

## PHL388H1F: Second Essay

*due by 11:59 P.M. on Friday, June 19*

One of the goals of this course is to help you learn how to construct and defend a personal position on an issue in the philosophy of literature. In this essay you will do just that. Your assignment is to **write a philosophical critique of an opinion you held about literature at the start of this class**, using your responses to the first micro-assignment as your “source material”. This means developing specific and pointed criticisms to your original opinion, and then using these criticisms to come to a new or clarified position.

### *Essay topics*

**Choose one of the following four topics.** Each is a question you’ve answered before, at the start of the term, as part of the first micro-assignment. I have added some further clarifications to each question for the purposes of this assignment; please be sure to take these considerations into account when writing your essay.

1. **What’s the value of reading literature?** A proper answer to this question should, ideally, identify a value which is distinctive to literature, or alternatively, explain why no such distinctively literary value exists.
2. **Are some genres of fiction better than others?** Note that by “better” here, I mean better *as literature*. This question is not asking, merely, whether great works of literature can be found in every genre (of course they can); it is asking, rather, whether there are principled reasons for preferring certain genres over others, on the whole. In other words, are all genres of fiction alike and equal in their realization of literary ends?

3. **Can there be multiple equally acceptable interpretations of the same piece of literature?** If your basic answer is yes, you should explain just how many equally acceptable interpretations there can be. If your basic answer is no, you should explain which interpretation is the “best” or most acceptable. In either case, your response to this question should clarify what makes one interpretation more acceptable than another.
4. **Can a great work of literature be morally repugnant?** Note that this question is not asking, merely, whether works of literature can portray morally repugnant characters and/or events (of course they can). It is asking, rather, whether one can recognize a book as an exemplary work of literature while at the same time believing it to *have a theme* and/or *express a viewpoint* which one finds morally repugnant.<sup>1</sup> In other words, do our moral values have any bearing on what we do or do not recognize as literature? (You need not worry about relativistic concerns here; the question you should be focusing on is whether a book whose viewpoint is morally repugnant *to us* can still be considered *by us* to be a great work of literature.)

To get the most out of this essay, I would recommend choosing the question that interests you the most, and which you would personally most enjoy thinking about more deeply.

*Before you begin*

Your starting point for this essay will be the response you gave to your chosen question on the first micro-assignment. Retrieve your responses to the first micro-assignment via Blackboard by going to “My Grades”, clicking on “Micro-Assignment 1 (due Tuesday, May 12)”, and then on the next page clicking on the number under “Calculated Grade” (which is probably a ‘2’). Then, find and copy out the response you gave there to the question you have selected as your essay topic; this will serve as your “original opinion”.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, imagine a book which not merely features a misogynistic protagonist, but which also seems (sincerely and unironically) to *champion* this protagonist, and thus to express the viewpoint that misogyny is proper and good – would we accept this as a great work of literature?

## *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
1 <sup>st</sup> developed criticism of your original opinion	250 to 350 words
2 <sup>nd</sup> developed criticism of your original opinion	250 to 350 words
Revised position	250 to 350 words

N.B.: The particular position you get to in the end is less important than *how* you get there. Your task is to *develop* a position *via criticism* of your original opinion (that is, to arrive at a position which responds to and avoids the problems and weaknesses that you highlight in your original opinion). In other words, it's the progression, not the conclusion, that matters (it's the journey, not the destination).

### I. Introduction

Your introductory paragraph should be brief and to the point: simply indicate the question you will be addressing, what your original opinion on that question (from the first micro-assignment) was, and what the revised position you will ultimately come to will be. You need not quote your original response verbatim, but you may; at the very least, you should paraphrase it here.

You may, and probably should, use the first person (“I/my/mine”) throughout.

### II. & III. Developed criticisms of your original opinion

The following two sections of your essay should each present a distinct, developed, and specific criticism of your original opinion. This may be done in various ways; for example, you may...

- **objection:** present an objection or counterexample to your original opinion, and explain why this objection needs to be addressed
- **clarify:** identify an ambiguity in your original opinion (i.e., a point which admits of two or more readings), and explain why these readings need to be distinguished

- **qualify:** show that your original opinion is valid, but only for a particular subset of cases
- **expand:** show that your original opinion on its own is not a sufficient answer to the question, and requires or presupposes that some other consideration(s) be added

Your criticisms 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. Your two criticisms may both be of the same form, but they must present independent points.

#### iv. Revised position

The final section of your essay should then use the criticisms you've raised in the previous two sections to arrive at a revised position which responds to and avoids the problems and weaknesses you've now brought out in your original opinion. Your revised position may be something quite different from your original opinion, or it may be a clarification of your original opinion; in any case, it should be an *improvement* on your original opinion. Clearly explain how you are addressing and responding to the criticisms you raised previously, and be honest about any reservations you still have about your revised position.

#### *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.

There's no reason to reference any secondary literature for this assignment, but if you do, please include a full bibliographical citation at the end of your essay. No specific citation style is required; just follow some standard style of your choosing.

**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, June 19.

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](http://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.