thinker will flourish. Look over all of this carefully and let me know if there are things that need clarification. I look forward to reading more of your work...maybe even more of this work...in the weeks ahead.

C -