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English 111: Composition and Critical Thinking Based on the Study of Literature

Theme: The Search for Self and Autonomy

A freshman course organized around the theme of the search for self and autonomy is one of the most rewarding experiences possible for both teacher and students. If the students are young, just entering college, this theme touches them directly and profoundly, as almost all of them are engaged at this time in this very search. Also, they are close enough to the age at which the struggle begins—the initiation period—to remember with intense feelings the way in which the necessary passage began and the conflicts it entailed. If students are older, they bring experience and recognition as their contributions, greatly enhancing the entire class experience.

While students can make fairly easy connections to contemporary stories that echo their own experiences, it is most often a source of astonishment to them to find that other lives in other times and places also took this journey, not always successfully, as some of the readings illustrate. It is instructive to them that context must be brought to their reading, that some knowledge of the history of ideas, of events, of ways of understanding the world, is essential. I hope in this way to reinforce some of the great goals of a good education: the furnishing of their minds with both information and reflection, so that no story or other work of art needs to be seen only in reference to itself.

Examples of this process can be adduced almost *ad infinitum*. A telling instance can be such a work as Sophocles' *Antigone*. The world Antigone inhabits requires an orientation to the gods and the rituals that flow from belief. For Antigone truly to express herself, she must find it in herself, unlike her sister, to follow the laws of piety in the face of political and gender opposition. Her uncle the king refuses to fulfill the laws, for political reasons. He repeatedly dismisses the ideas that women have any intelligence or power. Antigone asserts her autonomy in a metaphysical and political universe that makes demands and insists on limitations; and adding the context of the age of myth as well as ideas about women's roles in Sophocles' Greece helps students understand how autonomy is at issue even in that world.

A later example providing counterpoint might be Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." The confining elements of the scrivener's world make the search for self and autonomy very difficult, but very necessary. Bartleby apparently chooses neither to search nor to try to achieve autonomy. But an argument could be made that he has indeed encompassed at least some kind of autonomy in his refusals, in his repeated "I prefer not to" responses, even though his choice appears to be for a self diminished almost to the point of nonexistence.

Acquainting students with the context of the lives of such characters as Bartleby is part of the "humane letters" mission I subscribe to. If time allows for a novel to be read, a

Dickens novel would be appropriate. Mr. Wemmick in *Great Expectations* comes to mind. His *persona* at work is rigidly mechanical, but he establishes a fantastic world for himself behind his drawbridge, where he has complete autonomy. Here his comic self-assertion contrasts with the more difficult journey Pip must take to find a true self finally free from great expectations.

Another more modern example is Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*; he has so completely foregone his necessity to lead an authentic life, one with self-assertion and autonomy, that when we meet him his being has metamorphosed physically into what his self-abnegation has psychologically already confirmed: he has lost his authentic human self and will shortly be swept away completely.

One more example can help make the point: the boy Sarty in Faulkner's "Barn Burning" faces the most appalling choice: shall he lie for his father, and so submit his own self to a life of lies, barn burning, and absconding; or shall he tell the truth, and set out to form his own life on a new basis of honesty, notwithstanding its consequences for his family, and, indeed, for himself as he sets out alone?

Examples may be multiplied and multiplied: how did Emily Dickinson assert her self and her autonomy in her seclusion? What freedom from pain and social limitations did Keats find to be able to create an autonomous self as an artist? What choices do Flannery O'Connor's prophets and failed prophets make or fail to make, out of their own autonomy, to ready themselves as receivers of grace? In setting out to spread the highest ideals of civilization in the heart of darkness, what risks did Kurtz take, what lies did he shed and what truths about himself did he acknowledge? In finding Kurtz at the furthest point of darkness, what did Marlowe find in himself?

I find that teaching these great works of literature from this thematic premise allows the deepest kind of exploration with the most life-changing results that any teacher could hope for.

