**XIDS Special Topics: Memoirs by Women**

**Spring 2017**

**Essay One**

Write a fully developed essay of 2-3 pages in support of a clearly stated argumentative thesis. You must support your thesis with evidence from the primary text, including direct quotations in your essay where necessary and appropriate. These must be cited correctly using MLA format for parenthetical page citation. You will need to provide a Works Cited page, again according to MLA format, for the end of the essay.

**Essay One Prompts: XIDS 2100-03 / Memoirs by Women**

1. In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe Lauren Slater’s *Lying* as a story about “the physical and psychic effects of enduring bouts of epilepsy, deliberately [blurring] the boundary between what is viewed as physical disability and mental illness, but also [foregrounding] challenges to telling a credible story” (146). Earlier in the text, Smith and Watson write, “Any utterance in an autobiographical text, even if inaccurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer” (15). They later add that “experience [as presented in life writing] is already an interpretation of the past and our place in a culturally and historically specific present” (31). Consider the premise for Slater’s text—that she is lying to her readers—as well as her explanation late in the Afterword that “*Lying* is a book of narrative truth, a book in which I am more interested in using invention to get to the heart of things than I am in documenting actual life occurrences” (219). Write an essay that grapples with the use of fiction (lying) in autobiographical writing, specifically in Slater’s book. Consider the implied contract with the audience, in terms of the expectation of a “true story,” and theorize about her use of metaphor as a way to get at emotional and experiential truth without relying on facts. Does Slater’s text seem to successfully relay a true experience, and, if so, what does her text reveal about memory and truth? Why does it matter? How does this impact the audience?
2. In *The Stories We Live By,* Dan McAdams writes, “A personal myth delineates an identity, illuminating the values of an individual life. The personal myth is not a legend or fairy tale, but a sacred story that embodies a personal truth” and reflects “patterns of desire” not always conscious to the writer (34, 36). With that in mind, choose ONE of the authors we’ve read so far (Slater, Moore, Strayed, Kincaid, Angelou, or Hurston). What type of personal mythology does the author fashion in her autobiographical writing? What personal truth or truths, or “patterns of desire,” does her narrative embody? Where do we see evidence of these borne out in the text? What types of recurring images, motives, or tropes does the author draw upon to shape the audience’s perception of her character and/or experience? What is the impact of her agency over the reader’s perspective? What are the implications of this agency in terms of self representation?
3. Choose one text that we have read and discussed, and develop a specific argument in response to a sign or pattern from that text about which you wish to theorize. Consider the multiple significances of your sign/topic in its particular cultural and historical moment. For example, you might consider the significance of falling in Slater’s text or you might specifically focus on the grave scene when she stages a fall and then emerges unglamorously from the ground on her own accord. Other possibilities include Strayed’s promiscuity in *Wild* or the relevance of animals in the film. If you wish to write about Judith Moore’s *Fat Girl*, possibilities include her erotic descriptions of food or Moore’s appropriation of space in the text (June’s place and the reverend’s). You’re free to discover your own phenomenon or pattern or anomaly from the text of your choice—just make sure it’s concrete and identifiable in the text.
4. Alternatively, you might consider one or two of our course texts thus far as case studies for life writing by women. What do(es) the text(s) reveal about how women represent themselves in their own writing? How do(es) the author(s) perceive, present, and write about crises, family, self, history, and experience? Consider whether the text supports or pushes back against cultural stereotypes about women. If the narrative seems invested in critiquing cultural stigmas about women and their experiences, or in forcing the audience to consider imbalances of power or to acknowledge the agency and power of women, identify how the text foregrounds the issue(s) and how effectively it encourages the audience to question themselves or their own biases.

**Assessment:** There are a number of different ways to approach this writing task; however, it is very important that your essay establishes and develops in support of a specific thesis (an argument or idea about the work). In other words, your essay must do more than simply summarize or paraphrase a work. Your thesis should do more (substantially more) than simply state whether or not you like or dislike, agree or disagree with what the author says. Use specific references to and/or examples (quotations) from the work to support your thesis. I will assess your essay based on the following: 1) the qualitative strength of your thesis; 2) your ability to convincingly support your thesis with specific textual and cultural references; 3) the organization of your paper; and 4) college-level expectations for grammar, editing, and style. See the rubric below for more specific grading criteria.

**Format:** Your response essay must conform to MLA documentation style. This includes the format of the first page as well as the format of all quotations and citations of all primary sources (the literary work you are analyzing).

\*\*As you think through ideas, feel free to discuss any of your thoughts, opinions, and questions with me.\*\*

**Formal Assessment Rubric:**

**To earn a “C” on essay one, a student must**

1. Respond to *all* of the constraints of the assignment:
2. Paper should be formatted according to MLA style guidelines with no major errors.
3. Paper should meet the minimum length requirement specified on the assignment sheet.
4. Paper should adequately respond to one of the assigned topics.
5. Posit a clear thesis/argument:
6. Thesis must center on a concrete claim.
7. Essay should be comprised of textual analysis in support of the thesis.
8. Present a well-organized essay:
9. Essay should contain distinguishable introductory and conclusion paragraphs of adequate length and appropriate tone.
10. The majority of body paragraphs should provide supporting evidence from your primary source, demonstrating an understanding of context and purpose in relating your evidence to your claim.
11. Paragraphs should contain topic sentences and, where appropriate, transitions.
12. Maintain a tone appropriate for the audience:
13. Essay should not contain colloquialisms or excessively informal language.
14. Essay should not rest on personal opinion.
15. Construct grammatically sound paragraphswith no pervasive pattern of grammatical errors and/or sentence-level incoherence.

**To earn a “B” on essay one, a student must**

1. Adhere to all assignment requirements (MLA style and formatting, length, assigned topic, analysis-driven prose).
2. Anchor essay via concrete thesis statement focusing on a thoughtful analysis of the assigned text(s) and topic(s).
3. Provide sound analysis that follows standard rules of paragraph construction (topic sentences, supporting evidence, explication) and displays adequate paragraph development.
4. Demonstrate an ability to analyze the text through an interdisciplinary lens (situating the text within a cultural or political context, for example).
5. Have no distracting pattern of error.
6. Display tangible improvement with respect to errors marked on previous assignments/graded writing (meaning the student cannot have a repeated pattern of errors marked on previously graded work).

**To earn an “A” on essay one, a student must**

1. Adhere to all assignment requirements, with no major errors in MLA style or formatting.
2. Provide a sophisticated thesis demonstrating independent thinking.
3. Remain focused on the topic and thesis, providing sound and compelling analysis throughout the essay
4. Guide argument via strong topic sentences and appropriate transitions.
5. Have very few grammatical errors, none of which interfere with coherence.
6. Display significantimprovement with respect to errors marked on previous assignments/graded writing.

**A “D” grade results from**

1. Failing to adhere to basic assignment requirements (length, flagrant disregard for MLA style and formatting)
2. Failure to adequately respond to a clearly articulated topic
3. A lack of substantive analysis (i.e. an essay resting primarily on observation or summary).
4. A pervasive pattern of minor errors that undermines sentence-level coherence.
5. A pattern of repeated errors marked on previously graded work.

**An “F” grade results from**

1. Failure to adhere to basic assignment requirements.
2. Two or more of the faults listed under “D.”