

TEXT: MR WILSON'S CABINET OF WONDER

SEMINAR ESSAY DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

This guide is intended to provide some thoughts, questions, and examples to help you to develop your thesis statement and essay about the seminar text. No matter which idea you use to develop your essay, be attentive to the “key concepts” from the syllabus that correlate to the text (even if we don’t seem to cover it in seminar!) Remember that you may also connect your thoughts on the text to other program activities. Though the ideas in this guide are by no means meant to limit you, there is such a thing as missing the mark.

THOUGHTS

•Question the foundations of knowledge

Our sense of knowing something, a history, a fact, a value, or idea is always based to some degree on evidence or concepts that are reliant on assumptions. The MJT and Weschler's pursuit of knowledge presents us with some of the problems of verifying what we are told against what we know. In the book, much of what seemed impossible became real while much of what seemed plausible could easily be false. What looks like knowledge (annotated texts, meticulous references) can easily be used to give the illusion of objective certainty. To Wilson, this is all mere style, the stuff of art and wonder.

•Identify and critique patterns across time, culture, and texts

Wilson constructs a complex web of narratives through time and place. This complexity is both puzzle and mask, revealing and concealing while at the same time opening up a world of ideas long closed. He seeks to find the coincidences in the stories, much as Sebald did in *Rings*, renewing our sense of the past through an organic reconstruction driven by artistry and wonder.

•Understand the role of perspective in the telling of history

Wilson chooses to tell each story through multiple perspectives using the connections between them to branch into new areas of inquiry. New ideas and new perspectives, otherwise invisible or considered unworthy of investigation, come through the connections between and among seemingly unrelated phenomena.

•Question what in history is worth telling, valuable enough to preserve, and to understand the struggle that occurs in the attempts to preserve alternative versions.

Much of what Wilson chooses to memorialize in the MJT at first seems irrelevant and tangential to history as we know it. Nonetheless, the stories he tells contain layers of meaning, both literal and metaphorical, that give us pause. Confronted with such alternatives to mainstream history, we have to wonder why things appear relevant or not, what makes history valuable, what we expect to learn from history, and how much our judgments stem from being brainwashed, jerk.

•Critically evaluate, analyze, and interpret various sources of information around a particular topic.

Weschler provides a good example of an obsessive researcher who utilizes multiple means of verifying information learned. Imagine also Wilson's process of constructing his stories as the reverse of Weschler's. Though Weschler discovers a mix of truth and fiction in the MJT, he never ceases to discern meaning in Wilson's work he keeps his eye on the prize: art and wonder!

KEY CONCEPTS

•Question the foundations of knowledge

•Identify and critique patterns across time, culture, and texts

•Understand the role of perspective in the telling of history

•Question what in history is worth telling, valuable enough to preserve, and to understand the struggle that occurs in the attempts to preserve alternative versions.

•Critically evaluate, analyze, and interpret various sources of information around a particular topic.

General QUESTIONS

- What are the foundations of the MJT's collecting strategy?
- How would you characterize the relationships among the MJT's exhibit areas?
- What metaphors does the text use to describe the “reintegration of people to wonder”?
- In what ways does MJT function as a museum, a critique of museums, and a celebration of museums?
- In what ways do exhibits at the MJT affirm or undermine institutional forms of authority?
- Does the pursuit of knowledge destroy or increase our capacity for wonder?
- What's the difference between “wondering at” and “wondering whether”? (see p. 60)
- Discuss death as it relates to MJT and *Rings of Saturn*.
- What types of information does Weschler gather to discover more about the MJT exhibits; and what evidence does he consider conclusive in determining their verity.
- What is the value of knowing the stories/perspectives of the MJT?
- What does the text tell you about Wilson's motivations for pursuing the stories and phenomena that he does? Compare to Zinn's motivations.
- Would Weschler's book and the MJT in general make for a good elementary history curriculum?