Table of Contents

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Teaching Practice

My practice in teaching, whenever possible, is to use a seminar-like setting, with students (and teacher) facing each other, at least in an enlarged circle, if not around an actual table. They should be able to talk face to face, and not to the back of heads in rows in front of them. My role as a teacher is partly Socratic, as assumptions are questioned and evidence from text is required. But the role is only a partial one, as I have found that students in this kind of setting will take up the threads of the discourse as well. With some help from the teacher to keep from too many tangential forays, they will follow up on the theme, will make

connections, will apply the premise to their own lives and draw conclusions; they will even, to my delight, question my own assumptions and findings. Their new thinking and ability to reflect are what they tell me is most valuable in their lives, and also in their further education. I stress that flexible thinking, multiple perspectives, and inferential agility will serve them in many fields of study.

This course is the second one in our college-level composition sequence, and combines composition and critical thinking based on the study of literature. A minimum of five or six papers is required, at least one of which must be a longer project, with research and documentation, following up on one of the issues raised in our discussions.

It is important to note that a too-extensive reading list may lead to a situation where students will not read all of the selections if they are not held accountable for writing about all of them. One of my objectives, however, is to help furnish the minds of my students with a wide variety of important works of literature, since this may be the last time their education provides for this. Furthermore, this course is a Critical Thinking as well as a Composition course, and I want to be sure that students are applying critical thinking and inferential skills to a wide body of literature. I address this problem below.

Pitfalls and Solutions

1. *Failure to read all assigned selections:* Since they need write about only 15 or 16 pieces, students may well be tempted to skip some of the readings.

Solution: Classroom practice must be organized in such a way that students are held accountable. I make clear from the beginning of the semester that class contributions are a part of their grade assessment. Grades can suffer substantially if a student consistently fails to read the assignments. When a student is called upon to make an inference from facts or other elements of a work, I expect that he or she will at least try to make a logical inference, which cannot be done without having read the text. I frequently incorporate this aspect of instruction, trying to illustrate for the class that no given details are meaningless, or present by accident.

A more drastic solution would be a very much reduced reading list; frequent quizzes may also be employed.

2. *Context is missing:* Many students do not have a sense of the history of ideas or events. They have not become accustomed to seeing connections among events, or reflecting on the causes and effects of historical, social, and cultural facts and changes. They can read Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," for example, and assume that Emily is African-American, for no reason except that the setting is Southern and there is an African-American servant in the house. They don't have enough knowledge of the post-Civil War South, the changes in its culture and economy, of women's positions, and of many other elements, to make clear sense out of the story. In addition, of course, there are the literary elements that are new to them, such as point of view, setting, symbolism, and so on. Also, if one wishes to introduce an approach that includes some Freudian or archetypal elements, this needs to be furnished with care.

Solution: It must be emphasized that the theme of the course is a very universal one, and is applicable to all the readings without providing extensive historical or social context. This will produce very good results.

However, if the inferential argument to be made requires knowledge unavailable to students, then context and information must be provided. Otherwise the text contains obscure or opaque elements. It is unacceptable to me if such details are simply passed over in ignorance, since of course that would mean a very incomplete understanding. Advancing student understanding is a primary goal of this course.

In addition to the instructor as source, I sometimes assign several areas of the missing context to various groups for brief reports.

However, this too has pitfalls: it takes a great deal of time, and the results may be so shallow that misinformation rather than context is provided. So some very specific limited topics need to be assigned.

Finally, as noted above, a reduced reading list may be needed.

3. *Making use of class discussions in compositions can be problematical:* Students must understand that the prompts in the assignments are provided to offer them a starting point for their own interpretations, and that assimilating and integrating classroom discussion is encouraged but is not to take the place of individual approaches. Verbatim transference of the discussions should not take the place of original thinking on the provided prompts.

Solution: Provide a selection of prompts that are open-ended (so the students will construct their own theses) and that require sorting through our discussions, realigning those that support the theses they have constructed, and going into further (and logical) construction of an argument.

4. *Content issues:* While the theme of the course is very engaging, it can lead to vague and overgeneralized writing.

Solution: Since the course requires a critical thinking approach, insist on the use of details from which inferences can be made, and which as evidence specifically support the argument.

5. *Composition issues:* Many students lack the necessary writing skills to compose a coherent and compelling argument, with sequential organization that moves the argument forward without rambling and misplaced generalizations. Also, mechanical errors are carelessly edited, if at all.

Solution: Revision, revision, and revision, with tutorial help if necessary. Repeated mechanical errors should be checklisted by individual students, and papers checked against the list carefully before they are submitted.

