Tutorial letter 202/3/2013

FOUNDATIONS IN ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES

ENG1501

Department of English Studies

FEEDBACK AND EXAMINATION GUIDELINES
FEEDBACK ON ASSIGNMENT 02

The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger

Dear student

In this assignment you were asked to find three instances of ‘goodbyes’ that Holden makes in the novel, including the one in the question. You were asked to make notes on these departures, and then to write an essay, using these notes, on Holden’s attitude to loss and goodbyes.

As is the case in most complex novels such as this one, it is not always easy to isolate ‘themes’ and ideas in this way. The ideas of loss and of letting go, of departures and leave takings, run through the whole novel, and are intertwined with other ideas and strands.

If you read the section on the novel in the study guide, as you were instructed to do, you would have learnt that this novel is an example of a Bildungsroman, or ‘a “coming-of-age” novel. The main character, Holden Caulfield, is moving from a state of “innocence” (in childhood, adolescence) to one of “experience” (in adulthood). The term Bildungsroman denotes a novel of all-around self-development.’ (Study Guide for ENG1501). Reread the section on page 62 dealing with the Bildungsroman: you will see in point 2 that ‘To spur the hero or heroine on to their journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting’ (p. 62). Holden is at a stage in his life where he realises that growing up means a loss of innocence. What might the loss which has spurred Holden on his journey be?

It can be argued that the greatest loss that Holden has suffered is the death of his brother, Allie. Holden’s inability to come to terms with Allie’s death, to accept the loss, is central to the novel. Instances which underline this include the occasion on which Holden writes about Allie’s baseball mitt when writing an essay for Stradlater (Chapter 5). This episode reveals Holden’s obsession with death and loss. See if you can find other examples in the novel which show us this preoccupation, for instance Holden’s thoughts about James Castle, a skinny boy who jumped out the window at school and fell to his death. What does this incident and Holden’s memory of it tell us about Holden’s attitude to loss?
Linked to this fear of death is Holden’s fear of adulthood and leaving the safety of childhood and adolescence behind. He regards children as innocent and unspoilt. The adults he knows and meets are all, in his opinion, ‘phony’ in some way – by contrast, children are still pure and untouched by the dishonesty he sees in adults. He wishes to save children, and subconsciously himself, from having to lose their innocence. Find examples in the novel of how he tries to escape growing up and having to lose this state of innocence. One example is his fantasy of running away to live in the woods with Sally, for instance. Of course, this notion of childhood as pure and innocent is as flawed as his condemnation of the entire adult world as phony, but it allows him to avoid the things that frighten him most about adulthood, things like sex, intimacy and death.

There are other, more literal, goodbyes in the novel:

- Consider Holden’s visit to Mr Spencer in chapter 2. Read the whole chapter carefully, and then pay particular attention to the last page – note the change in Holden’s tone compared to the rest of the chapter. How does this chapter illustrate Holden’s fear of death and growing old? What other feelings does this visit stir up in him and how does this chapter add to our understanding of his attitudes to loss and leave taking?
- The ducks on the lake in Central Park are a recurring motif – what do they suggest about Holden’s fears of loss?
- The last few chapters of the novel, Chapter 25 in particular, though, are perhaps the most revealing. Read them carefully and think about Holden’s plan to say goodbye to Phoebe. What are his reasons for wanting to leave? Why is he unable to go in the end?

Now choose any three of the instances above, or any others of your own choice, and write notes on them which you can use in your essay.
The Road to Mecca by Athol Fugard

What is the reason for Marius’s visit? What does he want Helen to do?

When you analyse a play, remember to pay attention to the stage directions as well as the dialogue between characters. The main reason for Marius’s visit is to convince Helen to move to a retirement home in Graaff-Reinet. He wants her to complete the application form for the old-age home. When you make a statement such as this, you need to provide support or evidence from the play. How do we know that this is the real reason behind Marius’s visit? When the act starts, we see Marius and Elsa at a table with Helen, “the centre of attraction being a basket of vegetables which Marius has brought with him”. However, it soon emerges that bringing the vegetables is not the real reason for his visit. He informs Helen that a room has been made available in the home and that a “decision must be made, one way or the other”. He places subtle pressure on her by noting that she was moved to the top of the waiting list “as a personal favour”.

Marius claims that he knows what is good for Helen and that is why he has come to visit her. Do you believe him? Why?

This question requires you to give your opinion. You may choose to agree that Marius knows what it best for Helen or you may choose to disagree. The most important part of this answer is the way in which you support whichever argument you make. Your opinion must be based on the play. I would argue that Marius cannot know what is best for Helen because he does not really understand her. Helen is an artist, but Marius dismisses her art by referring to it as a “hobby” and by calling her statues “ornaments”, “that nightmare” and “cement monstrosities”. He has no respect for Helen or her work as he tells her that her “life has become as grotesque as those creations of [hers] out there”. Marius is obviously concerned about Helen’s safety, especially after the fire in her home. He also thinks that Helen would be better off as an active part of the church and the community. For Helen, however, her life as Stefanus’s wife was not a happy one. She did not love him and, even as she sat “obediently” next to him in church, she knew that “it was all a terrible, terrible lie”. Her art and the home she made for herself have allowed her to live a life of some truth and freedom. This is what is best for her, even though it is not something that Marius or the community can understand.
Elsa claims that Marius is in love with Helen (Fugard 2003: 74). Do you agree with her? Why?

