

Cultural Analysis Diagnostic: Beginning of the Semester

Instructions

Listen to your TA read the short text printed below. Then carefully read the text yourself [and read the paragraph of background or contextual information that accompanies it]. After you have examined the text closely, read the five prompts below. As a class, you will develop responses to each of them. Please follow the directions for how to respond to each prompt. The prompts lead you through five sequential steps of close reading, asking you first to *paraphrase*, then to *observe*, then to *contextualize*, then to *analyze*, and finally to *argue* a claim or thesis about the text. Be sure to keep the text visible and refer back to it as you respond to the prompts.

Haruki Murakami, *After Dark* (Japan, 2004)

“Eyes mark the shape of the city.

Through the eyes of a high-flying night bird, we take in the scene from midair. In our broad sweep, the city looks like a single gigantic creature—or more like a single collective entity created by many intertwining organisms. Countless arteries stretch to the ends of its elusive body, circulating a continuous supply of fresh blood cells, sending out new data and collecting the old, sending out new consumables and collecting the old, sending out new contradictions and collecting the old. To the rhythm of its pulsing, all parts of the body flicker and flare up and squirm.

Midnight is approaching, and while the peak of activity has passed, the basal metabolism¹ that maintains life continues undiminished, producing the basso continuo² of the city’s moan, a monotonous sound that neither rises nor falls but is pregnant with foreboding.”

¹ the minimal amount of energy necessary to maintain respiration, circulation, and other vital body functions while fasting and at total rest.

² an accompanying musical part that includes a bass line and harmonies

[Murakami’s contemporary novel tracks a series of encounters experienced by two sisters, a sleeping fashion model and a student. It is set in downtown Tokyo during the spooky hours between midnight and dawn. Murakami is known for his humor, psychological insight, and his blurring on the lines between logic and imagination. This is the opening paragraph.]

Prompts:

- 1. Paraphrase:** In your own words, give as accurate and complete a summary as you can of the *factual* content of the text: what situation it literally describes, what concrete action or actions (if any) take place in that situation, and who or what performs these actions. Respond to this prompt in two or three complete sentences. (A full credit response to this prompt would be worth two points.)
- 2. Observe:** Identify and list four (a, b, c, d) features or qualities of the text’s language that catch your attention and that you think may be important to understanding what the text means. Respond to this prompt by stating each of your observations in one short sentence that ends with the phrase “is potentially significant.” Your list may include any kind of

elements that you think may be significant: descriptive details; structural and stylistic patterns; arrangements of words; changes in the text's vocabulary, rhythm, or tone; evocative images or metaphors; repetitions of phrases, sounds, or ideas. But, in each of your four sentences, be as specific as possible in identifying the feature you are observing. (A full credit response to this prompt would be worth two points.)

3. Contextualize: *[Drawing on the information provided in the paragraph of background information about text x, period y, and poet z], identify and list 2 facts (a and b) about the social, historical, literary historical, and/or biographical context or circumstances of text x that you think may be important to understanding what the text means. Respond to this prompt by stating each of your observations in one short sentence that ends with the phrase "is potentially significant."* (A full credit response to this prompt would be worth one point.)

4. Analyze: Select 3 of the observations you have listed in steps two and three and state in one or two sentences for each of the textual or contextual features you have selected why that detail or quality is significant, how it contributes to an understanding or interpretation of what the text means. Respond to this prompt by naming the textual feature or contextual fact you are analyzing, followed by "is significant because . . ." (A full credit response to this prompt would be worth three points.)

5. Argue: Based on your work of observation and analysis in the preceding steps, write a one paragraph interpretation of the text that conveys your understanding of the text's meaning and purpose. Respond to this prompt by composing three to five sentences in which you state the main thesis of your interpretation--the central claim you are arguing for--and support that thesis by presenting the evidence for it that you have gathered in steps 2 through 4. Your paragraph may, but does not have to, include some of the same analytical sentences you wrote for prompt 4; whether you re-use these exact sentences or not, the individual observations and analyses that you present in this paragraph should all contribute to the support of your central thesis or claim. (A full credit response to this prompt would be worth two points.)

This assignment is not graded but it is intended to help you to be as successful as possible in the course. The available points for this assignment would total 10 (broken down as indicated). Your TA will be using this breakdown as a basis for assessing your written assignments (the Dream Interpretation entries, essays, research paper, etc.) for the class. A fully successful journal entry or essay will contain all of the elements listed above and may look like what is requested in step 5. The goal of the exercise is to clarify the course expectations for you, and to let you know where and how to focus your energies. The point breakdown is designed to give you an idea of how we will weigh each element and to ensure that you are aware of the expected elements for the formal written assignments.

