

## Artium Magister: The Master's Thesis

As a child, I loved playing a game called "Memory." If you aren't familiar with the game, the rules are fairly simple. 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. Those observations can reap hugely important benefits, for every so often, your opponent flips over a card you'd been searching for but couldn't find. 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. You spot matches more carefully and search more scientifically. 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; life seems to specialize in throwing unanticipated challenges our way, particularly during childhood and adolescence. Moreover, players follow set rules in pursuit of clear and unchanging goals: the game's simple world pales in comparison to our real one, which encourages us to shift our pursuits from childish dreams to real-world intentions.

But in both life and cards, experience and maturity strengthen one's perspective. When we learn lessons from our parents, friends, teachers, and works of art, we solve mysteries. Once those solutions have been reached, they're ours to use, 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.

Yes, life throws new cards into the grid. But you wouldn't want to empty the grid seventy years early anyway.

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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* (the first text in Myth to Science Fiction's second semester) and *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (the final book in the World Literature course) made previously-unseen connections visible. When I finished them, I began to feel like I understood why people sought love, identity, or the many, many other things we want out of life, and strangers I'd meet seemed less alien afterward.

I've tried to structure my curriculum like the "Memory" game from my childhood. As I'm sure you've noticed, I introduce concepts before laying them aside, only to bring them up again during another unit or activity. *The Murder of Tayshana Murphy* is about *Siddhartha* and *Gilgamesh*, but it's also about *Beowulf*, and *Macbeth*, and *War*, which in turn is about *The Inferno* and *The Visitor*, which in turn is about *(500) Days of Summer* and *Up...* you get the idea. Everything connects, everything links: you can find matches in cards from different sides of the board if you know what you're looking for, how to look, and why you're looking.

If I teach my content correctly – my ideas, my works – you recognize them with the affection bred of familiarity, and you start seeing them everywhere: something from *War* pops up in your Friday-night movie, or a friend says something that could've come straight out of *Siddhartha*. 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 sixteen classes remain. Some of our best material awaits, but we've covered much of what I set out to teach four months ago. The course's 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:** *Siddhartha (SFHP)*, *Gilgamesh (Myth)*, *The Inferno (Myth)*, *Macbeth (SFHP)*, *WALL-E (Myth)*, *Up (SFHP)*, *Beowulf (SFHP)*, *Childhood's End (Myth)*, *(500) Days of Summer*, *The Visitor*, *In the Pale Moonlight*, *Eat/Move/Learn*
- **SFHP Stories, Articles, and Excerpts:** *War*, *Gate C22*, *Untitled*, *Car*, *The Tipping Point*, *Freakonomics*, *The Futile Pursuit of Happiness*, *The Billion-Dollar Coach*, *Outliers (Chapter One)*, *So You Wanted to Be a Writer*, *\$50*, *Under 11.5 Rounds*, *Floyd Mayweather, Jr. vs. Victor Ortiz*, *The Murder of Tayshana Murphy*, *Tufts Words of Wisdom*, *Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here? Machine of Death*, *The Monkey's Paw*, *"Still" Life*, *The 49ers*, *Like Water, to Jane Cooney Baker (died 1-22-62)*, *Beowulf (Richard Wilbur)*
- **Myth/Sci-Fi Stories, Articles, and Excerpts** *War*, *Press X for Beer Bottle*, *Happily Ever After*, *Like Water, to Jane Cooney Baker (died 1-22-62)*, *The Silent Season of a Hero*, *A (Seemingly) Impossible Fall*, *\$50*, *Under 11.5 Rounds*, *Floyd Mayweather, Jr. vs. Victor Ortiz*, *The Murder of Tayshana Murphy*, *Tufts Words of Wisdom*, *Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here?*
- **Blogs:** *Stealing Happy Hours (Myth)*, *After You (SFHP)*, *Inquiring Minds Want to Know*, *Searching for a Former Clarity*, *The Hero Dies in This One (Myth)*, *Will the Future Blame Us? (SFHP)*, *With Love We Will Survive*, *Non Est Ad Astra Mollis e Terris Via*, *How to Win Friends and Influence People (Myth)*, *...And Were We Angels After All? (SFHP)*, *The Bottle and the Sea*, *I Never Wanted (The Quiet Things That No One Ever Knows) (SFHP)*, *Revenge Therapy (SFHP)*, *Is This Where I End, or Is This Where I Begin? (Myth)*, *...And Just 'Cause He's Gone...*, *The Bucket*
- **Activities and Handouts:** *Foundation Questions*, *Great Expectations*, *Nice to Know You (SFHP)*, *Round Table (Week 2)*, *The World Around You*, *Collegiate Personal Statements*, *Siddhartha Starter Questions (SFHP)*, *Establishing a Philosophical Baseline (Siddhartha, Macbeth, Gilgamesh, The Inferno Parts I and II)*, *Modern Mythology (Myth)*, *Creative Projects (SFHP)*, *Musica Universalis/The Great Song of a Thousand Voices*, *Machine of Death (SFHP)*, *The Universe of Pain + The Love that Moves the Stars (Myth)*, *Heroic Poem (SFHP)*, and *A Speculative Fiction (Myth)*
- **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 *The River Beneath the Stars 2012* (main body, song lyrics, quotes, or student comments)

You **must** use every *Something to Say* quote and work each **book, film, foundation question,** and **key concept** from your particular course 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. I highly encourage you to incorporate them whenever they fit into your plans.

One way to begin: Place 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 – orange = *Siddhartha*, blue = *The Inferno*, etc. Once you finish, repeat the process for your books and films and (if you wish) for the others as well.

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. Your finished piece addresses the "big questions" 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.

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The ultimate goal is simple: to take everything that you've experienced, examine it, and be able to explain, eloquently and insightfully, what you think all of this – our art, our societies, our place in the universe, our very lives – is all about....what it means to be a human being, and to be alive, particularly in this moment, with your childhood Memory grid almost cleared.

Yes, it's possible that you'll write something that, were you to re-examine your work in, say, twenty years, could cause you to groan – "Good Lord, *that* was what I thought about love / life / what lay ahead? What in the world...?" And yes, the things you believe now will shift, will gain nuance as you continue to gain perspective.

But to be honest, you're closer to "finished" than you know. You are far likelier to produce something that you can appreciate when you crack it open at some point in the future. Perhaps next year, when you're inevitably questioning whether you're "staying true to yourself" or "following the right path," it will reassure you that you are; perhaps, when you're about to get married, it will reassure you that this is, in fact, what you wanted; perhaps, when you're about to become a mother or father, it will remind you, *She won't know any of this. Either I can teach her, or the world will...*and you will truly understand how tremendously difficult it must have been for the people who've raised you to get you to this point, and what this moment you're reaching towards truly represents for them as well as for yourself.

Perhaps, in short, you will surprise yourself...for you may be wiser than you realize.

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Sixteen weeks ago, I asked you a simple, formerly-rhetorical question: *What would you attempt to do if you knew you would not fail?*

This project is your answer, just as it has been for those who came before you, and just as it will be for those who'll follow you once your time in B2 draws to a close.

Your work does not have a set length; it should reflect your **finest effort**, with everything that implies. If you were ever going to impress me, ever going to knock my socks off....this is your chance.

Submit your final draft twice by Thursday, January 17<sup>th</sup>: once through turnitin.com, and again with a bound hard-copy in class. You may, of course, illustrate or decorate your final version; I **strongly** recommend doing so.

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