

Critical Essay Prospectus

Assignment:

The purpose of the prospectus is to lay the groundwork for the critical essay that will be submitted toward the end of the semester. The idea is to provide a brief overview of the direction you plan to take in your research. This should include a theme chosen from the list below and some consideration of how this topic relates to the two disciplines you have decided to incorporate. (Keep in mind that you will use the remaining two disciplines for your critical essay in the spring).

Your choices for this semester are as follows:

Honor
Journey
Enlightenment
Revolution
Social Status
Paradigm Shift
Humor

The prospectus should be between 250 and 300 words and, additionally, should include an annotated bibliography of at least three potential sources, only one of which may be from the internet. Again, this is only a starting point and is intended to give you and the appropriate faculty an idea of the direction in which you are headed. While secondary sources are required, you should remain focused on developing *your own thoughts* regarding the material. We are interested in a fresh and engaging approach to the material, not simply a report/rehash of what other scholars and critics have to say on the subject. In two wordsoriginality counts.

Follow-Up:

The prospectus (typed and double-spaced) is due on **October 13**. By October 1, you must have met with the faculty members whose disciplines are involved. This will enable the faculty to help you refine your subject, if necessary, and perhaps to help you locate relevant materials. **It is your responsibility to set up this meeting with the professors. Part of your final grade for the critical essay will be based on the prospectus and the follow-up conference. It is up to you and your faculty member to decide if/when a second conference may be appropriate.** As the critical essay is best approached as a process, you should also feel free to contact the faculty outside of the designated meeting times.

Final Critical Essay: due November 24

- 6 sources (not including the internet) – at least three for each discipline
- 8-10 pages (2,000-2,500 words)
- Works Cited and Consulted – asterisk (*) works cited

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Honor within the Heart of Human Sacrifice

*“The heart should never be disregarded/for it holds life and meaning/One who is foolish enough to let his guard down for a higher power/Should have his heart taken away”.*¹

A poem comes to mind as I sit through this lonely afterlife, feeling the pain evoked from Mama’s suffering soul. I remember Mama always telling me that one day, *Huitzilopochtli* would abruptly take me away from her and she would be left alone in this unstable world. Mama had all the knowledge to say that, she was a woman of her word. “Mama, don’t cry”, I whisper ever so softly as a moist tear rolls down the apple of my left cheek. A divine breeze enters my vicinity and my cheek feels cool, almost as if a sharp object has vertically sliced it open and left it for the sun god to feast my blood. No time is given to let the wound naturally heal because when a piercing touch cuts open my delicate skin, the deity steals my blood,² quickly

¹ *“The soul . . . away”*: According to the article “Aztec Philosophy”, balance is a relevant component within the Aztec philosophy (Maffie). Without equilibrium in life, one is likely to fall through the cracks of the earth and become lost. The life of an Aztec is already an arduous and confounding entity fueled by the metaphysical nature of their questions and wonders about the being and reality. In the Aztec world of thinking, Cuauhtémoc falls through gaping holes and has no way of pulling himself back up. The poem he writes serves as an example of his conflicting ideas with that of the Aztecs because while Cuauhtémoc believes that giving up your soul to the gods without a fight is a sign of weakness, the Aztecs would perform rituals of sacrifice to recognize the deities for what good things reigned in the Aztec civilization.

Poetry was used to express ideas through imagery and metaphors. Because people found themselves incapable of depicting images beyond their world, they used the beauty of figurative language to convey their metaphysical messages (Léon-Portilla 79). Poems are interpreted differently depending on the individual, so to start off the story with a few lines of poetry, I am demonstrating the multiple perspectives that surfaced with the discovery of human sacrifice. Human sacrifice may be an uncomfortable topic to elaborate on, but I intended to show how the subject is open to interpretation because of the complexity and the metaphysical component attached to its controversial nature.

² Every time . . . my blood . . . : It was believed that the sun and war god *Huitzilopochtli* would feast the blood of enemy warriors whenever he longed for rejuvenation (Higgins and Solomon 78). The sun god has been stealing Cuauhtémoc’s blood from him without consent, showing Cuauhtémoc’s displacement from his own Aztec community. This foreshadows his eventual captivation by the Europeans; not only does he become the enemy, but he feels like a rival of the Aztecs in the sense that he cannot relate to the people who he should naturally be able to

deteriorating my hunger-stricken soul. And the process repeats itself over and over, until one day, I will have nothing left in my helpless soul to unwillingly give.

