

Questions for Professor Kristen Welsh

1. What was the specific assignment?

I asked the students to write a five- to eight-page paper on the work of one or more of the three authors we studied during weeks eight, nine, and ten of the semester. Because the class was small (six students) and the students all excellent, I was confident that such an open assignment could be successful, as long as I provided additional support for topic development. We talked in class about approaches to the assignment, and I asked the students to brainstorm topics individually, then share their ideas with the class. This exercise not only generated a wealth of promising topics, it also provided a helpful review of the works and concepts covered to that point in the semester. We spent approximately 30 minutes of our 85-minute class period on this discussion, and I subsequently met one-on-one with several of the students to discuss their work in progress or refine their paper topics.

2. How does this assignment fit with the goals of your course?

The course is about reading and understanding literature. I expect students to be able to discuss themes that recur in the works we read, as well as themes that may be unique to a single author or work; to identify techniques important to each writer's work; and to come to an individual understanding of a given text based on concrete evidence from that text.

3. Why do these student essays stand out for you as strong writing?

Sarah and Gala both present their ideas methodically, and waste no time in establishing the points they will prove. I do not know how many drafts each student wrote, but their final versions demonstrate careful focus and lead to original insights. I submitted their papers together because each discusses the work of the young émigré writer Lara Vapnyar, but from very different analytical points of view. I was especially excited to receive these two papers for the same assignment because they exemplify the multiple interpretive paths possible in literature.

Sarah focuses on the motif of communication and perception in Vapnyar's short story "A Question for Vera," showing how one character's bullying utterances trigger a loss of innocence in a silent and observant little girl. Sarah cites not only what the characters say to each other, but how Vapnyar presents or withholds their dialogue. She concludes her essay by briefly comparing Vapnyar's technique with that used by Natalia Baranskaya in her short story "The Woman with the Umbrella," showing how the same motif can be manipulated to different ends.

Gala writes about a single story, "Lydia's Grove," again by Lara Vapnyar. She isolates one seemingly insignificant detail, the child narrator's fingers, and traces its use throughout the story. Gala's essay, as she herself writes, shows how Vapnyar constructs "a magnified intimate look at the underside of things that are unspoken." Taken together, Gala's exploration of the unspoken and Sarah's discussion of communication and perception illuminate different aspects of a key theme in Vapnyar's writing.

Questions for Sarah Amundson

1. How did you go about completing this essay? What steps did you follow?

After reading several short stories from both authors, and discussing at length common themes in class, I decided to focus on the theme of perception and how each writer manipulates perception within each story. Once I'd determined my topic, I had to figure out in what way were the authors' use of perception similar. Although they used dialogue very differently, they used it to obtain similar affects.

For this paper, I began with the textual evidence and worked in reverse relating them to each other and describing what they do in the context of each story and in relation to perception. After identifying the textual evidence, I worked in a fairly linear process from introduction to conclusion, occasionally restructuring the placement of certain textual evidence within the paper.

2. What was the most challenging aspect of this essay assignment?

The most challenging aspect was relating the authors to each other by means of writing style. Both writers have such distinct styles, that at times I felt I could have just examined one story and one author's use of dialogue.

3. How does this essay connect to your work in the course as a whole?

Because the course is Russian women's writing, throughout the semester I've been looking for potential correlations in the works either thematically or structurally. The correlation in the texts thematically offered a closer structural analysis of the texts themselves.

4. What is the most important thing you learned from doing this essay?

This paper helped me to focus on the texts themselves and encouraged the analysis of writing style. This assignment also helped me understand the way different techniques are employed to convey similar affects.

Questions for Galina Mukomolova

1. How did you go about completing this essay? What steps did you follow?

I was deeply entranced with most of the stories in this book, but I was mostly interested in this story due to the used of lesbian sexuality which is so rare in Russian literature. I had some of my observations already swimming in my head when I proceeded to do at least two close readings, using different "stickies" to chart the re-occurrences of different symbols and images.

2. What was the most challenging aspect of this essay assignment?

Honing in on exactly what I wanted to say and how I wanted to prove it.

3. How does this essay connect to your work in the course as a whole?

Throughout this course I have been interested in the sexuality that is so intense and yet so covert in Russian women's writing. Tsvetsaeva was one of my greater inspirations and it was wonderful to finally get a modern writer taking about the topic of queer female sexuality in Russian culture.

4. What is the most important thing you learned from doing this essay?

How fruitful and exciting close-reading can be with short stories, something I had only known before with novels and poems.