

English 3096-002, Spring 2019
Texts and Criticism
First Draft (2 pages): Friday, Feb. 1 in class
Revision (4 pages): Wednesday, Feb. 6 in class

Nightingale Essay Assignment

You are a New Critic marooned on a desert island. Your only possession is a copy of a poem that washed up on shore in a bottle. The poem is by someone named “John Keats” and is titled “Ode to a Nightingale.” You read it over and over again. You get to know it by heart. You really like the language, but you puzzle over the meaning. Finally, you arrive at an interpretation and write it down on pieces of bark with a charcoal stick. What do you write?

Please compose a 4-page (1300-word) essay on John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” For this essay, you are a New Critic, adhering to the rules of interpretation used by that critical method. You can arrive at any conclusion that the poem supports. For this exercise, I am only interested in how well you can think like a New Critic and how well you can support your interpretation with evidence from the text.

Thesis statement: Your essay should have a clear thesis statement in the first paragraph, indicating what question you are asking about the poem and indicating the answer you will give.

Evidence: New Criticism relies extensively on evidence from the text: short quotations or a word or a line of poetry that you want to discuss. Every time you make a significant claim about what the poem means, you should support it with textual evidence.

Outside sources: The goal of this exercise is to try your hand at New Criticism and demonstrate an understanding of its assumptions. Do not consult existing criticism of the poem for this essay. However, a dictionary or a reference work on mythology (who was Bacchus?) are both fine.

Citation style: For your essay, write clearly and use MLA Style to cite lines in the text parenthetically. Include a “Works Cited” bibliography at the end of your essay—use the information on your handout to build a full citation for the poem. When you quote a line as evidence, place the line number(s) in parenthesis at the end of the sentence, just before the period, like so (2-3).