Ad Judicium: The Star

You've probably spent most of your academic lives – particularly in high school – writing a specific form of literary analysis: the thesis-driven essay. There's real value in the form: it's usually compact (five or so paragraphs), tightly focused, and (in the right hands) persuasive. But there's also a degree of limitation to the five-paragraph essays we've always asked you to write. Almost by necessity, you (the reader-writer) end up cutting material from the book you found interesting, wanted to discuss, or otherwise believed worthy of inclusion in order to avoid digressing. In the most unhappy cases, you found yourself responding to prompts that didn't resonate with you; you found yourself saying something without having something to say.

As you get older, the thesis-driven essay doesn't go away. It does, however, gain company; it's not the only go-to form of literary assessment in your arsenal. Literary *criticism,* in some respects, is a bit different from your previous exercise in literary *analysis.*

Think of a movie review: why are there so many different reviews for the same film? Because different reviews zero in on different aspects of the film. Some reviewers value performance over production design; some obsess over the technical minutiae. Some, famously, try to judge a film's success based on whether it achieved what it set out to achieve; others hold the same film to pre-existing standards, and judge it according to them. In short, you know what you're getting when you read a movie review…and yet you really don't. We have a bunch of different things that we give the same name.

What's the least-persuasive kind of movie review, save the ones that the studios clearly pay for? The one in which the reviewer inserts himself or herself into the reviewing process – *this disappointed me, this was stupid* – while acting like their views have universal merit. This is why it's so fun to disagree with certain reviews.

However, the critic *can't* really separate himself or herself from bias. What they're reviewing, ultimately, depends at least in part on what they perceived – regardless of what the creators intended. The ones that are open about their standards – *I'm evaluating this film based on this, this, and this* – can still be disagreed with…but they merit respect.

That's the sort of criticism I want you to engage in this semester. I will ask you, time and again: *Does this succeed? Is this worthy of recommendation?* And you will have to make an argument in favor of, or against, a work. Your evaluation definitely doesn't have to be uniformly positive or negative – even reviews slamming bad films often note their relative strengths. But you do, ultimately, have to make that determination. **This** succeeds; **this** is flawed but worthwhile; **this** had potential but failed to hit its marks; **this** was an utter failure.

There are tons of literary elements to consider, as you'll see from my partial list below. And I think you'll find this form of literature evaluation both more honest and more fun.

Your first task: to evaluate Arthur C. Clarke's *The Star.*

Elements to Consider

Organization

Plot Structure and Sequence

Plot Content

Syntax

Language and Diction

Philosophies

Assumptions, Arguments, and Messages

Characterization (Motivation / Plausibility)

Social Relevance (Current / Past)

Political Relevance (Current / Past)

Thematic Substance

Observations

Style

Tone

Pace/Tension

Aesthetic

Imagery

Sensory Details

Emotional Evocation

Relationship to Other Works

Influences (Social / Philosophical / Political / Ethical)

Use of Archetypes

Breaking Ground / Ongoing Influence

Narrative Perspective

Appeal to Audience

Persuasiveness