“Cuauhtémoc³ time to go to the ceremony!”. Those were the infamous words my mother would audibly express every time a new 52-year cycle was beginning and a sacrifice was being performed in my village of Tenochtitlan, the complex city with four causeways intended to protect the people and provide a home for Huitzilopochtli (Van Tuerenhout 139). I would drag myself out of bed, wash my motionless face, and try to avoid stumbling through our cracked floor as Mama was screaming my name and scolding me for not being ready. Frankly, I would not remember the first part of these mornings because it was droned out by my inability to stay awake. All I remember as a young boy was hearing faint but chaotic noises at these ceremonies and a unison of people chanting and raising their hands in the air with mighty and boney fists. I would rub my eyes ferociously with the hopes of clearing up my obstructed vision. Captured warriors, men, women and children would participate in *ixiptla*, which is the ritual of embodying the god to whom they would be sacrificed to (Van Tuerenhout187). *Huitzilopochtli* was a popular choice of costume, with neutral beiges and browns draped over the body with hints of

identify with; his ideals are not compatible with that of his society’s, therefore, he serves to provide life whenever the deities need strength because he is essentially the enemy and no mercy is shown to him. As this ritual progresses, Cuauhtémoc cannot hold on to his life with the little authority he has over it because he never achieves to find himself during his life; unfortunately, he is not strong enough to combat the almighty gods. This reflects upon the Aztec peoples’ limited authority to free themselves from this never-ending ritual of human sacrifice because without the ritual, people believed they would be condemned.

³ Cuauhtémoc: In the Nahuatl language, it means “falling eagle”. Eventually, Cuauhtémoc suffers a downfall within his native community who believe life is sustained with sacrificial offerings to the gods. In real life, Cuauhtémoc was an actual Aztec native fighting against the Spanish conquistadores to stop them from coming into Tenochtitlan in 1519, but I used the name Cuauhtémoc because it defined the journey that the man in this particular story endures. I am not alluding to the story of the real Cuauhtémoc through this anecdote because the stories are not similar; it was simply a coincidence in name choice.

The name “falling eagle” is symbolic to the story because although eagles represent strength, freedom, and knowledge, Cuauhtémoc suffers a tragic downfall and he is not only defeated by the infiltration of the Spanish and the practices of the Aztecs, he also stabs himself in the heart on account of his failure to explore his preferences and find answers that would release him from the world he has created for himself; this world consists of conflicting ideologies of human sacrifice that serve no purpose in fueling his growth in becoming honorable individual. He becomes so entrenched with the idea of no resolution that he fails to find answers for himself.

green and red to lure the eyes. Other times, the indigenous Nahuatl peoples would be covered in vibrant coats of paint and they would look like impeccable creatures with flawless complexions.⁴ I would hear the crackling of fire on a stick as it touched the chest of the victim, or the locus of cosmic life forces⁵ (Higgins and Solomon 79), as it lay helplessly on the sacrificial stone, and the ripping out of a heart, palpitating through its last seconds of life before it was cremated with the corpse. Other times, I would hear an individual screaming for mercy as he was pinned down and punctured with sharp maguey spines, followed by an excretion of blood leaving his body and entering the deities'. Priests known as the *Tlenamacac* would be authorized to perform the sacrifices and people would be chosen on the basis of whether they fit the requirements⁶ of the gods to whom they would be sacrificed to (Van Tuerenhout 187).

