

Guidelines for the short essay.

Length: 3-5 pp. or 2000-3500 words.

Due: 3/20, on the MIT Server (as a Word or pdf file).

Format: See “How to format your essay” for details.

This essay should be a close analysis of a brief passage of your choosing, taken from any part of *Paradise Lost*. By “brief,” I mean 50 lines or less; if your passage falls towards the longer end of the spectrum, you should expect a/ to write a paper on the longer side and b/ to focus more closely on some shorter segment of that passage, using the rest as context.

Beginning: You should begin by concisely setting up the context of the passage: who is speaking and, if a character, to whom; what is the setting; and what is happening at this point in the text.

Doing the analysis: Close analysis of the passage might begin with general or subjective impressions, but these should then be grounded in (and perhaps tested against) objective details: word choice, syntax, tone, and rhythm, as well as very careful attention to what is said and how. Under “how,” you’ll also want to consider Milton’s use of metaphors, similes, figurative language (e.g., the “debt” constituted by gratitude), as well as allusions (e.g., the figure of the scales at the end of Book IV as inherited from classical epic) and the use of sources, if any. I don’t expect you necessarily to look up the original source for allusions to Homer, Virgil, Ovid, or other classical writers, although it’s certainly worth doing if you have the curiosity and the energy. I *would* expect you to look at some version of the original text for any allusion to the Bible, and to consider both the surrounding context for the quotation or allusion AND how Milton may have changed, added to, or interpreted his source. Your notes should alert you to the presence of Biblical references, and the online texts linked to this site are good resources for looking them up. You are then the judge of how much of what you find out will be relevant, interesting, or important for analysis of Milton’s text.

Concluding: Once you’ve generated a good bit of material, and sorted it for importance, you’ll want to think about how it adds up. If you’ve begun either your thinking or the essay with an overall impression or question, what difference has your analysis made to that initial starting point? (It’s fine to discover that you’ve changed your mind). Finally, you might also want to indicate how the details of this passage relate to larger questions and issues in the text as a whole – that is, why it matters and what we can take from this analysis into our reading of the rest of the poem.

Note on Milton’s syntax: it is both difficult and very important to make sure that you understand Milton’s sentences, which are often structured in tricky and unexpected ways; I will be looking for this kind of clarity when I read the essays. Don’t be shy to start at a very basic level: what is the main verb of this sentence? Who or what is the subject/doer of that action? Who or what is the object/recipient of the action? How do the other clauses and elements of the sentence relate, formally, to its core structure of subject/verb/[object]? Please see also: “How to format your essay” (under General on this site) for details about how to quote the text correctly.

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21L.705 Major Authors: John Milton
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