

# SYNTHESIS PAPER

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## Specifications:

- 4 - 6 pages
- Meaningful **use** of **ALL** “new” texts & films\*. You *may also* use some from the first 4 weeks.

- OR**
- Thesis-driven essay that effectively answers any of the provided questions.
  - Thesis-driven essay that effectively answers a question of your own devising.

(your essay should be organized by your ideas, not as a sequence of discussions of each text in isolation)

- **Due** at 10:00 AM on Friday, February 25<sup>th</sup>

## •QUESTIONS•

**1. When using history in fiction, what responsibility and what reasons does a writer have to “get it right”?**

**2. What are the differences between what the historian seeks and what the writer of fiction seeks in the past?**

**3. How are fictionalizations of history about their medium, and not the history they take as their subject?**

**4. Words to play with when coming up with your own question: art, history, myth, legend, truth, meaning, storytelling, causation, facts, historical thinking, reality codes, representational codes, ideological codes, literature, knowledge, structure, connections, form, rich questions, framing, archetypes, character, setting, plot, sources, genre, coincidence, determinism, fate, progress, resolution . . .**

The questions force you to (#1) make some claims about that initial problem that faces the writer intent on using historical fact as the starting point of his work. He must consider why he is doing it, to what extent he will behave like an historian — stay true to history as it is “known” by other historians, and to *what* he ultimately feels responsible. The Foner-Sayles conversation makes a nice starting point. Consider what they have to say about the value of historical accuracy. What do *they* believe about the artist’s responsibility to “actual” history? Is the artist only responsible to some intangible “spirit” of what happened, not the facts? When are the facts paramount? What kind of facts cannot be distorted if the writer is to lay any claim to historical integrity? Also consider the implications of Barth’s three rules of thumb.

The variety of approaches to “getting it right” and being responsible lead to the next stage of the process and (#2) compel us to mark out some distinctions between the job of an historian and the job of a writer. Each digs through the work of other historians and through the various evidence and records of the past; what are they looking for? If the historian, one way or another, is looking for the facts that explain how one thing follows from another (causation), what is the artist doing? How do they differ in terms of what lessons their work yields, what images and myths, what kinds of cultural products?

Finally, we can ask (#3) ourselves about Barth’s bold conclusion — that all literature is really just about itself. If the writer begins with history, and to some extent with the pursuit of accuracy and historical integrity, how and why does he end with what Barth would call a Rembrandt — the fifth crab — or what Sayles would regard as ultimately just entertainment, just art, with nothing, really, nothing seriously to do with History. But if, as Barth claims, literature (and all art) is really about itself, its medium, then what exactly does this mean, especially when we are faced with works which seem so clearly to point to things (historical things) outside themselves? What does it mean for a book or film to be about its medium, and why on earth should that be interesting?

\*42nd Parallel, Matewan, The Known World, Glory, Imagining Argentina, The Official Story, The Rings of Saturn, The Last Emperor

## **Notes/Tips/ Pet Peeves/Demands**

1. Don't write about "coursework," "the program," or "us students and all these books we have to read." Write as if you have read and studied these independently (but don't make a big deal about it -- don't lie; just don't be all student-this and student-that).
2. Assume that your reader has read the text. Therefore, you don't have to tell the whole plot or give long summaries. The most you have to do is describe the most significant aspects of the work for your purposes, particularly aspects of the work about which there could be disagreement,
- 2.5 Use MLA bibliography format and citations for all references and quotations.
3. Don't begin sentences with the word "This" or with "There are/is/were."
4. Use complete and grammatically correct sentences.
5. Avoid pile-ups of prepositional phrases and short, dull words in sentences
6. Give your work a meaningful title.
7. Check your spelling with a dictionary in addition to the computer spellchecker.
9. Have someone else read your paper out loud to help you catch spelling errors, awkward phrases, and things that just don't make sense!
8. Do not use the question as your thesis. In fact, don't include the question anywhere in your paper. Answer it. (see # 12)
9. Avoid cheap, false transitions between paragraphs. ("This leads us to the next idea...")
10. Always italicize the titles of books and films.
11. Avoid creating a "list" paper in which you talk about each text in turn without comparing, contrasting, and making connections between them based on your answer to the question.
12. Write the question you are addressing in the header of your paper, before the title.