The world had been re-created four times in a matter of 2, 028 years; the gods who had once lived during these different worlds had all sacrificed themselves in an attempt to re-establish the lost worlds and continue living (Hassig 5). Therefore, in our colonial time, the

⁴People would . . . complexions. : Humans would embody the gods they were sacrificing with the intention of imitating their endeavors (Higgins and Solomon 81). Mimicking their deities through aesthetic means allowed them to answer the metaphysical questions surfacing with the purpose of human sacrifice. There are multiple outlets to understanding human sacrifice, and aesthetics provides a different perspective that enables them to bridge a gap between beauty and gore. By comprehending the exquisiteness versus the gruesomeness of a ritual, they tended to draw connections between the two and eventually neutralized the meaning of something that seems horrid. A balance is established as they begin to accept it and see it in a different light rather than go to one extreme of the spectrum and utterly condone it. As the author of "Aztec Philosophy" states, "Knowledge, truth, value, rightness, and beauty were defined in terms of the aim of humans maintaining their balance as well as the balance of the cosmos" (Maffie). The Aztecs believed that they were humans attempting to maintain balance on a slippery earth, which depicts the importance of balance within their lives.

⁵"Was the...forces": Because the Aztecs' distinguished different parts of the body for its distinct purposes, there was more reason to give back to their gods. The human body is an intricate entity that has inevitably developed over time. The Aztec people felt compelled to replenish the souls of the gods with rich organs and blood, which held so much meaning to them. These body parts, such as the liver, head, and heart, were the key components used to create a thriving civilization that the Aztecs felt they owed it to the gods to provide worthy sacrifices that would attempt to equally reciprocate what the gods had given to them and would give to them.

⁶. . . people would be . . . requirements: Maffie states that humans would successfully connect with *teotl* through the heart, which may serve as one of the reasons why the Aztecs would offer hearts to the gods. The successful connection through the heart meant that one's misunderstandings and misconceptions would suddenly disappear and comprehension would manifest. People thought that human sacrifice brought about good and prosperous things because with a strong connection between *teotl* and the heart, there was no reason to have bad things come upon them. However, it was believed that not everyone held the knowledge within their hearts to achieve the connection with *teotl* (Maffie), so if no prosperity resulted after human sacrifice, the relationship between heart and *teotl* had failed and more hearts were required until one with knowledge could be sifted out.

Aztecs believed that human sacrifice would content the gods, essentially making them more prone to rein our Aztec land with prosperity and joy. The Aztecs did not want to upset their gods because that would essentially create instability within the community, considering that the world had gone through multiple relapses of destruction. As a young boy, it alarmed me to watch such gruesome acts of sacrifice because although we were taught to accept it as part of our thriving culture, I questioned the extent to which it was effective. We were performing for the sake of our well-being, and it was working well for us. So why impede a system that would bring us endless happiness and support?⁷

It was not until I turned sixteen that I began working as a temple tender in the infamous *Templo Mayor* of Tenochtitlan where sacrifices were constantly performed. You can imagine the amount of goriness that presented itself to me through those years of work. Especially around harvest time, whenever the weather would not work in our favor, a multitude of sacrifices would be performed to quench the anger of the gods and manifest elated feelings, feeding them rich human blood and fresh, pumping hearts.

Have you ever seen a human body with no heart? There is a bloody hole protruding on the left chest of the body and a part of its spirit is released through the wound. Men would carelessly yank the maroon and plum purple heart from its insides and my eyes would gaze open in amazement at how quick and painless the priests made it appear. But after a while, my brain had become sterilized to the strangulations, mutilations, and rituals performed and witnessing the

⁷ As a young . . . support: Cuauhtémoc's polar state of thought reflects the Aztec's belief in the *teotl*, which is a spirit that is identical with everything, and everything is identical with it. This complex reasoning serves to elaborate on life and death, hot and cold, being and not-being, and light and darkness (Maffie). The force appears to go through stages of self-generation and re-generation and the Aztecs believed that order and disorder and life and death were continuous cycles that had no resolution. However, Cuauhtémoc is sub-consciously beginning to identify flaws within this reasoning, and he takes in more than one perspective to get closer to attempt to answer questions on the validity of human sacrifice to the civilization. *Teotl* represents duality, and for years, Cuauhtémoc will experience the nature of *teotl* through a clash of perspectives. Although some other force (the Europeans) come try to break the cycle of constant chaos, Cuauhtémoc and the Aztecs will continue to believe that resolution is impossible; hence the reason why Cuauhtémoc feels helpless in a worthless life.

once disturbing deaths were second nature in my eyes; the arterial spurts from victims had temporarily stained my heart and eventually eroded the sympathy that was once embedded in my soul.

