

21F.010, Introduction to European and Latin American Fiction

Prof. Margery Resnick

Last Essay Topics

Here are some thoughts for final topics that you may turn into a thesis and a short, concise, clear essay. Try to limit yourselves to 5 pages. Use textual evidence to prove your point. Think of something you want to argue in one of these works. If you are writing a comparative paper, make it very clear which element of each novel you are comparing and have a good reason concerning what the reader will learn from this comparison. You may write on: *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Cosmicomics* or *Aura*. Of course you should not feel limited by the topics below. **I will accept the essays any time from now until the last class session at 12 noon.**

1. Calvino pushes us to SEE what evolution has wrought in the breathtaking diversity of life, of the changes in life forms over millenia, of the consciousness humans bring (rather small in comparison) to the relentless evolutionary complexity in all life, from mollusks to the evolution of the eye in life forms, to the human mind looking at all of this (The Spiral). SEE, he says, look carefully, be amazed. He uses a fabulist style for this (The art of creating mixtures of fiction and reality in order to entertain, confuse, perform ontological sabotage or educate). Pick one or two of the stories and argue either that the mixture of science and fiction enhances, detracts from, or is irrelevant to the text it precedes. Be specific.

2. Calvino: "In an age when other fantastically speedy, widespread media are triumphing and running the risk of flattening all communication onto a single, homogeneous surface, the function of literature is communication between things that are different simply because they are different, not blunting but even sharpening the differences between them, following the true bent of the written language." (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*) Choose any story or two and argue that Calvino, in his own prose, is successful in linking "things that are different" to enrich the language and fantasy we enjoy in his work. Argue about what makes these stories so compelling.

3. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, by Calvino and published posthumously in 1987 and made up of the lectures he had prepared, just prior to his death, to be delivered at Harvard for the Charles Eliot Norton series, he states, talking about art and science:

"Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world."

Pick any story or two and argue that Calvino's "project" gives literature a function in contemporary life by providing a multifaceted vision of the world. How does he do this? Is the story you analyze successful in accomplishing this goal? Be specific about the "vision" the reader can gain from this text(s.)

4. Calvino is brilliant in opening up the dualism with which we deal with the world, dividing everything into this, not that, me, not you, us, not them, as if all reality is about distinction rather than reality extending from one to another, and a kind of zen unity in all things. Choose one or two stories and argue that this dualistic framing of the world allows us to understand human nature in important ways unavailable to readers of conventional fiction.

5. The novel is, in part, a genre that teaches us how to live, how not to live; how to distinguish between good and evil; how to love; how to be a good friend; how dialogue with others can, for better or for worse, change us. Choose a section of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and argue that the novel is truly didactic in terms of teaching the reader something important about how we should live.

6. "The personal is political" was a theme of the 1960s. Can this saying be applied to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*? Why? Argue that our personal fantasies are an important element of our political life. Use examples from the text.

7. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* deals with the theme of power: political, social and sexual. Argue that the novel does or does not break conventional notions of power. Explain how it does or does not do that. Be specific.

8. To what extent does *Kiss of the Spider Woman* show how conventional sex roles limit personal autonomy? How are they dangerous? How is Molina limited by his role? Valentin? Does either of them change his sexual identity? If the sexual identity does not change, expand, etc. what does change?

9. In *Aura* the reader is drawn into a surreal "family" and invited to participate in a way we might not have imagined prior to reading. Explain how elements of Fuentes' writing style captured your imagination to engage you in this family's present, past and future. Why did you keep reading (aside from the fact that it was assigned.) Argue that through his use of magic, Fuentes illuminates certain aspects of the human spirit that might not otherwise be examined.

10. *Aura* may be interpreted on several levels. On a literal level, it is a classic tale of horror with the hero losing autonomy as he is taken over by a witch. However, on a symbolic level the book engages our imagination in a much richer way, causing us to question our own passions, notions of destiny and free will, and inexplicable attractions. Argue any interpretation of the novel.

11. Think about the relationships among characters in *Aura*. What are the sex roles they represent? What is their social position within the family? What is their economic reality and their geographic and historical situation. In what way is this a powerful commentary on Mexico's past? Does Fuentes link the present Mexico with that past? How?