**HISTORICAL VILLAIN/ANTIHERO PROJECT**

**Assignment Description**
To bring together your newly honed information literacy skills with the conversations we’ve been having about villains and antiheroes, you will work on a research project on a historical figure who has, at certain points in history, been considered a villain or antihero. You will survey the available information about this figure and discuss how they have been treated by different parties (such as the news media, religious institutions, politicians, academics, and entertainment, to name a few) throughout history. Are they the victims of particularly bad press? Is the jury still out on whether or not this person is truly a villain? Have they benefitted from a campaign to reclaim their public reputation? If so, who ran that campaign and why? The key concept these projects will highlight is context: villains and antiheroes are defined by the social and cultural context in which they exist, and so our opinions of them may change over time and in different social and cultural contexts. As you evaluate this, you’ll be considering it from *multiple perspectives*—both that of those historically contemporary with the figure you’re studying, and more recent evaluations; major media and scholarly perspectives; historical and popular culture perspectives.

This project has two parts: a presentation based upon research that you’ll do in pairs (worth 10% of your final grade), and a lit review that you’ll write individually (worth 20% of your final grade). I have described each part separately below.

**List of historical figures for this project**
Each student must sign up to research one of the historical figures listed below. You can choose to sign up with a classmate you know you’d like to work with, or sign up for a particular topic that interests you. Sign ups will open at the start of your section’s class time on Tuesday, October 17, by which time you’ll have had opportunity to read a little bit about each of these figures and talk to classmates about collaborating. Be sure to sign up before class on Thursday, October 19. Sign-ups will be done via a wiki on Canvas, linked at the top of the assignment description page.

- James-Younger Gang
- Ned Kelly
- Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow
- Charles Arthur “Pretty Boy” Floyd
- Mata Hari
- Margaret Sanger
- The West Memphis Three (Damien Echols, Jessie Misskelley, Jr., and Jason Baldwin)

**The Research Presentation—Due November 21**
Students will work together in pairs to gather 15-20 documents about the historical figure or institution they are studying. These documents will likely include newspaper and magazine articles, as well as radio shows, television specials & documentaries, and historical studies. While students are encouraged to look into the pop culture afterlives of the figures they study—how they are represented in fictional narratives like films, comic books, political cartoons, plays, songs, and novels—these sources should not constitute more than 50% of the research. In other words: balance your pop culture with your journalism and scholarship.

Students will read their collected resources and together plan a 6-8 minute presentation to deliver to the rest of the class. This presentation should provide an overview of the historical figure’s reputation and how it has been constructed by different voices in different contexts. The presentation should be accompanied
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by a digital component, utilizing a website, Prezi, PowerPoint, or other media. The work on these presentations must be shared evenly, and both students must share in the oral delivery of the presentation as well.

Students will give their presentations in class on Tuesday, November 21. They will be graded based on their performance this day. Specific grading criteria are outlined below. Students are also strongly urged to deliver their presentations at the FYS event, Flame, on Wednesday, November 29, 7-8:30pm, in the Cintas Center Banquet facility. **Those students who present will receive extra credit: an additional 5% on their presentation grade.**

**Library Education**

On Thursday, October 19, Alison Morgan from the university library will walk the class through initial research practices. On Thursday, October 26, Alison will again visit class and aid students in their research processes. She will also hold special open research office hours to support students in their work. Get to know your librarians, because they are an indispensable resource. As information grows more and more readily available, it becomes more and more difficult to sort through and conduct meaningful searches. Alison will help you separate the gold from the dross.

**Grading Criteria**

Your research presentation is worth 10% of your final grade. Research presentations will be graded equally on content (the information you choose to deliver) and delivery (the manner in which you deliver said information). Good content and bad delivery do not make a successful presentation. Similarly, flashy, impressive design paired with disorganized or uninteresting content wouldn’t produce a good grade.

