

Exploratory Essays

Works of mythology wrestle with some big questions. Questions like: where did life come from?; what is life's purpose?; why does life end?; what is it to be a human?; and so forth. Over the course of the semester, you will have the opportunity to consider these big questions and your thinking about them in **three (3) exploratory essays**. You may notice that there are four (4) essays and essay deadlines listed below and on your syllabus; you are being asked to choose any three (3) of those four (4) essays to complete and submit.

Your exploratory essays can be informal in tone but should have at least two parts. **Part one (1) to two (2) of the questions engaged by the unit** (see list below) and will discuss how **at least three (3) of the myths** studied¹ answer the selected question(s). In **part two**, you will **tackle the question(s) yourself**, exploring your current beliefs on the subject(s) and striving to articulate not just what you think and how you would answer the question(s), but also *why* you think as you do.

The goal here is not to set down ultimate truths or develop a manifesto of your unwavering beliefs regarding major existential questions (I'm not quite that maniacal), but rather to engage with the narratives and thinking of numerous cultures and to render a sketch of what you might, at this point in your life, be considering with regards to some of the biggest topics with which we, as humans, can wrestle.

Each essay should be **750-1000 words, double spaced, and in a standard font**. In addition, **essays should be submitted via Bb by 11:59 PM (Eastern)** and, while your **tone can be informal**, your writing **should show attention to style, grammar, and mechanics**.

Essay Deadlines:

Unit 1 Exploratory Essay Due on **September 24th**
Unit 2 Exploratory Essay Due **October 8th**
Unit 3 Exploratory Essay Due **October 22nd**
Unit 4 Exploratory Essay Due **November 19th**

Unit Questions:

Unit 1 – Creation/Origins

- What is the essence or substance of life and of the universe?
- From where (or whom) does life and the universe originate? Why or how do we know? What does this communicate about the order of the universe?

¹ You may select **one** myth from a different unit to discuss, if you would like.

YOUR OBJECTIVES:

- DEMONSTRATE KNOWLEDGE OF MYTHS FROM MULTIPLE WORLD CULTURES;
- THOUGHTFULLY CONSIDER HOW DIFFERENT CULTURES AND THEIR MYTHS HAVE ENGAGED WITH “THE BIG QUESTIONS”; AND
- CONSIDER YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE ON THOSE SAME QUESTIONS.

- What do origin stories teach us about our values, our culture(s), and/or about the world around us and our place in it?
- Why do we tell stories? Why do we tell the stories of origins and of naming?

Unit 2 – Endings

- What makes up life? What separates the living from the dead? How are life and death different, if at all? How are they the same, if at all?
- What is death? What is death’s role or purpose in life and/or in the order of the universe? Does death affect our bodies, our souls, both, or something else?
- Can God/gods die? Why and how? What does this mean or suggest?
- Will life and/or the universe end? How will it/they end? Why will i/they end? How permanent is that ending? What is the essence or nature of “the” apocalypse?

Unit 3 – Humans (in context)

- What makes us human? Is it our bodies? Our minds? Our souls? All three? None of the above? (What even *is* a body, a mind, and/or a soul?)
- What are humans made of and/or where do humans come from? What is the “mortal experience” and how does it differ from immortal or supernatural existence?
- How are humans like *and* unlike supernatural beings, divine beings, and/or monstrous beings?
- Why is there suffering and evil in the world? Why do some suffer more than others? What is the purpose of pain, trauma, suffering in life? What is the purpose of love and hope? Do divine beings experience suffering and/or hope like mortal beings? Why or why not?
- How are sex and/or gender differences described? How “real” and/or distinct are these differences? Why and how do some myths emphasize differences or distinctions in sex and/or gender while others do not? What do these stories help us consider about culture and its relationship to difference and/or the human body?

Unit 4 – Heroes and Tricksters

- What makes someone a hero? Why do we tell stories about heroes?
- What makes someone or something a trickster? Why do we tell stories about tricksters?
- Can heroes be tricksters? Can tricksters be heroes?
- How do heroes and/or tricksters help us think about the functions (or a culture’s perceptions of the functions) of humor, violence, individualism, community, selfishness, and/or problem solving?
- Are heroes always “good”? How do we define “good” people or what makes people good? Do heroes always have any or all of these “good” qualities? Why or why not? Do tricksters?