

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

Prof. Margery Resnick

Second Essay Topics

The first version of the second essay is due one day after session #13. It must be at least 5 pages, double-spaced, with 1" margins. What follows below are some ideas: you are not required to take-off from these ideas—they simply represent some possible directions.

1. Many forms of repression are examined in these works. Use *Kiss, Aura*, *Therese Raquin* to think about how political/social repression plays itself out in personal relationships.
2. Several of the works we have read offer a social/political critique either directly or indirectly. Using two of the authors we have read, examine ways in which fiction is used to provide a social commentary. Many of these works allow the reader to understand political (post-colonial, governmental, economic) violence. Choose one or two characters and discuss how this violence is not necessarily physical, but also social, ethical or economic.
3. Choose any of the thought questions distributed by the teaching groups or by me and use them as the basis for an essay.
4. Fiction often invites us to participate in family life in a way we might not have imagined prior to reading. Choose one or more of the novels or short stories and explain how you were or were not drawn into a style of family life that was unfamiliar or familiar to you before reading the novel.
5. Think about the relationships among characters in any of the works we have read. 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 work distant from your experience? In what way is it close to your life experience?

6. TWO FIRST PERSON NARRATORS

Discuss, compare and contrast the narrators of *Dom Casmurro* and *Accident*. Machado and Wolf created extremely different characters, wrote them a century apart, published the novels before and after Freud's work on the unconscious appeared. Use passages to illustrate how each narrator's Voice powerfully reveal story in different ways (perhaps purposely confuses the reader at times, to cause us to think about uncomfortable ideas like love, death, loss, jealousy, guilt, and rage). One is calm, very measured. The other is agitated in dealing with a nuclear catastrophe. They have different motives in describing their experience, have different views of the world, and deal with elements of their own crazed fears in different ways. How sane or "normal" is each?

You could deal with how one narrator reveals himself as unreliable (self-interested bias, memory loss, lying, etc.) and the other as excitable and fearful of the loss of "normal" daily life (her brother's, her daughter's, whole populations, her own). What does the first person narrator allow each author to do in these

novels? (deal with the unconscious compulsions and darkness we are all capable of, demonstrate how subjective reality/perception can be, how self-interested and biased our "life narratives" are – who we are, who's at fault in our lifetime events, etc.?)

What is most affecting to you about how these narrators were created by Machado and Wolf -- the distinctive personalities and perspectives which interpret their experiences? What did you realize or think about for the first time about yourself (preferably) or others in this reading? [Note: Outline your ideas, collect examples, then organize your sections into a convincing argument based, not on general impressions, but a close reading of both novels. Carefully decide what your central idea is when you have written for a while.]

7. The HEART of DARKNESS in *Accident*

Christa Wolf uses a single day set near the Chernobyl accident to present "stream of consciousness" reflections on what makes us human, what makes life "normal," what we cherish human experience and what drives us to destroy it – in families, in war, and in scientific accidents. What does she mean when she discusses the heart of darkness several times?

Although she seems to free associate*, she carefully weaves together elements of personal life, scientific accident and domination of nature to think about what makes us human and how destructive we can be. She savors the pleasures of the senses, lovely sights, tastes, images and memories that make life precious. She alternates worry about her brother's brain surgery (no relation to the accident?) with worry about her daughter's family's health, living near the nuclear cloud, and concern for the effects of radiation on evolution, crop and water safety for masses of people. Then she moves into memories of the last apocalypse, World War II and the typhoid fever epidemic of 1945 that she and her brother survived at war's end. Talk about how she uses her writer's craft to recreate the horror of the accident in ways the news media never could or would, for whatever reasons.

Discuss the denial many use to avoid painful realities while others -- like the author-- plunge into the midst of our fears – "this early fear of the dark side of our nature from which we can never liberate ourselves except through death and destruction." (74) Discuss how she explores joy and pain and tell where she comes down in the end -- life is precious or life is vulnerable? How powerful is the darkness she relates, and what does fear do to us in her novel? What do simple actions and the everyday pleasures do for us? Does she see the glass half empty or half full? Do you agree with her mistrust of the some scientists and their fear that isolates them "so reliably against that which we normal people call life...[so they] would rather free the atom than themselves" (65)? Explain, again, with a clear thesis and examples to support your claims.

* "Everything I have been able to think and feel has gone beyond the boundaries of prose." (58)