As with the previous question, you may agree or disagree with Elsa, but you must support your argument with close reference to the play. For instance, if I argue that Elsa is wrong about Marius’s feelings for Helen, I must explain my opinion. I would argue that Marius is threatened by Helen. He is scared of her art and her commitment to living life on her own terms. He admits: “I am frightened of what you have done to yourself and your life, yes, that is true!” On the other hand, I could agree with Elsa and point out that Marius thought it “inevitable” and “right” that they “should find each other again and be together for what time was left to [them] in the same world”. He keeps insisting that his “only concern has been her well-being”. However, you should ask yourself whether this is enough to convince you that he is in love with her. Do you think that it is possible to love someone if you do not understand them or respect their choices? The play suggests that going to the retirement home would have harmed Helen more than it would have helped her. If Marius really loved her, would he not have realised this? These are just examples of the types of questions you should be asking yourself when you attempt to answer this question.

*When Rain Clouds Gather* by Bessie Head

Write a character sketch of Chief Matenge and comment on how he is an example of corrupt leadership.

Your essay would have benefitted from outlining the character of Chief Matenge by showing how he embodies the main concerns of the novel. This should be done in spite of the fact that the topic did not explicitly instruct you to do so.
What are the concerns that your character sketch of Matenge should have focused upon?

- Set in Botswana, and featuring a main character who has fled from apartheid South Africa, the novel shows how life may be experienced outside of the formal institution of white racism. In the character of Matenge, we see the presence of corruption and forms of evil.

- Also, in the character of Matenge, the future is allegedly threatened through his friendship with Joas Tsepe, who belongs to the Pan African political movement. (As shown at the beginning of Chapter V, a closer look at the novel’s development of this idea reveals that Bessie Head focuses on the corruption in this movement. Is tribalism one example?)

- Again, in Matenge, the future is threatened by those who manipulate the institution of royalty to further the system of slavery, to flaunt wealth and to unfairly discriminate against other people on the basis of being ‘foreigners’.

Notice that I began by stressing that a good essay would have presented Matenge through a demonstration of familiarity with the novel’s focus on what post-colonial country should be like. Below are some points that should have guided you in elaborating your character sketch of Matenge in the context of the whole novel.

- The novel introduces Matenge as an antagonist to his brother, Chief Sekoto, who is one of the heroes. This contrast shows that these brothers belong to royalty. You should have developed your argument about Matenge by carefully examining the tensions between these brothers, especially on matters of the law. Almost without exception, these tensions depict royalty as a site of power and control over the people. In short, does Matenge relate better to the people than to Sekoto? In your view, who would you associate with as far as your ideal of royalty is concerned and why
• Other incidents that you could have cited in order to develop your ideas about Matenge, relate to his obsession with Gilbert and Makhaya as ‘refugees’ and ‘foreigners’. In your opinion, is Matenge’s fixation with these individuals a display of xenophobia? To what extent would you consider such behaviour as signifying the corruption of the human spirit? Is it, in your opinion, a blight that should not taint leadership?

• Why do you think the novel associates Matenge with Joas Tsepe, and his political association with a questionable form of nationalism? My suggestion is that, through the embodiment of Matenge, the novel not only introduces another version of corruption, which is directly linked with royalty, but also insinuates and mirrors the apartheid South Africa of the time. You need to pay special attention to Makhaya’s reasons for going into exile in order to find my proposal convincing.

For instance, one wonders why (in Chapter IX) Makhaya expresses the sentiment that Matenge takes advantage of the poor, precisely because, like white racists (in South Africa), he sees himself as a ‘god’.

We urge you to think about characters in relation to the key themes a novel, or any work of art, pursues.

**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.

**Writing the essay**

Although you were asked to write notes in your journal in preparation for this essay, when you do the assignment your answer must be in the form of an essay. This means that you do not use subsections or bullets, or write down a set of different, unlinked comments.

A formal academic essay for a literary English module, such as this, is a single, continuous piece of prose without subsections, but structured so as to contain an introduction, a ‘body’, or middle section containing your answer to the question, and a conclusion (though these must not have headings). In the introduction you briefly state what the main point is that you are going to make, then you develop the argument in the body, and in the conclusion you briefly restate your contention.

The body of the essay should be made up of a series of linked paragraphs that follow each other in logical order, and within each paragraph each sentence should logically lead on to the next.
It is a good idea to draw up a rough plan for your essay, write a draft, and then edit it so that the argument flows smoothly and every sentence can be easily read and understood. After the second to last step, proofread your essay so that you can correct the language, spelling and punctuation, you can then submit your essay.

Good luck for the examination!

The teaching team

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