

## English 103: Underdogs, Outcasts, & Loners

### Film Adaptation Project Instructions

*Note: the following instructions detail what your final output for this project will be. There are many steps along the way that will be explained in more detail as we move through the project.*

**The background:** It was announced a couple of years ago that Edward Norton was working on a film version of *Motherless Brooklyn*, by Jonathan Lethem. Apparently, Norton realized when he first read the book in 1999 that he wanted to make a film of it. He seems to have a very particular vision for the film, for how it should look and feel.

This is an interesting thing to consider. Being an actor and a filmmaker, Norton obviously thinks in terms of cinema. This means that he was likely seeing the movie in his head while he was reading it. Of course, what he was seeing in his head was *his version* of the film. A different writer and filmmaker would have a very different version. Two examples of what I mean: according to reports, he wants to set the novel in 1954. This would drastically change the feeling of the story. What might his reasons have been for this decision? Another example of the way Norton sees the film: he sees himself as Lionel Essrog. This means he has a very particular vision of who Essrog is. A different actor would bring a totally different interpretation to the character.

There doesn't seem to have been any news of the film project since 2014. This could mean that the project has stalled, or is dead. This is where you come in.

**The situation:** Ed Norton is at the end of his rope—he needs your help. His script lacks focus. There's just nothing that ties the whole thing together as a coherent movie. He has put out a call for writers to adapt Lethem's novel into a screenplay. You want this job. You will write him a four-page text where you lay out your vision for the film. He's very adamant that he wants the film to focus on one particular aspect of the novel. Your task is clear: you need to focus on the one aspect of the novel that you think the film should focus on. For you, this is the most compelling aspect of the novel, and it will make up the most compelling part of the film. Your text will engage in a detailed discussion of how this particular aspect adds depth and meaning to the novel.

**The options:** Listed below are the aspects of the film you could choose to focus on (these choices are inspired by *scriptmag.com*. See supplementary reading on blog). You will choose ONE of the following. There might be some natural overlap between some of these, but you'll mainly focus on one:

- The world and setting of the story.
- The secondary characters.
- Lionel Essrog: what's the most interesting or compelling aspect of his character? Who would you choose to play him, and why?
- The major core conflict of the story and why or how this occurs. This should include the narrator's inner conflict.
- A few key scenes.
- The dialogue.
- The language. This can include Lionel's narration, and most interestingly, his verbal tics.
- The major overarching theme of the book. What kind of universal human truth does this novel suggest?
- The tone of the book. The overall feeling or mood.
- Perhaps there's another aspect you'd like to talk about that's not on the list? Pitch it to me.

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- *Option if you disliked the book:* A paper describing why you think it should not be made into a film. *Please, Ed, don't do it.* Again, you will focus on one of the above aspects, and discuss why you either find it uninteresting, cliché, trite, or unrealistic.

**While you're reading:** keep this project in mind. Picture the story playing out like a movie in your head as you read it. What does your movie look like? Sound like? Feel like? Take notes as you read. Take notes as they come to you. Which of the above aspects stands out to you about the novel? Where does the energy come from? See it in your head. Make it come alive.

**The final output:** You will produce a four-page (about 1,200-word) text discussing one aspect of the novel that you think would tie the film together as a coherent whole. You will discuss, in detail, why you think this detail would be the strongest aspect of the novel to exploit in the film.

\*\*\*You will do this by closely analyzing how this aspect plays itself out in the novel. You must include specific references and citations from the novel in your analysis (figure about 10 references or citations). You must provide direct analysis of the references and citations you include.\*\*\*

**How this is similar to previous English essays you may have written:** This is, essentially, a close analysis of a novel, and a close reading of excerpts from that novel. You still need to incorporate quotes, and you still need to analyze those quotes. You must spend your entire time discussing the novel. Don't veer off on tangents where you discuss filmmaking, the challenges of film adaptation, or Ed Norton. Stick to the primary text.

**How this is different to previous English essays you may have written:**

- Keep its specific audience and purpose in mind. You're writing to Ed Norton, and trying to capture his imagination. You're excited about this project, and should attempt to transmit that excitement in what you write.
- You don't have to stick to the traditional introduction, conclusion, or essay structure. Think about your opening: how will you grab the director's attention right away? Remember, this is a job that you want to get. The best way you will sell your idea, is demonstrating your unique vision of the novel.
- This will be published as a post on the class blog. This means you have the opportunity to use hyperlinks, photos, and video. These can be very valuable. Hyperlinks can demonstrate how you're connecting what you've read to other ideas, concepts, or works of art. Photos or video can illustrate interesting comparisons that you can use to help bring your ideas to life.

**Mostly, I want you to:**

- a) Have a clear direction while you're reading the novel.
- b) Feel free to use your personality and creativity. As long as you demonstrate thorough engagement with the novel, as long as you have enough references or citations from the novel (around ten), and as long as you analyze these in detail, you have carte blanche in terms of how you would like to structure your piece. Try to have fun with this. It will make your writing better.