

This paper, done well, should take care of several course objectives. Here they are again for you:

As a result of this course, students will be able to: understand and articulate the basic chronology of British literature from *Beowulf* through the 18th century, including the authors and dates of key works; speak and write knowledgeably about particular works drawn from those periods; demonstrate a basic understanding of major genres of British literature during the periods in question; demonstrate a basic knowledge of British history during the period, in particular as it relates to the literature.

The “Course Topics” bit of our syllabus says we will pay “some attention to the procedures and language of literary criticism,” too. Hence, the paper will be a mixture of etymology exploration and close reading.

Close reading, which might be described as a careful, systematic unfolding of a particular passage or text, is a fundamental part of modern literary criticism. (The New Critics really love it.) The term “close reading” is often used interchangeably with “explication” (or, if you want to be French about it, *explication de texte*), and explication is fine if you’re more familiar with that term...and I’ll use both of those terms here in order to avoid tacky redundancy and repetition.

Since we’re combining close reading with etymology, your papers will be a bit different than usual explications. We’re concerned with demonstrating that “basic knowledge of British history,” for one thing, and it’s difficult to do such a thing when considering only one text. So you’ll be looking at several—at least two, and as many as you wish (within reason). Through this assignment, you’ll familiarize yourself with the history of English through the gaze of one or two particular words and the texts their meanings shape. Thus, you’ll become more familiar with those texts and their authors, as well as their relative time periods. See how this works? Isn’t this exciting?!

How To Do This:

As you read through the texts we’ll be discussing in class, be on the look out for words which seem as though they might have interesting histories, or maybe just words you’re not as familiar with as you’d like to be. Write them down in your reading journal for reference, and once you’re ready to take a break from reading, go to the *Oxford English Dictionary* to investigate. Chances are, especially if you find the word in a medieval text, that the word will have quite a long and impressive history in English and, thus, will be an interesting choice for your paper. If you find, however, that your word is pretty boring (the meaning is static, or it falls out of use quickly and there is no *ooh, look!* reason that you can surmise for it’s replacement), you’ll have to keep searching.

The *OED* will be helpful to you in many ways. You’ll learn something about the origin of your word there, of course (though I also encourage you to look in other etymological dictionaries), but you’ll also be able to see the history of the word and its usage. The *OED* is an historical dictionary, you see? It gives examples for its definitions found in printed literature throughout the history of our language, and many of its most popular source texts appear in your anthology. (If you’re lucky, the *OED* will do a lot of your research for you.)

Once you’re satisfied with your word and have found a few texts in which it appears (and appears *interestingly*), you’re ready to write your paper. Begin with the origin of the word and its first occurrence and go from there, working toward the present (or as far into the word’s future as you’d like to go) and paying close attention to nuances in meaning and usage. If a certain meaning of your word has fallen out of present use but is important to our understanding of a sonnet written during the Renaissance, for instance, be sure to say so. (Remember: this is also a close reading assignment.) You may find it useful and amusing to guess at reasons for that meaning’s disappearance or disuse if you cannot find actual reasons for it. You may also feel free—especially if you are a Creative Writing major—to explore the ways in which that word and its older meanings influence modern texts.

Requirements: At least 5 pages. You must use the *OED* and at least two texts by authors appearing in the *NAEL*; other sources encouraged, but please provide copies. MLA format. If you have questions, ask them!