Tutorial letter 201/1/2013

FOUNDATIONS IN ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES
ENG1501

Department of English Studies

FEEDBACK AND EXAMINATION GUIDELINES
Dear student

Your first assignment is based on Shakespeare’s sonnet, entitled “My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun”. Even before you begin reading the poem, you should have remembered that William Shakespeare, possibly the most famous writer in the history of English literature, was primarily a playwright, who wrote, among other plays, Hamlet, Macbeth, Twelfth Night, Julius Caesar and The Tempest. Shakespeare was also a prolific poet who wrote several sonnets. One of these, “Let me Not to the Marriage of True Minds,” is also discussed in your study guide.

The sonnet

A quick look at the discussion of sonnets in your study guide would have reminded you of the main features of the sonnet. These are:

- It is 14 lines long.
- Each line contains ten syllables in groups of two. We call this kind of rhythm iambic pentameter.
- The rhyme scheme follows a regular pattern – either the lines rhyme in two groups of four and then in a group of six (in a Petrarchan sonnet) or in three groups of four and then in a rhyming couplet (in a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet).
- The subject of the poem is usually an important or universal human experience, such as death or love.

From the above list, you will be able to see at once that “My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun” is a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet. The first four lines rhyme in ab ab sequence, with “sun” and “dun” rhyming at the end of lines 1 and 3; “red” and “head” also rhyme at the end of lines 2 and 4. Lines 5-8 follow the same pattern, and so do lines 9-12. Lines 13 and 14 end on rhyming sounds (“fair” and “compare”) as well, which makes them a couplet.

Now that you have considered the form (or shape) of the poem, you are in a good position to answer the assignment questions. In the remainder of this tutorial letter, I will give you pointers about how you could have answered these questions. But please remember: my answers are not the only correct or acceptable ones, except for Question 1. In most cases, literary interpretation and criticism opens up the possibility of more than one “right” answer to any given question. This is because everyone reads in their own, unique way.
Question 1

The rhyme scheme of the poem is:
abab cdcd efef gg

Question 2

The tone of the poem refers to the emotional resonance, feeling or attitude of the speaker (as we explain in your study guide). The tone of “My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun” is half-comical and half-serious. The speaker appears to be making jokes throughout most of the poem, for example in the lines: “If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head” (line 4) and “If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun” (line 3). These jokes appear to target or belittle his girlfriend, but in reality, they are made at the expense of the convention that elevates women’s beauty in romantic poetry to unrealistic heights.

Question 3

I agree that “in this poem, the speaker seems to be mocking or making fun of the Mistress’s looks”. He turns his attention to several of her body parts, explaining one by one how these body parts do not live up to the expectations of idealised perfection that are often held up for them to meet. You could have taken any example from the poem to support your answer here. I have chosen the lines “I have seen roses damasked, red and white, / But no such roses see I in her cheeks” (lines 5-6). In these lines, the speaker begins by mentioning the idealised version of female beauty, namely the idea of “roses” in a woman’s cheeks. Several poems in the courtly love tradition claim that women’s cheeks looked like roses with their blend of red and white. After drawing the reader’s attention to this ideal, the speaker goes on to say that his mistress does not live up to it. She does not have “roses” in her cheeks. This means that her beauty is neither ideal nor perfect, but falls short of the standard that is often held up for women to reach.
**Question 4**

“My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun” differs from the classical Petrarchan sonnet in that it emphatically does not idealise or romanticise a woman’s beauty. In fact, the speaker does the opposite: he tells us about the ways in which his mistress does not live up to the idealised vision of female perfection that is created by such poems. Each of the references to a particular body part is framed as a denial that the mistress meets the romanticised standard for female beauty. In order to support this claim, I would like to mention the first line (also the title line) where the speaker says “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” (line 1). In this line, he mentions the idealised version of female beauty, in which women’s eyes were often described as shining as brightly as the sun, and then says that his mistress does not meet this expectation.

**Question 5**

You will remember from your study guide that simile, metaphor, and personification are three poetic methods of comparison. Shakespeare uses all three in “My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun”.

A simile is a comparison that uses the word “like” or “as”. In the poem, we read: “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” (line 1). This line compares the mistress’s eyes to the sun, but only to point out the difference or dissimilarity, by saying that her eyes are not like the sun at all.

