

Questions for Professor Williams

1. What is the specific assignment for this essay (see attached for complete description, short version below)

For your second paper, due Wednesday, March 21, I would like for you to examine Martha Graham's *Cave of the Heart*, or her *Night Journey*, or Doris Humphrey's *With My Red Fires*, or *New Dance*. Approach the choreography like a text and discuss it following the elements of criticism that Banes sets forth in her article: description, evaluation, interpretation, and contextualization. You may (and should!) use quotes from scholarly sources to support your statements—this is a research paper, not purely an "opinion" paper. The paper should contain a balance of the four elements, although not necessarily in equal proportions. Here are some suggestions for things to include in each category:

Description: basic program information (title, composer, set/costume designer, date first performed, featured dancers); plot or themes; organization/structure; movement style and qualities; sequence of events; music style and qualities; design elements. What makes this piece a Graham, or a Humphrey?

Evaluation: what makes this work a "masterwork"? Why is it considered important?

Interpretation: what is this piece "about"? What did the choreographer say it was about? How did critics and/or dance history scholars interpret it? If there are conflicting interpretations, which one do you support, and why?

Contextualization: how does this piece fit in with the artist's development as a choreographer? Were there new ideas, techniques, or approaches utilized, or does the piece represent a culmination of some sort? How does this work reflect the time and place in which it was choreographed? Does it resonate with a particular artistic sensibility, philosophical attitude, or worldview? Was it radically different from works of other choreographers of the same era?

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

Dance History II focuses on "modern dance" from its beginnings at the turn of the century through current trends. The focus (see syllabus excerpt below) is not so much on names and dates and dances, but on how each particular choreographer represented or rebelled against something social, artistic, political and how her/his particular focus and philosophy of dance affected the subsequent generations. Throughout the course students were asked to write from a variety of perspectives, from their first paper "in the voice of" a dance history pioneer to their final paper on a contemporary choreographer and his/her antecedents. I wanted students to be able to understand the motivations and beliefs of each person we studied, to begin to develop a critical and analytical eye for dance (to understand style, technique, composition and artistry) and to question how these dancer/choreographers were in relationship to their society, as we are to ours. This particular paper assignment demanded astute viewing skills, research, original thought/formation of a thesis, and the ability to engage in dialogue with a piece of art.

Dance History II examines the development of theatrical (concert) dance from the late 1800's through the contemporary period. The special focus of this course is the rise of modern dance and the women who were its pioneers and creators: Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, and Doris Humphrey. The emergence of modern dance in America was greatly influenced by the social and political reform movements of the late nineteenth century, and we will investigate the subsequent social, political, economic, and aesthetic forces that shaped its creation. An emphasis will be placed on discovering and understanding the artistic philosophy of each dancer and/or choreographer, and the ways in which his/her beliefs foreshadowed, corresponded with, or rebelled against the prevailing aesthetics of the time.

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

Anna deftly incorporated her deep understanding of dance choreography, dance criticism, and eloquent description into an amazing analysis of this work. Her ideas were original yet well documented and supported, her writing style was lucid and concise, and she brought me to a new understanding of this "masterwork."

Questions for Anna Dodge

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

After looking at the possible essay topics, reading their explanations, and watching the video/DVD material (the Martha Graham pieces we were to analyze and discuss) I decided that the piece I found to be most compelling to watch was "Night Journey."

Normally when I write essays I cannot sit down and type the whole piece linearly. I have to pool together thoughts and ideas as I write. It's like a collage-making process. Sometimes I write my ideas in list form and then cluster them together with important quotes. As I write, I carefully read over what I'm working on and constantly go back to layer, expand on, and elucidate ideas that seem undeveloped or unsupported. Once I build solid paragraphs (ideas that are supported within and can stand on their own) I move them around each other to try and find a logical flow and connection. For the "Night Journey" essay, I found it most coherent to first introduce the narrative structure and key points Graham worked with, then deconstruct her use of symbolism and movement ideas as they were presented chronologically in the dance.

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

I think that coming to terms with how I felt personally about Martha Graham's approach to "Night Journey" took a great deal of reflection. It encouraged me to do a bit of psychoanalysis...

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

I was working on an honors thesis about meaning making and interpretation in dance criticism with Professor Williams at the time. This focused my attention on how critics interpreted “Night Journey.”

4. What was the most important thing you learned from writing this essay?

It helped me work on relating dance critic to literary or poetic analysis. It helped me process the significance of certain repeating gestures and movement motifs in the context of a narrative.