

English 102

Writing Topics: “Obedience to Authority”

Choose one of the following topics and write an essay of at least five pages in response. In your essay, be sure to make specific, explicit references to **at least two** of the essays in this chapter (Asch, Milgram, Zimbardo, Fromm). In referring to the essays, you need to do more than simply mention or quote very briefly from them; you need to **integrate** the authors’ ideas into your own essay and **incorporate them into your argument**. Keep in mind that you must **take a position** and **argue a point of view**, not merely summarize a text (an essay or film) without articulating and supporting your own thesis. The essays in this chapter present us with abstract principles to help us understand why and how people are obedient or disobedient, and your job is to apply these abstract principles to specific, concrete cases.

1. The American Dream tells us that we’re “free” to do as we please in the pursuit of happiness (within certain limits), free to reinvent ourselves, to break out of our assigned roles and assume whatever identity we wish. Yet the Stanford prison experiment demonstrates how, despite this freedom, we may remain “prisoners” of our social roles, prompting Zimbardo to ask, “where does one’s ‘identity’ end and one’s ‘role’ begin?” (349). This dilemma is often depicted in films when a character takes on a role contrary to his or her identity and pretends to be “someone else” (some examples: *The Wedding Banquet*, *In and Out*, *Tootsie*, *Yentl*, *Dave*). Choose a film in which the main character chooses or is pushed into an uncomfortable, unfamiliar role (you may choose one not listed here, but check with me first). **In an essay, analyze the character’s predicament, using the work of Milgram, Asch, or Fromm in addition to Zimbardo to support your arguments. How does the character’s “role” affect his or her “identity,” and vice versa, as he or she tries to negotiate the elements of identity, role, and authority? In other words, how does the person obey the role itself, prompting a change behavior or attitudes? Why does the character take on the role in the first place? In your essay, explore what the character, as well as the audience, learns from the experience.**

2. Stanley Milgram writes, “The problem of obedience is not wholly psychological,” suggesting that the division of labor in the modern world (as in a bureaucracy) prevents our complete engagement with the things we do; he says, “A person does not get to see the whole situation but only a small part of it. . . . He yields to authority but in doing so is alienated from his own actions” (327). The recent film *Gladiator* exhibits many examples of obedience; virtually every character (including the crowd) remains obedient to someone or something throughout the movie. Does the lack of the modern bureaucracy that Milgram talks about enable the characters in this film to “see the whole situation” instead of “only a small part of it” (327)? How does this affect the choices they make to be obedient or not? **Choose one character from the film, and analyze his or her obedience, making use of Fromm’s and Milgram’s work in your analysis. Be sure to explain clearly which character you are analyzing and to what or whom you think he or she is obedient.** How does his or her obedience to an authority help to illustrate and convey that person’s character?

3. In his essay, Erich Fromm discusses the concept of the “organization man,” whom he describes as an “alienated bureaucrat” who has “lost the capacity to disobey” (361). The 1960 film *The Apartment*, made around the time Fromm wrote his essay, clearly illustrates the kind of “organization man” Fromm is talking about. In an essay, **analyze the obedience of the main character, C. C. Baxter, making use of Fromm’s ideas about obedience, along with one other essay to support your arguments.** What causes Baxter to be obedient, even at his own expense, and to become “alienated from his own actions,” as Milgram says? To what or whom is Baxter being obedient? In your essay, consider what price the character pays and what he learns. More than forty years later, can you see any parallels to Baxter’s situation?

4. Although we may sometimes feel as though we have no choice but to obey an authority, Erich Fromm seems to suggest that this is not true: Our fear of being lonely or ostracized, or of facing other unpleasant consequences, may seem to force us to “choose” obedience, but while we may not like the choices we face, we always have the option of being disobedient, if we are willing to face the consequences of our disobedience and give up the security and protection our obedience provides (Milgram’s and Asch’s work also imply the same thing). Many films have been based on characters who have made the difficult choice not to be obedient, such as *The Insider*, *Silkwood*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Norma Rae*, and *High Noon*, among others (you may choose a film not listed here, but check with me first). **Choose one of these films, and in an essay, analyze the disobedience of the protagonist in light of Fromm’s essay and one other essay from this chapter.** What are the consequences of the character’s decisions and actions? What qualities or conditions make the character able or willing to choose the course of action he or she takes?

5. In the film *Educating Rita*, both of the main characters, Rita and Frank, could be described as being “disobedient” to their expected social roles, though ultimately, their outcomes are quite different. Both of them have risked loneliness and social ostracism, giving up the security and protection that obedience to the prevailing social order would provide and choosing instead to face the consequences of their disobedience. **In an essay, compare and analyze both Rita’s and Frank’s disobedience in light of Fromm’s essay and one other essay from this chapter.** How does Rita’s disobedience differ from Frank’s? What are some of the consequences of their decisions and actions? What qualities or conditions make each of them able or willing to choose the course they take?