

Hum 110 (L. Liebman)
Thucydides Discussion Questions

5.84-116 Melian Dialogue
6.8-32 Debate about the Sicilian expedition
7/59-71 Speeches at Nicias and Gylippus

1. History as Dramatic Tragedy: I'd like you to consider what happens when we think about Thucydides as a story teller, or his history as a drama of sorts. What is the plot? Where are the plot twists? Who is/are the heroes? Do they have tragic flaws (in any sense of this word)? How would you characterize the main players? Are we purged by the end? What if we thought of the history as an early novel? How is this different from a tragedy? How would our expectations change? What are the limitations of these models?

1. Politics: how does the Melian dialogue influence our discussion of Athens as a state built on persuasion? Why is this a dialogue rather than just speeches? (What is the difference?) Why does this version of persuasion occur at this point in the history/tragedy/novel.

2. Ethics: What do you make of the demise of Athens? Do you see Thucydides description as realistic, idealistic, or deliberative? If you choose deliberative, what is our ethical response to the issues being raised? (What are the issues that are raised?) Is it possible to be a detached observer?

3. Narration: What are the parallels between Athens and Syracuse? Why are they there? Edgar Roberts provides the following useful questions for close readings of passages based on their location in a narrative. You might want to pick one passage and apply this strategy:

For an Early Passage:

Does the passages occur early in the work? If it does, you may reasonably expect that the author is using the passage to set things in motion. Thus you should try to determine how ideas, themes, characterizations, and arguments that you find in the passage are related to these matters as they appear later in the work. You may assume that everything in the passage is there for a purpose. Try to find that purpose.

For a Later, Midpoint Passage:

Does the passage come later in the work, at a time that you might characterize as a "pivot" or "turning point"? In such a passage a character's fortunes take either an expected or unexpected turn. If the change is expected, you should explain how the passage focuses the various themes or ideas and then propels them toward the climax. If the change is unexpected, however, it is necessary to show how the contrast is made in the passage. It may be that the work is one that features surprises, and that the passage thus is read one way at first but on second reading may be seen to have a double meanings. Or it may be that the speaker has had one set of assumptions while the readers have had others, and that the passage marks a point of increasing self-awareness on the part of the

speaker. Many of the part of works are not what they seem at first reading, and it is your task here to determine how the passage is affected by events at or near the end of the work.

For a Concluding Passage:

If the passage occurs at or near the end of the work, you may assume that it is designed to solve problems or to be a focal point or climax for all the situations and ideas that have been building up in the work. You may need to show how the passage brings together all themes, ideas, and details. What is happening? Is any action described in the passage a major action, or a step leading to the major action? Has everything in the passage been prepared for earlier in the work?

(Roberts 187-88)

4. Theme: What is the relationship between language and reality by the end of the book? Chart the development of this relationship through the speeches in the *History*.

Bibliography:

Roberts, Edgar. *Writing Themes About Literature*, 5th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1983.