Course Syllabus

English 111 is a course in critical thinking and composition based on the study of literature. Emphasis is placed upon critical thinking skills: argument, forms of reasoning, and use of evidence in writing and thinking about the various modes of literature. Analysis and evaluation of critical materials are part of the curriculum. Composition involves the processes of writing, from beginning idea to completed essay following class discussion.

Texts

Laurie C. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, eds. *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*. 5th edition. Heinle, 2003. (Handouts will be provided for readings outside this anthology.)

Individual editions of *Heart of Darkness*, *Metamorphosis*, and “Bartleby the Scrivener.”

Lester Faigley. *The Brief Penguin Handbook*. Longman, 2005. (If you do not have another handbook).

Some handouts for material not in our texts will be provided..

Requirements

Completion of all assigned writings. A minimum of six papers of increasing length will be assigned. Documentation and *annotation of secondary materials is required*. No assignments may be skipped, as there is a required word total for this course. Papers will be due at two-week intervals, starting with the third week.

Writing the final exam. No one who fails to take this exam can pass the course. The exam will consist of two essays: one on poetry (I will provide the poems, and will ask you for original analyses of two of them), and one on the theme of the course as it is exemplified in the three genres we have explored.

This is a Great Books course: 50–75 percent of the readings will come from the core great books of Western civilization. The course is evenly divided among the genres of drama, poetry, and fiction. The reading and writing assignments will be arranged thematically, using all the genres in each segment. Our reading assignments will be discussed and analyzed to assemble critical cases for argument, using inferential skills, inductive and deductive reasoning, and marshaling of evidence. One paper may be assigned as a response to a theater performance, depending on theater offerings.

The overarching theme of this semester’s work will be “The Search for Self and Autonomy.” Readings have been chosen that allow us to discuss this theme in depth in different contexts over the course of the semester. The readings are not arranged chronologically, but rather spatially, as they move outward from a narrow setting to the wider world. So we will examine self in the context of family, under several rubrics: Parents and Children; Initiation Motifs for the Adolescent Self; Finding Autonomy in Men’s and Women’s Relationships; and then Orienting the Self to the Larger World, with explorations of universal concerns such as justice, war, faith, and belief and disbelief.

It is important for the student to understand that all assigned readings must be completed, as they form the basis for classroom participation assessment of critical thinking skills.

Revisions of the first paper will be allowed, and a higher grade, if earned, will be entered. Extra credit papers will be suggested at appropriate points in the semester. These points do not have the same weight as points for papers, but will be used in considering final grades.

Grading Policy

Papers	100 points each
Documented Paper	200 points
Final Exam	200 points
Extra Credit	5 points each

The subject of your documented paper will arise from discussions of our assigned readings. Individual conferences will be necessary to formulate the specific subject you will be working on. Generally speaking, the subject will relate to historical or cultural context that will supplement class discussion and interpretation of a particular work of literature.

Extra credit is granted for extra response papers resulting from theater attendance or other suggested activities.

Schedule of Readings

Week One: Fiction: Parents and Children

Introduction	
Faulkner	Barn Burning, A Rose for Emily
Lawrence	The Rocking Horse Winner

Week Two: Fiction: Parents and Children

Russo	Dog
Kafka	<i>Metamorphosis</i>

Week Three: Fiction: Initiation

Joyce	Araby
Boyle	Greasy Lake
Hemingway	Indian Camp
Oates	Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

Week Four: Fiction: Men, Women, and the Family

Hawthorne	The Birthmark
Gilman	The Yellow Wallpaper
Hemingway	The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber
Hemingway	Hills Like White Elephants
Fitzgerald	Babylon Revisited

Week Five: Poetry: Parents, Children, and Adolescence

Blake	The Chimney Sweep
Wordsworth	Intimations of Immortality
Plath	Daddy
Dickinson	<u>Some Keep the Sabbath. . .</u>

Dickinson	Tell the Truth. . .
Frost	The Road Not Taken
Roethke	My Papa's Waltz
Keats	When I Have Fears. . .
Piercy	Barbie Doll
Housman	To an Athlete Dying Young