You know when you feel worthless in life, like there is no point in living on?⁸ That is how I felt for so long. Sometimes I would cry for no apparent reason, as if someone was sacrificing me and the pain was numb, but the emotions were stimulated in my sub-conscious. I felt like a claustrophobe stuck in an endless maze of worthlessness, attempting to escape what I had become accustomed to. My community was sacrificing because they wanted to rejuvenate the gods and pay them back for the sacrifices they had once endured, and most of the Nahuatl people were satisfied with that reason. Then you had elderly family members who were overwhelmingly sobbing their eyes out, drained of the last bit of life they had in them as they saw their impoverished child with no expression, motionless and vulnerable. But they had to combat those emotions because they knew it was for a good cause. And then you have me, one who resents the sacrificial world that has provided us structure and security. Life as I knew it was over, why was I still here?

One morning, I was cleaning the temple's coarse ground, sweeping over the faint bloodstains that were scattered all over the ground while the sun's burning rays were shining on my bare back⁹, when two of the king's guards grabbed both of my arms, lifted me with minimal

⁸ You know . . . on: Cuauhtémoc is challenging the questions ensued with the idea of metaphysics. A duel reaction is encroaching on his reasons to keep on living; he faces conflict between what ought to be right in the Aztec society versus his confound state of mixed feelings on human sacrifice. He is questioning to what extent he accepts the rituals being performed, which is hindering him from growing and conquering internal perplexity. Metaphysics was incorporated with the investigations on human sacrifice, attempting to comprehend the purposes and intentions gained with such rituals. Comprehension allows scholars to become more open to novel perspectives that may appear eccentric; societies become educated on events that may not be in accordance with their beliefs, but the distinct customs of a culture are not shunned immediately and are ultimately seen through a light yearning for new explanations.

⁹ Sun's . . . back: It was believed that with enough exposure to the sun, people would acquire *tonalli*, which was a valuable source of life energy (Higgins and Solomon 79). Essentially, *tonalli* was significant because in order to

effort and coerced me to go before King Moctecuhzuma as I was struggling with all my might to release myself. The guards threw me to the ground and I immediately rose up and knelt before my leader in confusion. “Good man, you have been chosen to honor our society with the pure blood that circulates your healthy body!” said Moctecuhzuma in the most piercing and assertive manner that my body cringed as the vibrations of his high-pitched voice reached my ears. “B-but *mi Rey*, I am a poor and worthless man. Please, give the gods something worth consuming! If our crops do not get enough rain this season after my horrific sacrifice, it will be on account of my valueless soul!” The king was not convinced, and he specifically told me that I had one year to prepare for my death. I would live a flamboyant life, surrounded with lavishes and services granted by him. You would think the thought of a rich life, followed by an honorable death would appeal to my seemingly worthless mind, but it did not. I was not moved whatsoever, nor was I flattered that they had chosen some poverty-stricken man who would determine the destiny of the community. I was an insignificant and pessimistic being with no purpose in life and for one year I would be living an empty life leading up to an even emptier afterlife.

A man who dies should die with honor, at least that is what Mama always told me. But what if the man has no choice? What if a man abruptly dies and he has no time to feel honorable during his death? Well, I had one whole year to recollect my thoughts and reflect on my sacrifice, but I never overcame my lingering insecurities and my lack of self-confidence for what I wanted to believe. I was not being myself, I was forced into this rich life full of lavishes and fame, but no love and no reason was manifested in that time whatsoever. Mama was not allowed to see me for that whole year; the king claimed that too much attachment would have my mind in a duel state of consciousness, fighting for my life because I had something to live for (Mama)

acquire it, one must work arduously; this symbolizes the importance of hard-work and perseverance which were qualities in the Aztecs that helped them continue to fuel a thriving civilization that needed much care and dedication.

versus dying for the sake of my community. I was dressed in the best-quality attire and for that, everyone knew me as the man who was sacrificing his life for them. No honor there, my life was not private, so why should I feel “honored” to die for people that meant nothing to me? I ate the best cuisine, and I was even forced to eat human flesh. Honor or disgust? At the time, it was all the same to me, honor was not anything distinguishable, but it was an ambiguous entity that would perturb my life discretely. My façade was simple, bland and not amused. On the inside, I felt lost and I did not know who I was anymore. Here I was, this human stuck on an on-going pathway, never being able to look back, always living the same monotonous life day after day, inexperienced with love and the pursuit of happiness. Tell me, why would you want someone with no honor to determine the future of your prosperity?

