

One Page Concept Review: Social and Philosophical Criticism

What is it?

This was my introduction to foundational thinkers from a variety of liberal arts and social science disciplines and using them to analyze literature. This sort of thing is very much a feature of more advanced English classes, though typically not so much in high school.

What I refer to are readings by Freud, Beauvoir, and Weber. These were chosen because each of these thinkers helped to either found a discipline or way of thinking that has proved highly influential, or they expressed ideas in a way that typifies an important way of thinking. None of these should be seen as the last word in their respective disciplines, although each remain important and are worth reading for historical importance alone.

Usually there would be one more in this group, but I've simplified the year due to the number of days we have missed; I've also gone into slightly less detail in the ones we did read (compared to my normal practice). This is also why I've saved this for the last group of review sheets, as I view explicitly using these authors on the AP test to be a less viable essay strategy than I normally do.

Why should I care?

First and foremost, if you progress very far in the liberal arts or social sciences, you will encounter these thinkers again, even if it just because more contemporary thinkers are building on their ideas. Moreover, even if you plan on choosing a career in something else, these are the sorts of ideas that educated people know, and I strongly believe that understanding the cultural heritage of Western thought is important-- even if it ultimately does not have direct "practical" bearing on your life (whatever that means).

In the short term, the readings were designed to help you develop more sophisticated understandings of some of the major works that we have read in class. An essay that successfully articulates these points of view is also very impressive to AP graders and is one way that I hope will separate your Q3 essays from the masses of more generalized essays. If you plan on passing the AP exam, the Q3 essay needs to be your strong essay, and everyone should be targeting a score of 6 or above (since a 5-5-6 on your essays is normally the threshold for passing given a reasonable multiple choice score).

The Q3 essay is also the one part of the test that you have complete control over, so there really is no excuse for not working up (before the test) at least two or three viable approaches for each major work you have read. All the essay planning review activities are intended to facilitate this.

Here's what I intended to be the payoff to reading selections from these thinkers: Freud helps you most with *Enemies*, *a Love Story*, *Sputnik Sweetheart*, *Yerma*, and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*; Beauvoir with *My Brilliant Friend*, *Yerma*, possibly *Jane Eyre*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; and Weber with any of the 19th century novels (to be used in conjunction with the specific information about historical changes in economic and social class in the 19th century). I didn't make a review sheet for the Gilbert and Gubar reading (the chapter from *The Madwoman in the Attic*), but if you read *Jane Eyre*, you might wish to consider reviewing it on your own, especially if you think you might end up writing about Bertha Mason. Gilbert and Gubar were also heavily influenced by Beauvoir, so you might want to consider the connections between the three thinkers. Download the PowerPoint from my web-site if interested.

You are obviously under no obligation to include discussion of these thinkers if you choose to write about these works. I am just telling you that doing so is one way to generate a potentially impressive essay, especially if you've bothered to work out a rough idea of how to do so beforehand.

How do I do it?

- **Introduce the outlines of the argument just like you'd build context for talking about evidence in a novel.** The level of detail depends, of course, on the degree to which you are using the thinker. If you are doing a Freudian reading of Hermann's anxiety in *Enemies, a Love Story*, you'd obviously have to do more work here than just mentioning that Murakami's "other world" is symbolic of the Freudian split between the conscious and unconscious minds (which relies on one idea from Freud that is very easy to understand and quick to explain).
- **If you're going to read a work completely in terms of another idea, consider using the introduction to lay the groundwork.** I would anticipate this as being most likely in the case of using Beauvoir or Freud to analyze *Yerma*. In other words, if the secondary reading is going to be your *primary* means to analyze the literary text, the introduction is particularly well-suited to bring your reader up to speed on what Freud or Beauvoir actually argue (though this does not absolve you of your obligation to contextualize the plot of the literary work as well-- you just do it as you go).
- **Introduce the secondary author the first time that you mention them.** Here is my suggestion for how to do this: "father of modern psychology Sigmund Freud," "French feminist and existentialist thinker Simone de Beauvoir," and "father of modern sociology Max Weber." You can obviously come up with your own author introductions, but the only one who needs no introduction of some kind is Freud (he really is that central to Western culture; you don't even have to use a first name for him).

How do students screw this up?

Not Knowing What You're Talking About

- **If you're not going to bother reviewing these thinkers, you're better off not writing about them.** Half-remembered or half-understood articulations of their ideas are not going to impress anyone. If you never bothered to actually do the assignments that went along with these readings, I would also suggest you accept the fact that you've cut off (yet another) way that you could have done well on this test.
- **You have to explain what these thinkers argue, just like you would the plot of a novel or play.** This obviously isn't going to be in exhaustive detail, but the reader has to understand the argument, and it's your job to facilitate this understanding.

Not Focusing on the Literary Text

- **These thinkers just give you one way to analyze a literary text.** Do not use the literary text as a sort of extended example about why the secondary source is correct in his or her theories. **Your job is not to prove the theory is true.** Your job is to use the theory to generate a reading of the literary work. The secondary source is just your approach in generating this reading.
- **Strike the right balance.** If your paragraphs are not mostly examining specific episodes from the novel or play you're engaging, something has gone wrong. Whole paragraphs devoted to the secondary thinker are also probably a bad idea given the time crunch that limits your ability to go in depth.
- **Go in depth about the literary work, not the secondary thinker.** Introduce the rough outlines of their argument and move on to what's really important (the literary text).

Trying to Do Too Much

- **Just like you have to narrow what you're going to talk about in the novels and plays, you have to do the same thing for these thinkers.** Typically you will want to focus on a single facet of their ideas, like Freud's idea of an unconscious Id, Beauvoir's idea of how culture locks women into passive roles, or Weber's suggestion that social and economic class are not identical.