Week Six: Poetry: Men and Women

Browning	My Last Duchess
Rich	Living in Sin
Shakespeare	That Time of Year. . .
Shakespeare	Shall I Compare Thee. . .
Marvell	To His Coy Mistress
Keats	La Belle Dame. . .
Keats	Bright Star
Donne	A Valediction. . .
Donne	The Flea
Tate	Nice Car, Camille

Week Seven: Drama: Parents, Children, Men, and Women

Ibsen	<i>A Doll's House</i>
Miller	<i>Death of a Salesman</i>

Week Eight: Fiction: The Wider World

Conrad	<i>Heart of Darkness</i>
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Week Nine: Fiction: The Wider World

Melville	Bartleby the Scrivener
Borges	The Garden of Forking Paths
Hemingway	A Clean Well Lighted Place

Week Ten: Fiction: the Wider World

O'Brien	The Things They Carried
Kafka	The Hunger Artist
O'Connor	A Good Man Is Hard to Find
O'Connor	The Life You Save May Be Your Own

Week Eleven: Poetry: The Wider World

Eliot	The Journey of the Magi
Eliot	The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
Yeats	Sailing to Byzantium
Yeats	The Second Coming
Yeats	An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

Week Twelve: Poetry: The Wider World

Stevens	Sunday Morning
Shakespeare	When in Disgrace. . . .
Shakespeare	Tired with All These. . .
Shakespeare	Like as the Waves. . .
Auden	Musee des Beaux Arts

Week Thirteen: Drama: The Wider World

Sophocles	<i>Antigone</i>
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Week Fourteen: Drama: The Wider World

Euripides	<i>Medea</i>
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Week Fifteen: Drama: The Wider World

Shakespeare	<i>Hamlet</i> , Acts 1 and 2
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Week Sixteen: Drama: The Wider World

Shakespeare	<i>Hamlet</i> , Acts 3, 4, and 5
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Sample Paper Topics

Paper 1

Choose one of the following prompts for a four- to five-page paper. In quoting, use MLA format. Be sure you quote from the stories to support your points; without these details, all you can offer is opinion. You need to support opinion with evidence, in this case the facts of the stories as they illustrate what you are arguing. Remember that you need a thesis, a statement that rules your paper, that states your position, and what you will be "proving" in the rest of the paper. Then each part of the paper should logically support that

thesis, and in turn each part is supported by details, evidence from the stories. Round the paper off with a conclusion that brings the whole discussion to a neat ending.

Remember above all that the theme of the course is "Self and the Search for Autonomy," so each of the following prompts should lead to a thesis with this theme as a focal point. Don't forget that the search for self and autonomy is not always successful in these stories, and you will need to explain why the failure happens.

1. Most parents would say they want "the best" for their children, but not all parents know how to bring that about or how to influence their children to achieve "the best," nor do they understand the consequences, which may be serious dysfunction. How do two of our stories illustrate this problem of the child's need to establish his or her own identity that leads eventually to autonomy?

2. Define and contrast the different kinds of parent-child love and the results of that love in two stories. Does it stifle or support the search for self?

3. How do two of these stories deal with the idea of "success"? Define the kinds of success hoped for, and discuss the actual "success" the children achieve or do not achieve, and what the effect is on their sense of self.

4. Money, class, or other kinds of status are frequently elements of parents' motivations, and also of obstacles to their hopes. Discuss and contrast two stories that use one or more of these status elements. What ultimately do we learn about this theme from these stories, and how does this problem affect the search for self?

5. Often when the parent or parents have little, or have lost much, they look to their children to restore their losses or to supply what they have so little of, or the children want to supply what is missing. Show how two stories exemplify this topic in different ways, and explain the consequences of this behavior, particularly as it relates to the child's sense of self.

6. Passing from childhood to adulthood may mean freedom, loss, the gaining of important knowledge, the loss of wonder, and many other things. Write about two stories starting from this premise, defining the consequences of the passage in the stories you choose, and focusing particularly on the problem of self-knowledge and the journey to autonomy.

7. Lack of imagination or empathy, on either the parents' or the children's part, can have lifelong consequences for them. Discuss two stories that illustrate this problem and its consequences, especially as it relates to the search for self.

8. Parents' dreams and children's dreams often diverge, with sad or serious consequences. Discuss two stories with this topic as the focus, especially as it concerns the search for self and autonomy.

