

Written Assignments

Civilizations of the Ancient World • Spring 2023

For this course, you'll write three essays: one on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one on Aristophanes's *Clouds*, and one on images of the ancient world.

Before uploading, make sure your essays meet the Requirements for All Papers. All written assignments must be submitted via BlackBoard.

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| Essay #1 on <i>The Epic of Gilgamesh</i> | Monday, March 6 |
| Essay #2 on <i>Clouds</i> | Monday, April 17 |
| Essay #3 on Representations and Images | Monday, May 15 |

IMPORTANT

Watch the video. The overview video explains what I want you to cover in the essay and what I'm expecting in terms of arguments, evidence, and structure.

Before you upload, make sure your essay meets the Requirements for All Papers, including formatting, structure, and citations. You will be marked down drastically if your paper is not properly cited. For how to do citations and bibliographies, see the Research and Citation Center.

Essay on *Epic of Gilgamesh*

The assignment: Write a 3- to 4-page essay using three moments from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to take a position on the culture, beliefs, and social expectations of ancient Sumer, responding to one of the following three prompts.

OPTION 1

The mortal and the divine

Choose any of the mortal characters from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and discuss his or her relationship with the gods.

- Describe and discuss three moments from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* showing your character interacting with or contemplating the gods.
- Make an argument about what these examples show us regarding Sumer's take on religion and the gods, and what it means to be human. Think about Sumerian culture's traditions and expectations and how they impact on the individual you're writing about.
- (Note: your best bets are either Gilgamesh or Enkidu; Utanapishtim is also a possibility.)

OPTION 2

Gender in Sumerian society

Choose any of the female characters from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and discuss her relationship with the other characters and Sumerian society.

- Describe and discuss three moments from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* showing your character's actions or behavior and how it relates to her role as a woman in Sumerian society.
- Make an argument about what these examples show us regarding gender expectations and the roles of women in Sumerian culture. Think about Sumerian culture's traditions and expectations and how they impact on the individual you're writing about.
- (Note: your best bet is Shamhat; Ninsun and Ishtar are also possibilities.)

OPTION 3

Life and death

Mortality is one of the major themes of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, but what is the epic saying about it?

- Describe and discuss three moments from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* that involve death or mortality—either an actual death, or discussion of death and mortality.
- Make an argument about what these examples show us regarding Sumerian ideas of death and legacy, and how Sumerian culture thought about death. Think about Sumerian culture's traditions and expectations and how they impact on the individual you're writing about.

Essay on *Clouds*

The assignment: Write a 3- to 4-page essay comparing three moments from *Clouds* to another work in order to take a position on the culture, beliefs, and social expectations of classical Athens, responding to one of the following three prompts.

OPTION 1

Right and wrong in Clouds

Clouds emphasizes traditional values throughout the play and then ends with violence. Does *Clouds* offer an internally inconsistent message on morality?

- First, choose a tragedy from the Greek classical period in which morality is a key issue. (Popular options include *Medea* by Euripides; *Elektra* by Euripides or Sophocles; and *Antigone* by Sophocles; but there are other possibilities as well.)
- Describe and discuss three incidents from *Clouds* that involve a moral decision or an argument between characters about what the morality of an action. Compare each of these incidents with a similar (or contrasting) moment in the tragedy you've selected.
- Make an argument for the consistency of the moral argument of *Clouds* by comparing it with the moral argument in the tragedy. Where do both plays stand with regard to the Athenian debate on relative morality (nomos vs. physis)?

OPTION 2

Aristophanes's agenda

The surviving plays of Aristophanes range over a long and turbulent period of Athenian history. Do Aristophanes's opinions and technique change over time?

- First, choose another play by Aristophanes. (Popular options include *Frogs*, mounted in 405 BCE, 11 years after the revised version of *Clouds*; *Birds*, mounted in 414; and *Wealth*, mounted in 388; but any of the 11 surviving plays is fair game. Full texts in English are available on the course website, on the ancient texts page.)
- Describe and discuss three moments from *Clouds* that reflect either Aristophanes's opinions or how he makes the play reflect them. Compare each of these moments with a similar (or contrasting) moment in the other comedy.
- Make an argument for the consistency of Aristophanes's approach to writing, and the evolution of his overall philosophy across this most troubled period. What themes and ideas are present in both plays? Is his approach, methodology, or agenda consistent? If not, how does it change?

