They Say/I Say: Entering the Conversation

Imagine that writing a paper using secondary sources in addition to your primary source is like having a conversation. When you incorporate a secondary source, be explicit about not only WHAT is being said, but WHO says it.

In addition to providing a quotation from a secondary source, you will also need to explain it. Notice that the explanation of a secondary source is not exactly an analysis; it is an explanation or a response that situates the ideas of the secondary source with your own.

Here are some examples for how to frame your sentences and show that you are entering into the conversation…

THEY SAY:
• In his essay _____, X maintains that “_____”.
• X agrees/disagrees in his essay _____ when he states, “_____.”
• X complicates the matter of _____ when he writes, “_____.”

I SAY:
• Do you disagree? (No way!)
  • The essence of X’s argument is that _____. However, he fails to recognize that _____.
• Do you agree? (Yes! Plus…)!
  • In making this comment, X means _____. Similarly, _____, and additionally, _____.
• Do you agree and disagree in some ways? (Okay, but…)!
  • X accurately recognizes _____, yet neglects _____.


Here is an example of how I would write a paragraph that enters into the conversation. Firstly, I have to read the secondary source (usually a critical essay). Secondly, I have to figure out what the overall argument of the source is. Thirdly, I have to pick out passages from the source that relate to my argument. From there, I can focus my ideas to a couple of quotations and write my paragraph (assuming I’ve found quotations from my primary source already!).

Basic argument of the essay: Grendel and his mother are predators and the humans in the poem their prey.

Passage from the essay: “…the sheer gruesomeness of the Danish catastrophe makes it plain where the poet’s sympathies lie. Modern readers critical of martial idealism are sometimes disposed to valorize the viewpoints of Grendel and his mother, arguing that their ‘monstrosity’ is no worse than that of their human foes. John Gardner’s Grendel plays on something of this sensibility. Yet such most emphatically is not the standpoint of the Beowulf-poet. His outlook is thoroughly homocentric…Critics who assume an impartial response to the massacre of the Danes have not sufficiently grappled with the imagistic horror of those scenes.”(5-6)

My Paragraph:
While Grendel and his mother are monstrous and demon-like, certain aspects of their characterizations show that they are in fact a blend of the bestial and the human. In his essay “Prey Tell: How Heroes Perceive Monsters in Beowulf,” scholar Ward Parks argues, however, that Grendel and his mother are clearly predators and the humans their prey. He indicates that “the sheer gruesomeness of the Danish catastrophe makes it plain where the poet’s sympathies lie” and warns against modern readings that approach the monsters and the warriors in a neutral and even equal way (5). He also suggests that “critics who assume an impartial response to the massacre of the Danes have not sufficiently grappled with the imagistic horror of those scenes” (6). Yet a close reading of the Seamus Heaney translation of Beowulf shows complexities in Grendel. For example, when Grendel enters Heorot, he does not approach “the throne itself, the treasure-seat” (168). Much like a human reasons, he recognizes that there are boundaries to where he should go. Similarly, when Beowulf grabs and squeezes Grendel during their fight, Grendel becomes “desperate to flee to his den and hide” (754). The poet is careful to point out Grendel’s emotional reaction, his “desperat[jion],” indicating that while he is surely monstrous, there is something undeniably human about him. Although there is no doubt that the “poet’s sympathies lie” with the humans, as Parks indicates, close reading of the poem demonstrates that Grendel is some combination of monster and human, unfeeling beast and emotional mind. Perhaps the ability of the reader or listener of the poem to recognize these traits in Grendel makes him all the more frightening, since that reader or listener might see similar traits in himself.