A metaphor is a comparison that does not use the words “like” or “as”, but simply states that one thing is the same as another thing. In the sonnet, we read “black wires grow on her head” (line 4). This is a metaphor, comparing the mistress’s hair to wires. The speaker does not say that her hair is like wire: he says that it is wire. In this way, the metaphor gains more impact than the simile.

**Personification** is a form of metaphor. It is a poetic strategy that involves turning a non-human object into a human aspect. An example from the poem is “I have seen roses damasked, red and white, / But no such roses see I in her cheeks” (lines 5-6). In these lines, a natural thing (a rose) is turned into a human attribute when the speaker says that roses cannot be found in his mistress’s cheeks. Specifically, here, the pink colour of a woman’s cheeks is being compared to the flower of a rose.
Question 6

The answer to this question is certainly yes. Our society promotes ideals of women’s beauty that are as unrealistic as those that are mentioned in the poem. The ideal woman in the twenty-first century is not, perhaps, as natural as the accepted image of female perfection in the Shakespearean era. You only have to look at advertising on billboards or in magazines to see that today’s perfect woman is very young, as one would expect in a society that despises ageing and does everything possible to avoid it. She is also extremely thin (many models and actresses make themselves ill by dieting to extremes).

Question 7

In the final two lines of the poem (the couplet), the speaker’s tone changes from humorous and jocular to serious, as he expresses his true feelings about his mistress. Up to this point he has been saying how he does not feel about her: that is, that she does not come up to the ideal of feminine perfection that is enshrined in Petrarchan writing. In the couplet (the final lines), though, he says that she is “as rare” as any woman (“any she”) who is “belied” (that is, lied about) by being falsely compared to anything or anyone. He implies that, although she does not live up to the ideal, she is still “rare” and precious to him. Maybe she is even more precious to him because she is a real woman, not an idealised one. In these two lines, the speaker overturns or reverses the tone of the preceding twelve lines, where he has apparently been mocking his mistress’s looks. Instead, here, he turns his criticism to the conventional expectations that demand of women that they should look impossibly beautiful. The effect is that we will imagine his mistress in all kinds of ways apart from the ideal of beauty that we are used to in our society – but we will imagine her as a real, not an ideal, woman.

I hope you enjoyed working on this assignment. Please read your other prescribed poems with as much attention as we have devoted to this one. In this way, you will make sure you prepare adequately for the examination.
PRE-EXAMINATION INFORMATION

In this module we are aiming to do two things:

- We want to inspire you to enjoy the diversity and artistry of English literature;
- We also want to introduce you to some of the ways in which we can think about English literature and write about it academically and critically.

Your examination will demonstrate how well we (and you) have succeeded. The format of the exam paper is as follows:

You will be presented with five examination questions, one on each text (Selves and Others, Seasons Come to Pass, Catcher in the Rye, The Road to Mecca and When Rain Clouds Gather). The examination is two hours long and you will have to answer two of the five questions. Each question is out of 50, although your assignment mark counts 30% of your final mark.

The questions on Selves and Others and Seasons Come to Pass are “contextual” questions in the sense that passages from the texts are provided in the examination. You do not have to “learn” these texts. Rather concentrate on reading them thoroughly, and especially, work through and prepare intelligent critical analyses of the twenty poems we have provided for you to study in detail. The questions on these texts will not necessarily ask you to write essays: you may be asked to answer short questions in a paragraph each (about 10-15 lines).

The questions on Catcher in the Rye, The Road to Mecca and When Rain Clouds Gather are essay-type questions. Each of these should be answered in an essay (about 2-3 pages long) and each question focuses on a controversial or ambiguous aspect of the text. You will need to answer these questions in essays that are argued coherently, and present evidence for your point of view.
When we mark your examinations, we’ll be looking for:

1. A sustained focus on each examination question. Answers that re-tell the story of any of your prescribed texts will definitely fail on the grounds that they do not address the questions adequately.

2. Clear and grammatically correct expression in English. Because this is so important, it is worth while taking a few minutes at the end of your exam to read over what you have written for each question to make sure your grammar, spelling and style are as good as they can be.

Good luck for the examination!
The teaching team

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