

British Literature (Medieval and Renaissance) Essay Topics

A good undergraduate literature paper should be concerned primarily with a careful and detailed analysis of a particular character, theme, or passage in a particular work or works. Your paper should pose some kind of argument about your topic, in the sense that it should advance an idea that someone might disagree with. You are not required to use secondary literature for this paper. Your primary aim should be to construct a meaningful reading of some aspect of a work that stays close to the text as it develops. You should support your claims with quotations, but you should also carefully analyze those quotations—don't assume that the meaning is transparent. And remember, all the normal rules of composition still apply: focused thesis statement, strong topic sentences, unified paragraphs, and thorough analysis. Please refer to the *MLA Style Manual* for proper citation forms and other formatting issues.

If you decide to use secondary literature, do not use it as a replacement for your own analysis. Secondary literature is best used as a point-of-departure for amplifying a particular point, or for introducing an idea that you plan to argue against.

For suggestions on writing about literature, see the “Handouts” section of my web page:

<http://www.longwoodshakespeare.net/handouts>

Topics for paper #1:

1. Compare the *Beowulf* poet's treatment of Grendel and the dragon. Do these monsters contribute to our understanding of the ethical or social values of Anglo-Saxon society? What purpose do the monsters serve in the poem? Do Grendel and the dragon represent different kinds of evil?
2. The Green Knight says that he has only come to Arthur's court to ask a Christmas game (l. 283). Much of the action in *Gawain* revolves around various kinds of games, including hunting games. How are all these games connected? What is the Green Knight's game? Is the poet playing a game with the reader?
3. Choose and analyze a portrait from the *General Prologue* of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* not discussed in class. Can you detect irony in the choice of details or in the tone? What is the pilgrim's “degree”—i.e., rank—and can you compare him with other pilgrims? Or discuss two portraits of pilgrims related in some way (e.g., Knight/Squire, Prioress/Monk, Sergeant of the Law/ Franklin, Parson/Plowman, Miller/Reeve, Summoner/Pardoner). In what ways do the details in the descriptions complement one another?
4. Both *Everyman* and *The Second Shepherds' Play* attempt to deliver religious doctrine through a dramatic structure. Choose either the morality or the mystery play and discuss the strategies it employs to educate the audience about the truths of Christian experience. Be sure you think about these plays in dramatic terms. You might even want to discuss how to produce and stage it in order to bring out its doctrine.

Topics for paper #2:

5. Write a comparative analysis of a pair of poems on a similar theme—and feel free to draw on poems in the anthology we didn't discuss in class. Compare and contrast such things as (a) situation and point-of-view (what is stated or implied about the speaker, person[s] addressed, and circumstances); (b) figurative language; (c) tone, (d) diction, (e) versification, (f) rhyme scheme or stanza form. You don't need to talk about all of these elements. Focus on those that lend themselves to a significant comparison. In conclusion, in what respects does each poem exhibit the individual style of its author; in what respects does it belong to a "school" or historical trend. Possible pairs: Marlowe, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," and Donne, "The Bait"; Herrick, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," and Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"; Donne, Sonnet 10 ("Death be not proud"), and Herbert, "Death"; Waller, "Song" ("Go lovely rose!"), and Herbert, "Virtue"; Jonson, "Still to Be Neat", and Herrick, "Delight in Disorder."
6. How does Milton use imagery (both literal and figurative description) to manipulate the reader's response to Satan? Discuss examples from the first two books and some of the later books. Can you trace an emerging pattern?
7. Analyze the different ways in which English Renaissance poets contributed to or responded to the Petrarchan tradition of love poetry. Discuss the use (and abuse) of Petrarchan conventions or conceits (love as a battle, love as a wound, love as a hunt, blazon, the beloved's virtue, the beloved's fair complexion and hair, identification with objects touched by the beloved, antithesis) by English poets. Make sure you discuss the anti-Petrarchan sentiments that arise in the 1590s and later.
8. In what ways does the idea of the court and the life of the courtier affect Renaissance English literature? Identify poems or works in which court life is represented or commented upon and explain how those texts reflect Renaissance attitudes toward court life.