

## **QUESTIONS FOR PROFESSOR ERUSSARD**

### **1. What was the specific assignment for this essay?**

The students had to choose one of the following three sonnets by Shakespeare: 12, 18 or 55. They were required to write a detailed, thorough formal analysis of the sonnet using the critical terminology studied in class.

### **2. How did this assignment fit with the goals for your course?**

The goal of the course is to teach students to read texts in an analytical way. The analysis of Renaissance sonnet is a difficult but engaging exercise that forces students to read very slowly and think about all the possible meanings of each word, each sentence structure, rhyme... It also familiarizes the students with the changing conventions of poetry and gives them a sense of the history and development of these conventions.

### **3. Why is this student essay an example of strong writing?**

I have given this type of assignment each time I taught this course and previously in other courses, in Europe and in the USA. Joshua Unikel's essay on sonnet 55 is the most complete student's "explication de texte" I have ever read. Another quality of Joshua's essay comes from its interdisciplinary depth. I use the term "explication de texte" because I recognize in Joshua's analytical style the influence of the French classes he has taken; at the same time, the overall interpretation reveals Joshua's familiarity with and understanding of the philosophical tradition. The essay is extremely detailed and insightful, but it is also written with great fluency and grace. As the title demonstrates, it is also fun and creative. This is an absolutely wonderful piece of

## **QUESTIONS FOR JOSHUA UNIKEL**

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

This essay began with a completely different focus than what appears in its final form. The project was initially as a comparative study of Shakespeare's "Sonnet Fifty-Five" and Plato's Forms. In its early stage, the essay was centered around an evaluation of the various uses of the word "you" in the sonnet. However, I soon decided that this topic required an implausible amount of philosophic reading. Also, I found the thesis too narrow. The more I studied the sonnet, the more literary nuances that I discovered within its fourteen lines. In light of this, I let myself read the poem in as many ways as I could. This impetus led me to read the sonnet in nine different manners (viz. in terms of its structure, euphony, connotation, denotation, Renaissance Themes, literary devices, overall narrative, which are explicated in the essay as well as the use of tense and the word "you" in the sonnet, which was omitted from and footnoted in the essay, respectively). These readings allowed me to formalize as many of the inter-working literary elements that I could find in "Sonnet Fifty-Five". The last step of my process was my attempt to express all of this in an outline and in an essay that presented these ideas in a clear, precise, and well-ordered fashion. Finally, it should be noted that throughout parts of the process mentioned above, I had a kind and scholarly support group of academics who aided me in revising the ideas as well as the structure of this essay.

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

Once I decided to open my thesis so broadly, I found it difficult to refine my scope so that: 1. I was able to discuss all of the elements that I thought were in need of discussion 2. My essay reflected the cohesion that I found between these literary elements in a way that was clear to the reader 3. I thought that justice was done to Shakespeare, Professor Erussard and her assignment, and my capacity as a student of language. Driven by these three indices, I forced myself to minimize my outline from nineteen to six pages. In the process, I deleted some of the extraneous topics completely while others appear in a truncated form as footnotes. This process of revision probably turned an essay of fifty pages into an essay of approximately twelve pages of text. The act of “trimming down” my ideas and my scope, so to speak, which is present in the process mentioned here, seems to be a necessary, regular, and bittersweet part of how fine tune my essays in general. In doing so, I often feel as if I am selling everyone short (viz. the author, the professor and his/her assignment, and myself), yet, in retrospect, I usually conclude that these choices were well-made.

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

I think that this essay attempts to meet the expectations that Professor Erussard has of her students to perform a close reading of texts, to innovate a creative yet textually supported thesis, to design a structure that makes use of a clear and grammatically correct word choice, and to present all of these in a logically ordered manner. Throughout this semester I found these expectations to be present in all of the course’s essay assignments, which ranged in their textual foci from Homer’s Odyssey to Marquez’s Chronicles of a Death Foretold, as well as our daily discussions in class.

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

If I had to choose one thing as the most didactic aspect of this assignment, I would say that it is the astounding profundity of everyday speech that this essay allowed me to see. During a revision of the essay, I re-read my conclusion and found myself humbled and fascinated with the idea that there may be many different inter-working aspects of language (e.g. denotation/connotation, alliteration/consonance, euphony, etc.) not only in this sonnet but in the words that I hear people use in everyday life. I think that this is something of which we lose sight, even if we are students of language in the academy. However, if we consider the words we hear and say as well as why they might encourage their respective thoughts and/or emotions, we may find that Shakespearean sonnets and academic ivory towers are not the only places where language is used profoundly and can be studied for its depth. Stop—consider how you converse with a friend or how someone uses slang when they pass you on the street. You may find that sometimes everyday language is as rich as its academic sibling.