

SYNTHESIS PAPER

1

Specifications:

- 4 - 6 pages
- Meaningful **use** of **ALL** texts & films*
- Thesis-driven essay that effectively answers one of the provided questions
- **Due** at 1:00 PM on Friday, January 28

QUESTIONS

1. When using history in fiction, what responsibility and what reason 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?

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?

*Sayles-Foner Conversation, Barth’s “Crab” Essay, Gods & Monsters, Regeneration, Gallipoli, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Billy the Kid movie, Mr Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder, Tanner ‘88