9. A child's sense of self and of his or her values is sometimes in sharp contrast to his or her parents' values. Where do you see this in two stories?

Paper 2

Choose one of the following prompts for an essay of four to five pages. Pay close attention to your introduction and conclusion, of course, but also make sure the order of your paragraphs makes logical sense: you should be moving from point to point in a sequential and rational manner. Your thesis should be evident somewhere near the beginning of your paper, usually in the introduction. This should be a polished product, as well: check your spellings and other mechanical elements, and make sure you document your paper with the page numbers and quotations you need for support.

Above all remember the theme of the course: "The Search for Self and Autonomy," and make sure that the prompt you choose leads to a thesis with this theme as its focus.

1. These stories reveal a pervasive sense of alienation as experienced by one or more of the characters. What is the cause (or causes) of alienation among the young characters in these stories? Are the sources familial, psychological, religious, economic, or culture-driven? Discuss two pieces from the point of view of this theme.

2. How does status or characters' perceptions of status affect their behavior? What creates status: peers? school? family? self-worth? Compare two pieces from this point of view.

3. There is a fair amount of role-playing in these pieces. Discuss two of them from this perspective. What is the role? (Be specific in describing the roles you choose.) Why is it chosen? What is the result?

4. Metaphors are taken from popular culture in several of these pieces, whether it is songs, or images, or dialect. Discuss how you see popular culture metaphors in two pieces. What do they add to the piece they appear in? How do they impinge on the characters' search for self?

5. Some of these pieces deal with ideas of who is a hero, or what makes a hero, or why some figures are attractive to others. Discuss two pieces from this point of view, and discuss how the choice of heroes is a reflection of the search for self.

6. Some of these pieces dealing with teenagers convey a pervasive sense of their being without direction in life. What are the things that go wrong? What makes these teenagers lack direction? (Family expectations? Society? School? Lack of something important in modern life?) Analyze two pieces to show which details support the theme of alienation or lack of direction and how this condition relates to the search for self.

7. Choosing the wrong path: analyze how characters from two different pieces choose the "wrong path," at least as their parents or as society might see it. What is the path each chooses, and why is it seen as wrong? Why do they choose this wrong path, and where is your sympathy: with the young person or not, and why?

8. How do these stories reflect any universal pattern—initiation, infatuation, epiphany, etc.? (Write about at least two, keeping the course theme in mind.)

9. How is “society” (or its representatives in religion, education, or other institutions) at fault in these stories? Discuss two from the point of view of the difficulties these social institutions create for the characters’ search for self and autonomy.

10. Is the “absent parent” a problem in these stories? (Define what “absent” means as applied to each parent: it may be physical, psychological, emotional, etc.) What are the effects of the absence? Discuss two.

11. Discuss how the women are “victims” in three of the pieces we have read. What makes them victims? (Society? Their education? Men? Themselves?) How effective is the presentation of their situations? What details make their situations persuasive? Discuss three pieces, with the focus on these women’s success or failure in the search for autonomy.

12. Discuss how the men may be “victims.” Consider the different ways they may be victims. Are they victims of society? Of their education? Of false expectations? Of women? How effective is the presentation of their situations? What details make their situations persuasive? Discuss three pieces, keeping the course theme as the focus.

Papers 3 and 4

Choose one of the following topics for a paper of four to five pages on *A Doll’s House* and *Death of a Salesman* and a different one for your next paper on *Antigone* and *Medea*. The papers should be typed, double-spaced, and rigorously edited and proofread to rid the writing of errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. Include a cover sheet containing the title of your essay, your name, the class name, and the time and date.

Remember the theme of the course: “The Search for Self and Autonomy,” and make sure that the thesis you fashion and the argument that follows have this theme as its focus.

1. Consider the protagonists of these plays: in what way can they be said to take charge of their own destiny? Within what limitations or with what obstacles do they operate? What prevents them, if anything does, from being in control of their own actions and destiny? Or what obstacles do they overcome in order to be in charge? Do they in fact ever achieve what we would think of as desirable: the determining of our own fate?

2. A modern formulation says that “character is destiny.” How does this apply to this topic?

3. Discuss these plays in the context of this problem: the freedom of the individual versus the restrictions of conventional society, which may include laws, mores, customs, social and economic conditions, etc. What freedom do the protagonists achieve, if any, and what will be the result of their freedom?