In 1519, Aztec messengers, including myself, were sent to Xicalanco and later travelled the coastline until we spotted the absurd creatures with their uncontrollable hair and pink faces¹⁰ (Léon-Portilla 25). When we saw who appeared to be Quetzalcoatl, we knelt down before him and worshipped his presence for a few moments. We gave them embroidered gold pieces and greeted them with great praise in our language of Nahuatl, but they stared at us with puzzled looks. A woman, La Malinche, who spoke Nahuatl was with us and she translated our enchanting words to the Spaniards. All I saw were deceitful snickers and one man even laughed hysterically as he was told that he was an Aztec god. Suddenly, the smirks were erased from

¹⁰ In 1519 . . . faces: When Moctecuhzuma heard news that the Europeans had arrived, he was awe-struck and immediately sent out for wizards and magicians to inform him about the arrival of these strange creatures. No one had answers and people began to panic; a simple question such as what brought the Spanish to their territory could not be determined, which made them question their reasons for sacrificing and performing other rituals. A motif is apparent throughout the story as metaphysics continues to surface, especially as curiosity is lingering within the minds of the Aztecs and no one is able to overcome the wonder and find answers. People have been instilled with trepidation for centuries, wondering if any earth-shattering events will unavoidably come. Therefore, events that may appear catastrophic or novel are taken into consideration and interpreted as messages sent from the gods. Also, since the Aztecs cannot find answers to the arrival of the Spanish, where does that leave the purpose of human sacrifice? Was there a purpose at all? Is this a test from the gods to challenge the rituals? Instead of acting on such things to conform to what the deities wished, their approach to handling the situation with the Europeans is irrational.

their faces and they started chasing us, grabbing our arms, and chaining us with heavy material. My body felt weak and helpless and for the first time in my life, I was scared to death. What did all this mean? Would I be saved from my sacrifice, or would it continue as planned?

We were loaded into the boat and for months, we were forced to direct the Spaniards towards Tenochtitlan as they painfully punished us by burning parts of our body whenever we did not listen to their commands. We made a number of stops at different places, including Cholula and Veracruz, and even formed an alliance with the Tlaxcalans. Through the course of the journey, the Spaniards were showered with gifts, and the leaders of these villages would give them food drizzled with blood to test whether the Spaniards were actually the gods; obviously, the Europeans rejected the food with disgusted gestures and regurgitation, but nevertheless, the people witnessed how strong these interesting creatures were that they did not doubt their abnormal powers to be a reflection of their divine nature (Van Tuerenhout 75-6). When we arrived in Tenochtitlan, Moctecuhzuma had already prepared a huge feast for the arriving guests. The Spanish had made it appear that the native messengers had converted into confidantes of them and we would serve as the majority voice for the Aztec people. Moctecuhzoma was so infatuated by the Spaniards that he ended up releasing me from my pending sacrifice because he felt I would be a vital asset to the Aztec society through my connections with the Spaniards; foolish Moctecuhzoma, for he was later captured by the Europeans and overthrown by his own people.

The Europeans were particularly disturbed with our participation in human sacrifice, and they ended up prohibiting sacrifices that went against the Christian way of thinking. They had abolished a tradition that was so harsh in my eyes, so why was I enraged with what they were

doing?¹¹ Because the consent of the people was missing in their decision-making and they were more interested in accumulating wealth than worry about a bunch of savages with no purpose in life. They sought to “help us” out, and my people were vulnerable, they did not know what they were getting themselves into. The Spanish took advantage of that weakness that prevailed in our civilization, despite our once-fierce front, and they penetrated our system so that they would gain more support from the ones who could not find themselves in the world. We, the messengers, were forced to steal from our families, burn any remaining possessions, and sometimes kill people who would disobey the law of the Spanish, including sacrificial rituals, practicing religion before our Aztec deities, and hiding gold and other valuables from the Spanish. Over the course of my life, I never felt honorable, especially during this stage of my existence, where I was going against my own people.

