

Artium Magister: The Master's Thesis

As a child, I loved playing a game called "Memory." Two people lay a few dozen cards face-down in a grid, then take turns flipping them over, two at a time. If the cards' faces don't match, the player's turn ends, and he returns the cards (face-down) to the grid. But if a player selects two cards with the same face, he gets to keep them.

In the beginning, you can't see any of the cards' faces. Your initial turns serve as shots in the dark. If you pull a pair, you feel lucky, not skilled. Instead of expecting to succeed, you spend your first few turns observing and memorizing everything you can about the faces of the flipped cards. Every so often, your opponent flips a card you couldn't find, and you can pick up a free pair as long as you remember where you left the first one. As the board clears, your likelihood of drawing pairs (even accidentally) rises. Once you both empty the grid, the player holding the most pairs wins.

While "Memory" provides a nice parallel for growing up, it doesn't mirror it perfectly. Nobody throws new cards into the grid during the game, and players follow set rules in pursuit of clear and unchanging goals. Its simple world pales in comparison to our real one.

But in both life and cards, experience and maturity strengthen one's perspective. When we learn lessons, we solve mysteries, just as players pull cards off the grid once they find what they seek. As we learn more, it becomes easier to continue learning, just as "Memory" gets progressively easier as cards disappear. And while life throws new cards into the grid, you wouldn't want to empty the grid seventy years early anyway.

Literature serves as a way for human beings to grapple with life's complexities. While much remains that we don't/can't understand, we've evolved into skillful theorists, and we use pen and paper to puzzle over the unsolved mysteries in our hearts and universe. Each work offers its readers a chance to see more of the world, even if said readers ultimately disagree over what they see.

In short, books introduce cards and flip others along the way. The more I read, the more I understand. Authors have the uncanny ability to provide insights about readers they've never met, and my favorites answered questions I hadn't thought to ask about myself and others. My first readings of *1984* and *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* made previously-unseen connections visible. I began to feel like I understood why people sought love, identity, or the myriad other things we want out of life, and strangers seemed less alien afterward.

I've tried to structure my curriculum like the "Memory" game from my childhood. I introduce concepts before laying them aside, only to bring them up again during another unit or activity. If I teach them correctly, you recognize them with the affection bred of familiarity, and you start seeing them everywhere: something from *Happily Ever After* pops up in your Friday-night movie, or a friend says something that could've come straight out of *Gilgamesh*. Once you see it again, you file it away, just like a "Memory" player pocketing a pair.

In order for the class to work, I have to resist telling you what lies on the other side of certain cards, or try to avoid crowding out your perspective with my own. The payoff comes when you flip cards over yourself, either during discussions or in your writing, and find what you want. I get to feel proud and happy every time you answer a question to your satisfaction, or when you ask a new one based on something you found here.

Now our time grows short, and only eighteen classes remain. Some of our best material awaits, but we've covered much of what I set out to teach four months ago. The Myth/Sci-Fi grid has grown emptier with every passing day, and now that we've reached the home stretch, I want to see which pairs you kept. I want to see what you learned. I want you to explain what we seek, how we pursue it, and why we want it.

I want you to talk about what it means to be human.

While we've spent the past sixteen weeks studying a lot of different topics, we've always done so in the interest of answering those questions I mentioned earlier. After all, we live in complex times, and you face challenging questions. In order to consider, observe, and respond to what you'll face – in order to shape a better world for yourself, your friends, and your family – you need structure.

I have given you that structure, bit by bit, for sixteen weeks. Drawing on my comparative literature background, I chose or composed almost every handout, lecture, activity, assignment, blog, story, and film with your final project in mind.

Your material includes the following:

- **Books and Films:** *Gilgamesh, The Inferno, Childhood's End, (500) Days of Summer, The Visitor, In the Pale Moonlight, Wall-E, Eat/Move/Learn*
- **Stories, Articles, and Excerpts:** *Happily Ever After, Gate C22, Outliers, Tufts Words of Wisdom, Press X for Beer Bottle, The Silent Season of a Hero, Like Water, Machine of Death, to Jane Cooney Baker (died 1-22-62), The Star, Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here?*
- **Blogs:** *Stealing Happy Hours, Inquiring Minds Want to Know, Are We Really Happy With Who We Are Right Now?, Searching for a Former Clarity, The Hero Dies in This One, Non Est Ad Astra Mollis e Terris Via, With Love We Will Survive, How to Win Friends and Influence People, ...And Just 'Cause He's Gone..., The Bottle and the Sea, I Never Wanted (The Quiet Things That No One Ever Knows), Rise and Fall (Rage and Grace), The Bucket*
- **Activities and Handouts:** *Great Expectations, The World Around You, Personal Statements, This I Believe, Modern Mythology, Establishing a Philosophical Baseline (Gilgamesh + Inferno x2), To Infinity..., and Leaving the Ground*
- **Key Concepts and Ideas:** *Choice, Morality, Death, Happiness, the Soul, the Meaning of Life, Enlightenment, Independence, Identity, Security, and Love*
- **Quotes:** *Something to Say, anything from Beneath the Stars 2011* (optional)

Start by placing the *Something to Say* quotes in some sort of logical pattern, labeling your first quote "#1" and continuing to your final quote (#30). Some will lead easily into the "next" quote or concept, whereas others will require you to "fill in the blanks" with more commentary. Next, figure out how the quotes relate to your key concepts and ideas. Use color coding! Once you finish, repeat the process for your books and films and (if you wish) for the others as well.

Your finished piece addresses the "big questions" from earlier in the handout through your own commentary and your use of evidence. Evidence comes in many forms: anecdotal (experiences that happen to others), personal (your own memories), quotes (either isolated ala the opening statements or in context), and references.

By studying each course element in the context of the others, you will (hopefully) arrive at interesting, surprising, and unique conclusions. You should write thoughtfully, profoundly, and personally whenever possible. The memoir format lends itself well to this assignment. You may also experiment with structure, chronology, form, narration, and so on; while you can write this assignment in a conventional way, I always encourage you to write in a versatile and creative way.

You must use every *Something to Say* quote and work each book, film, and key concept into your ultimate piece; those serve as your piece's backbone, and keep it from ballooning into a giant, incoherent mess. The other elements are optional, and I highly encourage you to incorporate them whenever they fit into your plans.

The piece does not have a set length; it should reflect your finest effort. You will submit your final draft twice by Monday, January 23rd: once through turnitin.com, and again with a bound hard-copy in class. You may, of course, illustrate and decorate your final version.

Good luck. I look forward to seeing what lies on the other side of your cards...and hope you always remember this class.