**Content:**

- Don’t feel the need to address every detail you learned as you researched. Pace yourselves and cover the main points. Track your time as you present.
- Organize all you have learned into a story we, the audience, can easily follow. Select important details and frame them as part of a historical narrative about the figure or institution you studied.
- Draw conclusions about your research. These conclusions should come from observations about how the particular figure or institution you studied has been viewed by different people over time.
- Consider including quotations or clips from your sources. If you do, make sure to properly attribute them using MLA citation. Simply including a URL does not count as proper MLA citation.

**Delivery:**

- Your presentation should be 6-8 minutes long, and **no shorter or longer.** Practice to ensure that you are within the time limits. You will lose credit for failing to stick to this requirement.
- Demonstrate mastery of the information—do not read directly from a transcript, or from the text on a poster, PowerPoint, or Prezi.
- Similarly, whatever multimedia form your presentation takes should **NOT** be a direct reproduction of what you say during the presentation.
- Include images or graphics that supplement and enhance the text of the presentation—but don’t let the visuals overtake the words.
- Pay attention to your body language as you present: Make eye contact. Look around the room. Speak loudly and clearly. Don’t hide behind the podium or your notes.
The Lit Review Essay—Due December 7

After working with a classmate to research a particular historical figure or institution, you will independently write a 6-8 page paper that synthesizes what you have learned into a narrative about that particular villain/antihero’s shifting place in our cultural imagination. This essay itself has two parts. The first, longer section of the essay will be a lit review. Here, you will survey all the research you did and construct a narrative about how the particular historical figure you researched has been represented throughout history. In the second, shorter section of the essay, you will reflect on what you’ve learned more generally through this project. In particular, you will comment on what this project has taught you about how a person’s or an institution’s reputation is formed and expressed in the public domain. Remember: one of our goals throughout this semester is always to be aware of how villains and antiheroes exist within specific social and cultural contexts. This reflection will give you the chance to consider a real life example of those contexts. I imagine that the essay will be divided into 2/3 lit review (4-5 pp), 1/3 reflection (2-3 pp).

The lit review section of the essay is thesis-driven in that you’re claiming there is a specific trajectory for how this figure or institution has been understood and represented. So, your lit review should cite evidence to support that claim. You’re assembling a narrative for us out of the disparate sources you’ve read, and your goal in the lit review is to demonstrate the structural integrity of that narrative. For example, if you were to write about Lizzie Borden, your argument might be that, during her own life, Lizzie was treated with fear and considered villainous, but that this fear arose out of the contemporary culture’s uncertainty about how to handle mental illness, and its desire to avoid discussions of abusive parents, leaving complicated family dynamics behind closed doors. Today, however, Lizzie Borden has become a pop culture antihero because of her ability to act out in self-preservation and cover her tracks and keep herself from arrest. Looking back, we admire the grit of this woman, 130 years before our time, even if we can’t fully absolve her of (allegedly) murdering her parents. To reach this conclusion, you would have had to read a great many contemporary accounts of Borden’s trial and also articles about her written more recently.

Your lit review essay should include a bibliography in correct MLA style citation. For guidance on this, refer to the library’s citation style guides.

Grading Criteria

Your individually authored lit review will count as 20% of your final grade. I will grade it based on the following criteria:

- **Content**
  - Do you clearly present a historical narrative about the figure you researched?
  - Do you analyze how different authors represent the figure?
  - Do you evaluate your source’s strengths and weaknesses, the ways in which they are in conversation with each other, challenging or reinforcing certain conceptions of the figure?
  - Do you include a reflection that discusses what you’ve learned about the ways a person’s reputation can shift over time, and be formed and shaped by different dominant cultural ethics?

- **Organization**
  - Does your paper communicate the historical information and your analysis of it in a clear, organized fashion?
  - Does each paragraph have a clear topic and strong internal organization?
  - Does your paper transition effectively between major points and between paragraphs?
  - Is there an effective introduction and conclusion?
  - Does all of the content relate back to your central argument?
Style
  • Is your prose clear and organized? Is it largely free of grammar and syntax errors?
  • Does your prose demonstrate eloquence and style, above and beyond clarity?
  • Are all conventions of MLA citation observed? (Including in-text parenthetical citation, proper documentation of all sources, and a well-composed final bibliography)