

PHL388H1F: First Essay

due by 11:59 P.M. on Friday, May 29

One of the goals of this course is to help you learn how to apply a philosophical understanding of literature to the discussions of books we have in everyday life. In this essay you will do just that. Your assignment is to **write a philosophical evaluation of a book review** of your choosing. This means identifying the implicit assumptions about literature being made in the review, assessing the validity of those assumptions as general principles about literature, and speculating about the considerations that may be motivating those assumptions.

Before you begin

It is up to you to find a book review to evaluate. Three constraints:

1. **The review must be from a legitimate source.** A review from a newspaper or magazine (online or in print) is ideal. Some example sources, all of which have websites you can browse through, include The Toronto Star, The Globe & Mail, The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Guardian, The Telegraph, Slate, The A.V. Club, and Quill & Quire. Reviews from professional or quasi-professional book blogs are also acceptable. User reviews from websites like Amazon or Goodreads are *not* acceptable. If you have any doubts about whether the review you've found is acceptable, check with me!
2. **The review must be negative or otherwise critical of the book it's reviewing.** This is just to ensure that you'll have something to write about!
3. **The review must *not* be of a book we have or will be reading in this course.**

It is not actually necessary that you be familiar with the book being reviewed for you to do well on this assignment. However, to get the most out of this essay, I would recommend thinking of a recently published book that you yourself read recently, and then searching the Internet for a negative review of that book.

Essay guidelines

Your essay should be **approximately 1000 words in length** (i.e., 4 double-spaced pages). Specifically, your essay should consist of the following four sections:

Introduction	50 to 100 words
Identification of review's implicit assumption	250 to 350 words
Assessment of review's implicit assumption	250 to 350 words
Diagnosis of review's implicit assumption	250 to 350 words

Importantly, you are ***not*** to evaluate the claims that the review makes ***about the work***. It does not matter if you think the review is incorrect in its assessment of the work at issue. Your task is to evaluate whether it is assessing the work *on fair grounds* (that is, whether the assumptions it is making about what would make the work a “good” one are legitimate assumptions about literature).

I. Introduction

Your initial introductory paragraph should be brief and to the point: simply announce the piece you will be discussing, preview its content, and indicate what your ultimate assessment will be. For example:

Willie Costello, in his review of Claire Messud's The Woman Upstairs, criticizes the work for its unsympathetic protagonist. In this essay I will show that this criticism assumes an untenable conception of literature, according to which a work's protagonist must be sympathetic for the work to succeed. Ultimately, I will suggest that successful literary works demand, not sympathy, but identification with their protagonists, where identification is more a matter of the protagonist's being interesting than simply sympathetic.

II. Identification

The identification section of your essay should do two things: summarize the review's main criticism of the work (with reference to specific quotes from the review), and then identify the implicit general assumption about literature that seems to be standing behind this criticism. For example, if your review criticized the book for having an unsympathetic protagonist, the implicit assumption behind this criticism would be something like "good works of literature must have sympathetic protagonists".

III. Assessment

The assessment section of your essay should evaluate the validity of the implicit assumption you identified in the previous section. This means assessing how good the assumption is as a general principle about literature. Regardless of what the particular assumption may be, you should be able to show that it is questionable in one way or another. This may be done in various ways; for example, you may...

- **invalidate:** show that the assumption is open to clear counterexamples, either by counting obviously nonliterary works as literature (i.e., by being too broad) or by disqualifying as literature other, commonly accepted literary works (i.e., by being too narrow)
- **qualify:** show that the assumption is valid, but only for a particular *subset* of literary works (i.e., that it fails as a *general* principle)
- **expand:** show that the assumption on its own is not sufficient, and requires or presupposes that some other condition(s) also be satisfied
- **clarify:** identify an ambiguity in the assumption (i.e., a point which admits of two or more readings), explain why these readings need to be distinguished, and (perhaps) show how the assumption is trading on that ambiguity
- **focus:** question whether the assumption is in fact specific to literature, or rather reflects other, extra-literary concerns we may have about books

For example, if your review's assumption were that good works of literature must have sympathetic protagonists, you could invalidate this by pointing to some examples of commonly accepted literary works with unsympathetic protagonists (Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, perhaps).

Note that your assessment need not fit neatly into any of these categories; the above list is intended merely to give you an idea of what I am expecting.

iv. Diagnosis

The diagnosis section of your essay should then speculate about what might have motivated the reviewer to make the assumption you've now shown to be questionable. What aspect or feature of literature is the assumption trying to capture? Is there some other, more accurate assumption in the vicinity of the review's assumption, which it should have assumed instead? Is there some better way to put the point that the assumption is trying to make? For example, if your review's assumption were that good works of literature must have sympathetic protagonists, you might suggest that the real concern here is that we must be able to *identify* with literary protagonists, and although sympathy is often associated with such identification, it is not required.

Formatting

Please prepare your essay for blind grading: the only piece of identifying information on your essay should be your student number; please do not include your name. Other than that, you may format your essay however you wish, but please keep in mind that it is going to be read by another human. A legible font, ample margins, and appropriate line spacing will all be appreciated.

Please include a full bibliographical citation of the review you evaluated, as well as any other material referenced, at the end of your essay. No specific citation style is required; just follow some standard style of your choosing. Quotations from the review you're evaluating should be put in quotation marks, but need not be followed by any further citation information (e.g., year or page numbers).

Please attach a copy of the review you evaluated to the end of your essay. If it's an online review, you may just copy and paste the review text; if it's a print

review, append a scan of the review.

Please save your essay in PDF format, with the file name “[YOUR STUDENT NUMBER].pdf” (e.g., “997340408.pdf”).

Turning it in

Please submit your essay via Blackboard (from the “Essay Assignments” link on the sidebar) by 11:59 P.M. on Friday, May 29.

Late papers will be docked 10% if submitted within the first 24 hours after the due date, and 5% for each subsequent 24 hour period after that (unless accompanied by valid documentation, found here: www.illnessverification.utoronto.ca). Late papers may be submitted up to 7 days after the due date; any papers not received by this time will automatically receive a 0.

Grading

Your essay will be graded on the quality of its analysis, cogency of its argument, and overall clarity of its writing. The grading rubric I will be using will be made available on the course website.