

QUESTIONS FOR PROFESSOR HENKING

1. What is the specific assignment for this essay?

This assignment asked students to choose a theme or incident or character in the novel *THE LADIES' AUXILIARY* by Tova Mirvis that would address what the student took to be a central question regarding the relationship of women and religion. The paper was to be circa 5 pages long and to use specific evidence from the text to show how the book related to the relationship of women and religion the student wished to articulate. In addition, students were asked to draw from other readings in the course, each of which was chosen in order to show some of the key questions characterizing discussion of women and religion within religious studies.

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

The paper, which came early in the semester, was quite open-ended. It was organized in this way in order for students to be able to identify their own key questions and to do so in direct dialogue with readings which were, on the one hand, quite technical in religious studies, and on the other hand, a work of imaginative fiction which they could treat, in a way, as a case study. Thus, the assignment met course goals of (1) careful reading of texts; (2) creation of arguments based on textual evidence; (3) identification of questions from the field that were important to individual students; and (4) examining a "case" from the perspective of theoretical discussions.

3. Why does this student's essay stand out for you as strong writing?

Caitlin is a strong writer in terms of identifying a thesis and arguing for it. She is synthetic in her use of course readings, and articulate in her use of BOTH theoretical paradigms and the fictional material.

QUESTIONS FOR CAITLIN ALLEN

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

Often times, professors ask seemingly daunting questions for students to answer in a limited amount of space. First, I break down the question into smaller questions. I assemble all of my "evidence" from texts and materials presented in class around themes that address the questions. Using those themes, I construct paragraphs that analyze the class material from multiple perspectives. When I start out writing I have a basic idea of my thesis, but, my thesis is best crafted after I have assembled my evidence, written critically about the material, and re-wrote some of the paragraphs. With my thesis statement, I am better able to do another re-write to construct a more lucid argument. For me, writing is not stating what I heard in class; the process of writing is to think deeply about what I have experienced in class

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

Although this paper is for a Religious Studies class, I usually take political science and public policy classes. Religious Studies has challenged me to think critically about the "big" questions, to ask why we are here and why do people believe in things. Political Science asks the same questions; however, writing about political science is easier because there are some definitive events and statistics that have shaped human behavior and history. Writing about religion is far more ambiguous, which makes these assignments very challenging for me.

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

This paper gives a general overview of the material discussed in "Women, Religion and Culture" with Professor Henking. Professor Henking introduced the topics of this course using Tova Mirvis' *The Ladies Auxiliary*. Consequently, writing this paper prefaced many of the more difficult and nuanced discussions in class.

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

I learned that it is possible to write beautifully, clearly, and accurately about topics that generations of people cannot begin to describe.