

Example of multiple work focus for ending term final paper essay

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Writing as Social Therapy: Camus' *The Plague* and Vergil's *Aeneid*

Eric Blair attended secondary school at Eton, where he made a series of decisions that would affect not only his personal life, but also his future writing. Instead of working hard on his assignments and pursuing top marks, Blair decided instead to stop doing serious work and just do what he needed to get through. He did make a number of friends who would become influential in British letters, but he did not get the grades he would need to earn a university scholarship. Since his parents did not have the money to pay for his tuition, he went instead into the Indian Imperial Police in Burma (now Myanmar). After seven years of working for what was essentially an imperial security force in one of Britain's colonial holdings, he quit and came back to England, filled with distaste for the inner workings of an empire. He soon volunteered for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, fighting against the Stalinists; after his side lost, though, he had to flee Spain before being arrested by communist leadership in 1937 (George Orwell Biography). He took the pen name George Orwell (after the patron saint of England and the name of a river that he had loved as a child), and wrote two works that show the formative influence of those experiences: *Animal Farm* is an allegorical explanation of the transition from Lenin's Communism to Stalin's totalitarianism in the Soviet Union, and *1984* examines what would happen if a faceless bureaucracy, dedicated to controlling information, took over a nation – or even a whole section of the world. His job during World War II was writing copy for the BBC Eastern Service – basically building propaganda to support Britain's efforts. This manipulation of the truth shaped his writing of

Winston, the main character in 1984. In the cases of Vergil's *Aeneid* and Camus' *The Plague*, both works are the fruit of experiences that the authors endured; both works have as their themes issues with which the authors struggled. Writing is, and always has been, a way for authors to work out issues of the day and to share their perspectives on those issues with society.

The time when Vergil lived (70 – 19 BC) was one of significant political chaos in Rome. The government made its change from republic to totalitarian empire, during the turbulent events that led to that fateful Ides of March in 44 B. C. Starting during Vergil's childhood, different uprisings had attempted to end the republic, beginning with the conspiracy of Catiline in 63, who was foiled by Cicero. When Pompey came back from his eastern conquests but had his accomplishments rejected by the Senate, he formed a bond with Julius Caesar and Marcus Crassus, the three of whom made the "first triumvirate" and essentially controlled the Senate because of Pompey's control of the legions. Working with two others wasn't good enough for Caesar, though, and he eliminated his two partners, taking over sole control of Rome for life. This angered a group that included Marcus Brutus, who wanted to maintain Rome's political freedom. As a result, Caesar was assassinated; however, the empire emerged when Caesar's nephew, Augustus, took power ("Cataline Conspiracy").

While the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have their origins in the oral tradition, the *Aeneid* was written significantly later and has much more symbolic depth. From the beginning, it is clear that Vergil has chosen the story of Aeneas

because this general's wanderings after the fall of Troy have a thematic connection to the events of this epic. While Odysseus' wanderings from Troy back to Ithaca have mostly a personal application, showing the struggles of the hero for the reader's enjoyment and occasional edification, the story of Aeneas is also the story of Rome. In the Aeneid, when the Italians fight against Aeneas, the clear parallel is the victory that Augustus gains over his rivals in his quest to be emperor. The way in which Dido, queen of Carthage, almost diverts Aeneas from his destiny as future founder of Rome and as leader of his men, does have parallels with the wiles that Circe and Calypso exercise over Odysseus. However, it also has a parallel with an event that was taking place in Vergil's Rome: the love affair between Marc Antony and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. This love affair distracted Antony from his fight in Rome; because Augustus had no such distractions, he had far less trouble consolidating power than Antony would have.

The Aeneid also shows an awareness of the Stoic philosophy which was so important in Roman thought – and would have been an area of emphasis during the political turbulence that went along with the transition from republic to empire. When Jupiter seems much more an agent of fate than an active manipulator of the forces of history in the first book, which would dovetail much more with stoicism than with the activist deities that populated the Greek pantheon. Anchises' speech about the vagaries of human existence in the sixth book urges a reliance on fate instead of human action – again, this is much more consistent with the Stoicism of Vergil's day than with the more hopeful beliefs that characterized the older ancient

world. The events that affect Romulus and Remus show the hand of fate working towards Rome's founding, indicating that the Stoic way of thinking goes all the way back to the city's very establishment.

Vergil's understanding of history and current events in Rome, as well as the undergirding philosophies that are supposed to guide the thinking of each Roman citizen, informs his writing throughout the epic. Because most writers use their own significant experiences to shape their writing, this comes as no surprise. However, the use of the ancient story of the end of the Trojan War and the founding of Rome to serve as a figurative parallel to the end of the Roman Republic reflects a depth in writing that was new to literature at that point in time, going intellectually further than the grand imagery that comprises Homer's two epics.

In 1947, right around the time when Orwell was finishing 1984, Albert Camus published *The Plague* (*La Peste* in his native French). The previous seven years had been terrifying for anyone living in France, as the Nazi regime had rolled through and taken over most of it as part of its domination of Europe, before unraveling and falling to the Allies. On a literal level, the story is about an epidemic that tore through the Algerian city of Oran in the 1849, but the story is clearly set in the 1940's. Cholera had hit the city in 1556, 1678, 1849, 1921, 1931 and 1944. However, the tale of Oran's plight is generally received as an allegory for the Nazi occupation of France. Camus' insights about the time of occupation inform his description of the terrors that went through Oran.

One point of interest, from a stylistic perspective, is the syntactical and tonal similarities between *The Plague* and Kafka's *The Trial*. The absurdity that lies in wait for all of us, wresting actual control over our lives out of our hands, dominates both of these novels. Both Josef K and Dr. Bernard Rieux (the central characters of *The Trial* and *The Plague*) suffer from circumstances about which to say that they are out of the character's control would be a classic understatement.

The ways that different characters respond to the plague also show the absurdity that characterizes human existence. While Rambert, who initially sought escape from the town so that he can rejoin his lover, he is convinced by Tarrou and Father Paneloux to stay and help, as they both have foregone chances to leave in order to stay and help the sick. However, once the plague starts to die down, Cottard is very upset, because the contraband operations he has set up during the quarantine will dry up once normal commerce resumes – which means that the end of the plague will actually hurt him financially. When the quarantine ends, he goes insane and starts shooting at passersby from his house and goes to prison. While the final reflection that Rieux has about the whole story is that, in balance, people have more positive than negative traits, the way that the plague swept through the town and the way that many people responded show the absurdity of life. The ways that the Nazi regime brutally murdered so many Jews and other minority members, and turned friend against friend in the lands that it occupied, also show the absurdity of existence; it was this absurdity that inspired Camus' spinning of this tale.

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