OPTION 3

Socrates vs. Socrates

The “Socrates” found in Aristophanes’s *Clouds* is a deliberate distortion driven by a desire to discredit the real Socrates. What does this version of Socrates have in common with the one depicted in works by Socrates’s student, Plato?

- First, choose a work by Plato in which Socrates is a major character. (Possibilities include: *Phaedo*, which has Socrates discussing life and afterlife on the brink of his execution; *Apology*, a version of Socrates’s self-defense against charges of irreligion; or any of the other dialogs that focus on how Plato wanted to show Socrates’s methods and beliefs. Full texts in English are available on the course website, on the ancient texts page.)
- Describe and discuss three moments from *Clouds* that reflect an opinion or behavior expressed by Aristophanes’s version of Socrates. Compare each of these moments with a similar (or contrasting) moment in the work by Plato. What characteristics of Socrates and his philosophy were most exaggerated by the two authors (either in ridicule or praise), and why?
- Make an argument about how Socrates was seen by Athenians in their time of strife. What stood out about his behavior and beliefs that caused him to be venerated by some, and yet so feared by others that he was executed?
- (What’s important to remember is that both versions of Socrates are distortions, twisted in the service of what their authors were trying to say about them. Aristophanes and Plato each had an agenda with respect to how they wanted to show Socrates. That means that both authors offered a distorted picture of Socrates that separates us from the real-life man.)

Essay on Representations and Images

The assignment: Write a 3- to 4-page essay using depictions of the ancient world to take a position on the representations of ancient cultural ideas and beliefs, following one of the following two options.

OPTION 1

Two pieces in a museum

How a culture sees abstract ideas (masculinity, virtue, old age, divinity, and so on) is often reflected in its artwork. What can two different works of art depicting the same idea, but from different times or places, tell us about how the cultures that produced them?

For this option, you need to choose two works of art from the ancient world that (a) represent the same idea or concept but (b) come either from different periods or from different places in the ancient world.

In your essay, compare three things that these works have in common, using those comparisons to make an argument about what these two artists believed in and the insights this gives us into the cultures they came from.

Choosing your subjects

- Your two works of art must represent the same idea or concept. For example, you can choose two little girls, two warriors, two fertility goddesses, etc. The idea is to look for how similarities and differences in representations of the same idea tell us about the cultural beliefs and expectations that shaped the artists and their own culturally-conditioned visions of that idea.
- Your works of art must be from the ancient era (before 500 CE), and they must be from either two different places or two different periods. This allows you to talk about two separate societies and how they represent the same concepts differently. The two pieces can be in any visual medium: sculpture, painting, relief, etc. They do not have to be in the same medium as long as they are depictions of the same idea or concept.
- Ideally, you should experience the artwork face-to-face by attending a museum in person. Possible venues include: Metropolitan Museum's Egypt Collection; Metropolitan Museum's Greek and Roman Art Collection; Brooklyn Museum of Art's Ancient Egyptian Art Collection; and Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Art. You are, of course, not limited to these venues, and you are not limited to New York. If you are not able to attend a museum in person because of ongoing restrictions, you may find imagery of artworks that meet the requirements on museum websites instead.

Writing your paper

- Choose three aspects of the works you can discuss for both pieces that seem to reflect how the artist felt about the subject and what the subject stood for.
 - Some possibilities include facial expression, dress, use of technique or medium, stiffness/fluidity, apparent strength/weakness, idealism/realism, or any other elements offering some kind of insight into what the artist was trying to convey. Describe and discuss your subjective impressions of these three aspects in the two works.
 - For each aspect, compare how it manifests in the first piece; then talk about how the second piece is similar or different and in what way; and finally talk about what these similarities or differences tell us about what each artist believed about their subject and what that might tell us about the cultural beliefs they came from in relation to the subject being depicted.

