

Autumn 2013

Department of English and Cultural Studies  
McMaster University

English and Cultural Studies 3Q03E

## **History of Critical Theory: Representation, Education, and the Question of the Just Community**

Instructor: Dr. David L. Clark (dclark@mcmaster.ca)  
T.A.: Mr. Andrew Reszitaryk (reszita@mcmaster.ca)



Elizabeth I , *Darnley Portrait* (1575)

### **Essay Assignment**

Essays must be double-spaced and word-processed, and should be about ten pages or 2500-3000 words in length. Do remember to submit an essay which is *completely* free of errors in punctuation, spelling, and grammar, and which is argued in a coherent manner. *Avoid merely paraphrasing the arguments of the texts. Avoid recapitulating the content of the lectures and the Study Questions and Course Blog document.* Instead, treat this assignment as an opportunity to develop an essay that *analyses* questions and issues arising *from* those texts, using the lectures *only* as a jump-off point for your own remarks. It's important to root your remarks in the assigned texts, working closely with what the authors actually say there—i.e., the figures, images, narratives, settings, arguments, and illustrations--that bring these texts to life.

Although you may of course refer to arguments and examples that were discussed in class or in the Study Questions and Course Blog document, you are expected to develop an argument, finally, that you

can properly call your own. Write in a way that responds *directly* to the complexities and nuances of the course texts and to the specific core course questions (for the latter, see the Course Outline). The primary focus of your essay must be on materials that are assigned on the course and must address the course's core questions. You are welcome to refer briefly to other thinkers and questions, but the emphasis in your essay should be on materials that are assigned on the course and on the core questions of the course.

Students are warmly encouraged to turn to "secondary sources" when necessary; however, you are expected actively to *negotiate* with these sources and to acknowledge their use. (Wikipedia—or similar user-created platforms—is not a reliable scholarly resource and so should not be cited or used.) Any citation system (i.e., footnotes, endnotes, bibliography, or Works Cited) is acceptable, as long as it is consistent and informative.

It is especially important that your essay demonstrate three crucial characteristics of critical thinking: the precise delineation of your terms, the careful shaping and pacing of your argument, and the sustained discussion of specific passages drawn from the texts at hand. Your essay should be quickened by and consistently answerable to an indentifiable thesis or wager. If you have any difficulties with these or other aspects of writing essays, or seek to improve your essay writing skills, I highly recommend consulting *Writing Tools: Tips on preparing and composing your essays*, a very useful and accessible resource created by the Writing Center at Harvard University:

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/resources.html>

The exceptionally helpful and knowledgeable Writing Tutors in the Department of English and Cultural Studies are also available to assist you with your compositional practice. You can contact them and arrange a meeting at: [englut@mcmaster.ca](mailto:englut@mcmaster.ca)

If you are a smoker, please ensure that you print and submit a copy of your paper that is smoke-free.

### **Essay Due Date and Late Submission Policy:**

There are two due-dates for your final essay. You may choose either date. Essays are initially due in class, in person, at start of class, Monday 18 November 2013. Essays submitted at this point will receive a full marking commentary. Essays handed in after 18 November 2013 will be graded exactly the same but without comment. Essays may be submitted in class up to 2 December 2013, the last day of the course. No essays will be accepted after this point. A grade of zero/F will therefore be assigned to essays not submitted to me by 7 pm, 2 December 2013. No essays can be accepted as e-mail attachments or dropped off with the Department of English and Cultural Studies.

### **Essay Topics**

1) Several of the texts that we examine in this course in fact represent only a small part of larger, more extensive works, works which discuss any number of issues in addition to addressing the question of

mimesis, education, and justice that we explore. The section of Plato's *Republic* that we consider, for example, forms only one small part of a much more extensive argument. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is primarily about the nature of knowledge and knowing; it is this more detailed discussion that forms the backdrop for his remarks about the nature and abuse of language that we examine in class. Plato's *Phaedrus* is a dialogue primarily about love and language. Only in its last pages does it turn—at least explicitly—to the question of speech and writing. Choose one text on the course (of which we read only a part), and discuss the relationship between the remarks about mimesis, representation, education, and the just community that are found in the assigned reading and the text's argument as a whole. How is the part of the text that we consider informed by the claims and worries of the text in its entirety? And how do the problems and questions raised in our selection speak to the text of which that selection is but a part?

- 2) Texts which *theorize* the complex connections between representation, community, education and justice often also *exemplify* these connections. In other words, these texts are examples of the thoughtful worlds that they also affirm, even if that affirmation is a complex one. Discuss, looking carefully at one or two texts on this course. Do not recapitulate remarks made in class or in the Study Questions document, using those comments only as a jump-off point.
- 3) The history of critical theory could be described as a sustained conversation and negotiation between the texts making up that history. Discuss how a later text in this course inherits and adapts the argument of an earlier one.
- 4) The meaning, importance, problems, and possibilities of *education* activate the history of theory from its very beginnings. Compare and contrast the significance of education, teaching, learning, and schooling in two assigned texts. Remember to develop an essay that moves *well beyond* what was said in class. I.e., do not repeat what was said in class or in the Study Questions and Course Blog document, but instead use that material as a jump-off point to new arguments and discussions of new examples.
- 5) Create a short audio-visual presentation (say, 5-10 minutes) that stages a scene or moment in one of the texts that we study on this course. For example, using images, text, and sound, *dramatize* a scene from Plato's *Republic* or *Phaedrus*, capturing the complex interplay of character, argument, tone, setting, sound-scape, etc.. Or combine images and music as a background to a dramatic reading of a passage from Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*, capturing the "voice" of that text's narrator-- self-deprecating, ironic, worried, encouraging, and purposive. Or stage a scene from Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace*, using images drawn from the Revolutionary Wars (and earlier wars in the eighteenth century) and the Napoleonic Wars that so concern the German philosopher, and his worry that the world will extinguish itself in what he calls "wars of extermination." What does peace "look" like? Write a short (five page) explanation of why your audio-visual presentation looks and sounds the way that it does, and what specifically you hoped to accomplish by creating it in the way that you did.
- 6) I warmly encourage students to devise your own essay topic. Note: In order to ensure that your topic is viable and manageable, you must discuss your essay's objectives and arguments with Andrew first. Regardless of the topic, your essay will need to be anchored in the work of the writers and works on this course.