

FIRST PAPER: Suggested Topics

Papers are due by Lecture 10 and should consist of at least five typed pages (figure 320 words/page, but since most spell-check programs will tell you how many words you are submitting, you can't make the essay look bigger by creating extra-large margins). The following suggestions are meant to be just that--suggestive. To sharpen your thinking about the texts, they frequently ask for a comparison between two of them, but you may write in reference to one text only if you wish, or you may apply the theme or topic mentioned to texts other than the one(s) mentioned in the question, or you may modify a topic or invent one of your own. In any case, however, the subject of the discussion should be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed so far this term and should deal with issues centrally relevant to both the text and to the subject-matter of our discussions in class.

Please remember that you are writing an essay, not a book-report. The assumption is that the reader of your essay has read the book and does not require a rehearsal of its contents. (A longish summary of the plot or of passages unrelated to a point of your overall argument will be regarded as mere filler, unnecessarily occupying space.) What an essay does supply is some reminder of the contents in the context of an argument about them; the reminder is offered in the course of explaining how one should understand or interpret those contents. Any good, short, coherent essay will be arguing something. It will help you to write the essay if you have in mind some overall point that you are trying to make and state it at the outset of your essay.

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SUGGESTED TOPICS

What are “ideas” in *The Machine Stops*? Why does Vashti “get no ideas” from those parts of the natural world that mankind naturally inhabits? What is meant by “the terrors of direct experience”? If the inhabitants of the Machine have indeed lost all sense of “direct experience” (whatever that is), has their devotion to “ideas” played any role in this? Are there any correlatives in our contemporary world to the “ideas” that are so central to human life in Forster's story? What does Kuno mean when he says that mankind is the measure of all things? Kuno says that people “worship” the Machine. Can a Machine be worshiped?

Discuss the opposition between the artificial and the natural in *The Machine Stops*. The text says that human beings must be adapted to their environment, but it hints that it is possible to be *too* adapted, to much in control of the environment for humanity's good. What sense does this notion make?

Exposit carefully Aristotle's basic notion of the natural (*physis*) or any particular aspect of it—such as, for example, the doctrine of the four kinds of cause—in such a way as to make the overall viewpoint of the text reasonable (if, as we now know, incorrect).

Compare the implications of the story of the Garden of Eden with any other text read so far this term, particularly in connection with the themes of either “knowledge” or “mankind's relation to nature” or “the need to labor”.

Compare Montaigne's essay “On Cannibals” with Bacon's “New Atlantis” as accounts of a “new world”, whatever that phrase suggests, from the standpoint of illuminating each by the other.

Compare Caliban (The Tempest) and Friday (Robinson Crusoe) as representatives of “natural man”. Or: compare Montaigne's account of cannibals with Defoe's in any way that seems productive of understanding one or another of the texts.

Compare Caliban and Ariel as servants obedient to Prospero's authority. What is the idea of “service” in the play? Why doesn't Prospero keep Ariel longer? Compare the idea of labor or servitude in The Tempest and in any other text read so far this term.

Discuss the similarities and contrasts between any of the kinds of characters in The Tempest--e.g. the “pure” characters, Ariel, the fairy spirit, and Miranda, the innocent, who has had no experience of humanity, save for her father and Caliban; the “good” servants, Ariel, who will not obey a bad supernatural master (Sycorax) and is punished for it and Gonzalo, who will obey a bad human master (Alonso) and in doing so, saves the master's intended victims; the good “bad guy” (Alonso) who will ask his child (Miranda, who becomes his daughter) forgiveness and the bad “bad guy”, Antonio, who does not exhibit repentance, although Prospero seems to forgo vengeance here as well; the comic villains (the two drunken servants) and the serious villains (the two aristocrats). Say something about the relation between this comparison and the theme or themes of the play.

An idea recurs in certain texts--someone (or some group) is brought to the brink of destruction by the design of a human agent or by force of circumstance and then discovers (or comes to realize) that this has been “stage managed” by someone or some power for their own betterment. Comment.

Crusoe calls himself “man in the state of nature”, but thanks to his salvaging the contents of the ship, he is supplied on his island “with the biggest magazine [i.e., store-house] of all kinds that was ever laid up, I believe, for one man.” Later readers came to hold that this not only contradicted the notion of a return to the state of nature but also that the book would have been better if Robinson had to start from scratch--i.e., without an array of tools and supplies. Accordingly, in the eighteenth century, several books were produced in Europe detailing the adventures of Robinson cast up on an uninhabited island with nothing but a few oddments (including a knife) that he had in his pockets; correspondingly, of course, they had to make the island richer in natural foods and materials for this to work. Do you think that changes of this sort would improve the original?

Compare the conditions of Prospero and Crusoe and the means that they have for their survival on their islands and draw some conclusions.

Discuss the idea of occult (secret, concealed, or hard-to-get-at) knowledge, or knowledge forbidden to certain people but not to others in relation to The Tempest and Bacon's New Atlantis. Or: discuss the character of Prospero's magic. If he can whistle up a storm or raise the dead from their graves (“by my most potent art”), why can't he whisk himself and Miranda back to Milan, depose Antonio, and reclaim his throne?

Compare the implications of the story of the Garden of Eden with any other text read so far this term, particularly in connection with the themes of either “knowledge” or “mankind's relation to nature” or “the need to labor”.

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