For example: say the works you've chosen are two sculptures depicting a goddess of love from different cultures, and one has a crafty expression while the other has an innocent expression. The different facial expressions can be used to talk about how each artist, and the cultures they came from, might have thought about things like the gods' attitudes toward their roles in creating relationships between mortals; the nature of love; the motivations of the gods, etc.

- Make an argument about how consistently the same core idea was seen in the two times or places that produced these two works. If art is an expression of cultural values, what do the differences between these works tell you about the respective cultures they come from? What do their similarities tell you about what these ancient cultures have in common?
- You do not need to preface your essay with background about the periods, the media used, etc. This essay is about your subjective reactions to these two specific works and what you believe they are telling you about the beliefs and social expectations of the cultures they came from.
- On a separate "Works Discussed" page after your essay:
 - List the title of each work, the artist, the approximate date it was created, the city or region it came from originally, and the name of the museum gallery where the work can be found.
 - Paste in photographs of the items. If it's permitted at the museum, take a picture of the items while you're there. If it's not, find pictures of those specific items on the museum's web site.

OPTION 2

The ancient world on film

Every depiction of an historical event, whether in prose, poetry, painting, theater, or film, involves an artist using history to convey his or her own beliefs. What do the creators of the film and the authors of the source material it was based on want you to believe?

For this option, you need to choose a film that is set in the ancient world and that is based on an ancient primary source. In your essay, compare the agenda of the filmmakers with the agenda of the authors of the primary source. Describe and discuss the similarities and differences in how these creators reshaped this event for their own purposes. Use these similarities and differences to make an argument about the ways in which this particular event is leveraged to impose ideas on audiences and about what this event means to the people who create art about it.

Choosing your subjects

- First, choose and watch any feature-length film set in the ancient era (3500 BCE to 500 CE). You can also choose two episodes of a television series set in the ancient world.
- Then find the ancient primary source material it was based on and read it. For example, if you chose the movie *300*, which is about Spartans fighting Persian invaders at the Battle of Thermopylae, the primary source you'd need would be the main ancient account of that battle, which is in Book 7 of *The Histories* by the famous historian Herodotos. Your primary source(s) must come from the ancient world (before 500 CE).
- Some suggestions for possible films or series and their corresponding sources are listed on the Essay #3 page on the course website. The list is not exhaustive, and you are not limited to this list as long as the film you choose is set in the ancient world and is based on ancient primary sources.

Writing your paper

- Choose three moments or depictions from the film and find the corresponding events or depictions in the primary source.
 - For each moment or depiction, describe and discuss how it appears in the film and how it is presented similarly or differently in the primary source material.

For example: In the movie *300*, Xerxes and the Persians are depicted in a very distinctive and heavy-handed manner. If this is one of your three topics, could describe and discuss what tropes and visual and dialog cues the filmmakers were using to suggest how we should think of the Persians in the film, and why the filmmakers might have chosen to represent the Persians this way as part of their overall point about these events.

Meanwhile, Herodotos's presentation of the Persians is very different, which you can use to discuss what Herodotos wanted us to think about the Persians and the role he saw them as playing in this war.

After that, you could discuss how and why the two depictions are different and what this means for their two different perspectives on differences between Greeks and Persians.

- Use these similarities or differences to make an argument about (a) the agenda of the primary source author and how it compares to the agenda of the filmmakers, and (b) the ways this historical event is used by others to present their own ideas, and what this tells us about the shape and meaning of this event's impact and legacy on history.
 - **Please take note:** This essay is about the agenda of the primary source author as much as the filmmakers'. Do not use the source to "fact check" the film and list what it got "wrong". You must consider the primary source to be at least as skewed, manipulative, and agenda-driven as the film.
- On a separate "Works Discussed" page after your essay, list the title of film, year, director, stars and studio. Then list the book or books you drew your written evidence from, using standard citation style. The references to the primary source must also be properly cited in the text as usual.