**8G:1 Honors Interpretation of Literature, Sec 57**

**Brooks Landon, Fall 2009**

**First Paper Assignment: Reading Diagnostic**

**Due: Wednesday September 9 Suggested length:** 3-5 pages

Let’s use this first paper as a kind of diagnostic(a metaphoric Rorschach inkblot test) for thinking about the way we read—what we like, what we don’t like, and what we look for or want from our reading. And I want to see if you can do this in analytical fashion—not just saying **what** you like, but explaining why, using some of the critical vocabulary we’ve been developing. You may choose to diagnose your likes and dislikes in reading either poetry or fiction (no nonfiction on this assignment, please). Feel free to refer to either poems or stories we’ve covered to offer examples of the kinds of things you like or dislike, but you can draw your examples from your own reading as well. But your paper should make it clear that you’ve been following the kinds of critical questions we’ve been talking about in class and that you are now assessing or reassessing your reading habits and preferences in terms of these more specific critical questions.

Your assignment is NOT just to identify the works of fiction or poetry you like most and least or even which you like or dislike, but to think of each story as consisting of numerous aspects or elements of fictional narratives and each poem as falling into one or more of the categories we’ve discussed that poetry is particularly well-suited for. In this sense, fiction offers us a range of narrators, a number of different characters, different settings (time and place), different **semblances** (kinds of illusional worlds) different kinds of conflict, different kinds of changes, different ideas, and different prose styles (the syntax and diction of the sentences that present the story). Draw from these aspects or elements in your reading likes and dislikes to illustrate your specifications of what you seem to like and what you seem to dislike (or at least like less) in your reading of fiction. If you choose to write about poetry, you’ll need to answer that all-important question: Why is this a poem and not something else? You’ll also need to specify the things or purposes you find most attractive in the poetry you like and explain how you like to think about the poems you read. Discuss the way you now would describe your reading interests—whether in poetry or in fiction--not just in terms of plot or story type (not in terms of what Atwood calls “a what and a what and a what”) but in terms of the how and why of your likes and dislikes.

In effect, I’m asking you for a kind of thoughtful, contemplative inventory of the things you look for when you read and the things you tend to avoid or tune out when you read. Think of this as the literary equivalent of sending in a profile to a cyber dating service, only instead of describing yourself in terms that might pair you with the perfect date, you’re describing your reading taste in terms that might allow a computer to make some well-educated suggestions about titles that might interest you.

**Some Incredibly Easy But Incredibly Important Tips For This Paper:**

**Don’t waste your first sentence on stating the obvious (“Everyone has likes and dislikes when it comes to reading”) or saying something so vague (“There are lots of things that I like and lots of things that I dislike when I read”) or something so abstract (“Cerebration about interpretation can yield significant information about reading habits”) that it doesn’t really give your reader any useful or interesting information. Make your first sentence count (then do the same for all those that follow).**

**And Some Paper Do’s and Don’t’s**

**DO** work hard—very hard—to make your first paragraph an effective preview of your paper, one usually containing both your thesis and an “essay map.” By the end of a first paragraph, a good reader has a very clear idea whether the paper will be strong or weak. After a poor opening paragraph, lots of second paragraphs never get read.

**DO** remember that good writers always pay close attention to (1) the way they come across in their writing—the persona they project, (2) their audience—to what their audience knows, doesn’t know, needs to know and to what is appropriate for reaching their audience, and (3) their purpose or argument, what they aim to do with their writing.

**DON’T** write “about” things; write to do things.

**DON’T** write a sentence so vague or so cryptic that any good writer will think “huh?” and ask questions about what the sentence means. Don’t write sentences that must be followed by sentences that explain what they mean. Follow-up sentences can elaborate, detail, add supporting evidence, but they should not have to make the meaning of the original sentence clear.

**DO** be a helpful “tour guide,” explaining to your audience why you are writing what you are writing, where your paper will go next, and why it is important to go there. Explain why what you are writing is important for the reader to read. Pay attention to the transitions between sentences and between paragraphs.

**DO** clearly state a thesis you will develop. Your thesis should commit you to advancing an argument or expressing an opinion that might be right or might be wrong. Good writers stick their necks out, take risks, don’t waste time “arguing” stuff anyone with half a brain would know.

**DO** write in a way that reveals YOUR MIND AT WORK—judging, speculating, reflecting, explaining, THINKING. Words like “because,” “possibly,” “perhaps” help you do this.

**DO** read your paper aloud before you turn it in. Seriously. Your ear will catch mistakes your eyes will never notice.