In 1520, sometime after the arrival of the Spanish in Tenochtitlan, I was captured by the Aztec warriors. I remember I was in the air for a few seconds because three strong men had extended my arms and legs as they carried me to the *Templo Mayor*. I had converted into the enemy and it was apparent that although I had been captured by the Spaniards, I had never fought for my peoples’ sake. They saw no honor in what I was doing, similar to how I saw no honor in human sacrifice. At least to them, my planned sacrifice would have served to save the people, but now I was being killed simply because I was the rival. I paved my own fatal destiny

¹¹ They had . . . doing: Aztec philosophers also believed that people needed rootedness to increase stability, health, well-being, and righteousness. People were born face-less and they needed human contact through a well-ordered social community to learn how to become stable and develop a proper face and heart (Maffie). Cuauhtémoc feels that he has been living within an unstable society filled with gore and injustices, so explaining his nature through the eyes of the Aztecs, Cuauhtémoc has never been able to combat instability, which explains his conflicting ideals. As the story progresses, it is evident that Cuauhtémoc cannot find a strong root to grip onto within his own culture, and he tends to question the rituals, specifically human sacrifice, that seem ambiguous to him. Instability was also engendered by the Spaniards when they invaded the Aztec civilization in 1519, so during the course of Cuauhtémoc’s life, he was unable to resort to a stable figure or practice that would help him seek answers, such as the gory nature of human sacrifice, the feelings of the victims who endured in such acts, and the extent to which it helped the society flourish or experience recession.

because I had not fought for my soul; my whole life, I was allowing my own heart to wander off into a realm of confusion and ambiguity and I never pulled it back in to explore it and figure out what was right for me. Perhaps if they would have sacrificed me before the Spanish had captured me and coerced me to go against the natives, I would be a significant figure in the Aztec society and the Spanish would not have destroyed our city in the most brutal way possible. But I failed to do so for the mere fact that I could not find my place in this society, a society where the rituals were not coinciding with what I believed in and I would condone the traditions that I grew up around; therefore, I never had an incentive to rebel against the Europeans and go back to my indigenous strangers. I thought about all my mistakes as a failed hero as they were laying me on the sacrificial stone. I was not going to fight back, I was the enemy and they had the authority to take my life away and give my dirty blood to their gods. The stick was lit up with a great fire that emanated streaks of yellow and orange. All of a sudden, I felt an excruciating pain crawl down my chest and within a matter of seconds, my whole life had been extracted out of my body as I lay there, a lost soul.

I am an honor-less individual with no ethnic roots to look back on and no meaning in this afterlife to continue. I failed to protect my indigenous people from their invaders, and I let down myself for not proving I had it in me to be an honorable hero despite my differences. The deities have held me hostage for some time, and all I am waiting for now is to have them drain all the life out of me so I can deteriorate and finally leave in peace as Cuauhtémoc, the fallen eagle.¹²

¹² I am an honor-less . . . eagle: Although Cuauhtémoc is re-telling the story in another life, the ambivalent nature of his ideas still haunts him. According to León-Portilla, “. . . the Nahuatl had divined the duality . . . of the world . . . visible, immanent, manifold, phenomenal . . . ‘that which is upon earth’ . . . permanent, metaphysical, transcendental . . . ‘what is above us and below us, in the region of the dead’” (14-5). Even reflecting on his life story, Cuauhtémoc refuses to accept that he achieves honor in the Aztec community, and in his own mind. He will never experience serenity with his thoughts because he failed to survive through the middle sphere on earth, which is the one where he betrayed his fellow natives. If one cannot achieve life through the middle sphere, who or perhaps what is to say that one will be able to find themselves in their afterlife, where questions become more complex as metaphysics (the

being and reality) is reflected upon and interpreted more extensively? Because he is the enemy, his thoughts are interrupted by the deities who continue to extract the blood from his body; time is running out to find answers, so he settles on the idea of failing to be an honorable hero, and he yearns to cease the pain that remains by ending his afterlife with the extinction of his soul.

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