4. Several of the plays deal with certain taboos or forbidden practices, whether these are religious or secular. Compare and contrast the importance of taboos in these plays.

5. Compare and contrast the roles of the women: what they want, what they do, and how they will be treated (or are treated) by society after they do it. What is similar and what is dissimilar in their characters? Whom can you relate to better?

6. Compare and contrast the men of the plays, as in question 4.

7. In what ways is each of these plays relevant to contemporary society?

Hint for writing: These are all complex subjects. Don't just start comparing specific plays or giving specific examples. First it makes sense to define the concepts involved, and to lay out the lines of thought. For example: "Freedom of the individual implies the ability of a person to apply her or his own mind, perceptions, and will on the world around that person, limited only by acceptable ethical and social demands of other persons and of the society of that time. This basic concept does not appear to change, though societies change and make the individual's freedom to behave in this fashion more or less desirable and more or less possible. The consequences of behavior based on this concept of freedom also change as societies change, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. In the plays under consideration, this problem of individual freedom is seen in relation to both the character of the person and the character of the society, and there are varying degrees in the extent to which a character may be able to operate freely. In his or her freedom is the opportunity to create and express an autonomous self."

(This is a sample, perhaps needing simplification, of the way a problem might be stated to allow you to get to the important points: what is freedom in a particular society, and to what extent does the nature of the society allow for freedom?)

Then it makes sense to go to the plays specifically, to analyze each in respect to this problem, and to support what you say with specific references at each point of the argument.

Your conclusion need not be lengthy, nor need it ever, in a short paper, review everything you have just said. This is an awkward and irritating way to conclude a piece of writing. Your conclusion should instead refer to your topic in a more general way, relating generally to what you have just said, and leave the reader with a strong final position.

Paper 5: Poetry

For this paper you will select two poems from our readings. The poems should differ: one should be from the more intimate setting of self in relation to family, whether parents and children or adolescent choices, or men and women; the other poem should look outward to the larger world, where the self must make choices dealing with social institutions, war, religious conflict, belief systems, etc.

Having chosen your two poems, you should first make any comparisons between them that are possible, and then concentrate on the contrasts: how do the metaphor systems differ in the two settings? How and why does the tone differ? What kind of images are there that contrast? What different emotions are touched on or emphasized? What distance does the poet establish between his or her words and the reader? (For example, does the poem invite intimacy or require a more distanced contemplation?)

These are some of the kinds of questions you should ask yourself in analyzing these two poems.

Above all, keep the course theme in mind. How do your two poems deal with "The Search for Self and Autonomy?" How is this theme present in the poems?

Paper 6: *Hamlet*

Keeping in mind the course theme, “The Search for Self and Autonomy,” choose from the following options a prompt that allows you to focus your exploration on this particular premise. You must use the text fully to support your analysis.

1. What kind of power does Hamlet have? Or is he powerless in some ways? If powerful, does it come from a sense of self and autonomy in action, or if powerless, does it come from a weak sense of an autonomous self?

2. How have Hamlet’s relationships with his father and his mother affected his sense of self? For example, have they strengthened it or undermined it?

3. Does Hamlet’s behavior towards Ophelia reflect a man in possession of the sense of who he is, or on the contrary, does it reflect a man whose sense of self is fragile or unstable?

4. As Hamlet considers the world around him, the corrupted garden that is the state of Denmark, and the whole human condition, is he at home in the world? Does he really want to be king? Fortinbras says at the end that Hamlet would have proved “most royal” had he become king. Do you believe this? Is the character we have seen developing and changing a fully autonomous self?

5. What obstacles do we see in the beginning and middle of the play to Hamlet’s becoming an autonomous self? How does he clear these obstacles away, if he does, and what is the evidence that he has achieved autonomy by the end?

Resources

For resources outside our rather voluminous class readings, I ask students to include with their presentations, whether individually or as part of a group, some element, whether visual or auditory, that can supplement their remarks. Of course, the Internet is a cornucopia of such material. Additional material can be retrieved from historical accounts, costume histories, and the like. I maintain a file of these materials from year to year, and call upon them as time and interest dictate.