Essay # 4: Personal response to “Solitude” or “Meaning of Life” theme, with some research

The literary works for weeks 11-13 of class all deal with the theme of solitude, of people alone; the subsequent weeks deal with the meaning of life—the God question (in the broadest sense). Choose one of the following literary works, the one that contains a vision of solitude or of the quest for life’s meaning that you relate to: Thoreau’s “Solitude” (from Walden), Li Po’s “Drinking Alone by Moonlight,” James Wright’s “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota,” Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Updike’s “Pigeon Feathers,” Carver’s “Cathedral,” Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur,” Bishop’s “Filling Station,” and Saint-Exupéry’s The Little Prince. Reflect on the similarity between your experience and/or insight and the experience/insight presented in the literary work; I suggest that you initially jot down your thoughts in your journal. Find a thesis: exactly how does your reflection on solitude or the meaning of life compare with that of the literary work? (If you choose Hamlet, you’ll be talking about the way Hamlet’s distress about his family drives him to pull away from the people around him. I would recommend that you stick to one or two scenes, most likely Act 1 scene 2.)

The essay will elaborate on your thesis, and it will follow the outline you followed (or should have followed) for the first essay: Your introduction will introduce the literary work and your experience, and will state the similarity you’ve noted (that’s the thesis). Then the body of the essay will show how your experience compares with that presented in the literary work by 1) discussing the work or the relevant part[s] of the work, not merely summarizing but analyzing and quoting in order to support your thesis (this should take two or three paragraphs); 2) describing your experience vividly and tracing the connections between your experience and that of the speaker or character in the literary work (this should also take two or three paragraphs).

Your analysis of the literary work will include a brief discussion of at least two outside sources; these sources need to enrich and deepen your analysis of the texts, and they may also provide opinions that relate to your own personal response. You will use MLA style (including a Works Cited page) for source citation.

Assume a general reader who is unfamiliar with the literary piece—that means you’ll have to briefly establish the situation, describe the speaker or narrator or protagonist[s], etc.—and with you. Your reader should get from your paper a good sense both of the literary work and of you.

Length: 5-6 pages, typed, double-spaced.

NEW Due Date: Monday, May 9 (the date of the final exam)