

A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS FOR READING AND WRITING CRITICALLY

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I. The Purpose of Literary Analysis

Literary analysis serves two purposes: (1) It is a means whereby a reader clarifies his own responses to a work; (2) it is a means whereby one reader shares his experiences with another. Whenever one is reading literature and writing about it with these intentions in mind, he is functioning as a literary critic. Some students assume that when they are asked to write a “critical” analysis that they are expected to write about those things that are wrong with a book. The term “critical” is used professionally to mean analyzing a work for whatever it does for us as a work of art. The sensitive reader is interested less in whether a work is “good” art than he is interested in how the work functions for him as he reads it. Literary criticism is the detailed investigation of the ways a work goes about producing a response in the reader. From this it should be clear that literary criticism is not the same thing as the short report one gives in high school English classes; nor does it serve the same function as the reviews one finds in popular magazines and newspapers. Reviews tell us in general terms what happens and what the reviewers think of the works, but they do not tell us why we respond as we do or what these responses signify.

It is also important to recognize the principles that govern the writing of critical prose are not the same as those which govern the writing of creative literature. The role of the critic is to express, in as clear a language as possible, the responses of a representative reader has felt as he was reading a work. The critic should not try to evoke strong emotions in his reader in his own right through a highly metaphorical or rhetorically loaded prose. The prose of a critical essay should serve as a transparent window through which the reader views the inner life of a work of art. The reader’s response to the critic

should be limited to appreciation for the depth of the critic's insight and the clarity of his presentation of this insight. The critic's personality should not come between a work of literature and the critic's reader. This does not mean that the critic's prose should be passive and lifeless; nor does it mean that he should give up the voice of his essay to the author he is treating. The voice of the critic should be strong and steady throughout his essay; his argument should be clear from start to finish, and his prose should have a life and vigor of its own, but at no point should the critic's own personality become the subject of the essay. The critic must feel deeply, but he must also express these feelings in a balanced, objective language. The artist does the essential work; the critic makes the experience more accessible to a wider public.

II. Basic Concepts of Critical Reading and Writing

If you can understand the six concepts explained below, you should have no trouble reading most works of literature with awareness, and writing about them with assurance. When reading a work it is usually best to apply the six concepts in the order listed below starting with Beginning Situation. When writing about a work for an audience one should begin with Problem and Approach.

Concepts 1 and 2, Beginning Situation and Ending Situation

In order to accurately define Beginning Situation and Ending Situation you must first read the words on the page. This means that you must understand the meaning of all words in the poem, play, or story, and exactly how the grammar is working. Also you must understand the Context of the work, that is all references to events or ideas that lie outside the work in the culture of the author. The biggest single error students make in responding to literature is not paying close enough attention to the author's

language. In serious literature, language is not a matter of casual, hit or-miss writing. It is not enough to sense at a subliminal level the general tendency of a piece; one must know quite specifically how the language is working. If one has carefully read the words that are actually on the page and has put them together in accordance with the basic grammatical and logical principles of the language, then he should be able to define the Beginning and Ending Situations. To do this, first ask yourself these questions: what does the language at the beginning of the work make me feel and think; what mood is established by the first lines of a poem; with what emotional dilemma are we confronted in a work of fiction? All this adds up to form the tone of the first part of the work. After you have expressed your initial response in more conscious terms, you should go back to the text and pinpoint the language that was responsible for this response. At this point you will be moving from a quite personal, subjective response toward a more objective, public statement of this response. In the treatment of many poems and some works of fiction you may be able to begin talking about the work immediately in terms of Tone. When working with some poems (narrative poems for example) and most stories, novels, and plays, it may be necessary to talk of Beginning Situation in terms of plot--what physical and/or social situation surrounds the characters--before you can talk of Tone. At the same time that you are thinking of Beginning Situation you should be thinking of Ending Situation. In a good work of literature there is an inevitable connection between the situation of the ending and that of the beginning. In thinking of both together you will begin to understand the central issue of the work. Be alert to the fact that in some works Beginning and Ending Situations overlap and occasionally the Beginning Situation will take up all but the last moments of a work. Both Beginning Situation and Ending Situation should be defined in the same terms in a paragraph or two in which you refer to key elements of the text.

Concept 3, Change

Once you have a clear sense of the Beginning and Ending Situation you should proceed to define the Change that takes place between the two. For a work of literature to be complete something must happen. This does not mean that a work of literature must depict some sort of physical action. It does not even mean that a character within the work must undergo a mental or emotional change. In many pieces the only change that takes place is in the emotional and intellectual value of the language, but if there change of this kind, subtle though it may be, then there will be a corresponding change of feeling and perspective within the reader. When we talk of change, then, we are talking of the change of Tone that can be seen in the language of the text and the corresponding change in the response that occurs within the reader. If there is a Change of some kind between the Beginning of a work and the Ending, and if the Change was inevitable, given the nature of the original situation, then work is structured by a Theme.

Concept 4, Theme

Theme is a statement of cause and effect that explains why the Ending Situation of a work was inevitable given the Beginning Situation. Theme should be stated in two ways: it should be phrased in general terms that would apply to many other works of literature as well as actual real-life experiences, and it should be stated more specifically in terms of the work at hand. The Principle that explains why a given situation will inevitably lead to a specific conclusion can be stated in universal terms or terms that are specific to a particular culture. One should recognize that when one states Principle he is defining an assumption about what is universally or culturally true. These assumptions can be stated in religious, mythological, psychological, biological, anthropological, philosophical, or in general common-sense, moral terms. There are three parts to a complete statement of theme: 1) a statement of the basic nature of the situation with which we are faced at the beginning of the work, 2) the outcome that inevitably

derives from such a situation, and 3) the explanation of the underlying Principle of life that explains why the beginning leads to the ending. A complete statement of theme must include some sort of “Because” statement: Because of such-and-such Principle of human behavior, whenever such-and-such a situation arises, thus-and-so will inevitably take place as a result. It is important to recognize the difference between Topic and Theme. Topic is the simple assertion that the general subject of a work is such-and-such. For example, it is useful to recognize that *Huckleberry Finn* is about alienation in American society, but “alienation” is only the Topic of the novel. Phrased in cultural terms, Theme might be stated something like this: America is a culture that places a premium upon independence, self-aggrandizement, the individual will; because of this, American children, all too often, find themselves at an early age in competition with all those around them including peers, their parents, and other adults; this competitiveness can put unbearable pressures upon the child and he may find physical and/or emotional flight his only recourse. Please note that, though this statement of Theme applies to Huckleberry Finn, it can also describe other American novels such as Henry James’ What Maisie Knew and Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye. For this reason, after stating Theme in general terms, you should go back and restate it more specifically in terms of the work in question. It is also important to recognize the difference between a statement of theme and a statement of Moral. A Moral is an expression of what we would like life to be like, how we think people ought to feel or behave. Moral is what one gets in popular art. Theme, on the other hand, is a statement about how people do, in fact, respond to life. For example, a short story might remind us that “we shouldn’t mistreat those who love us”; this would be the Moral of the work. A statement of Theme for the story might go something like this: Common sense tells us that we should be good to those who love us, but because many, if not most of us, think we are unworthy of love, we may interpret loving gestures from others as signs of duplicity and manipulation, and in such circumstances we are likely to strike out at such people, often with considerable verbal, or

even physical violence. In formulating Theme, the critic should be careful to be sure that his statement does not violate either the spirit or letter of the text. It is possible that a work of literature may generate a theme with which the critic does not agree. Since one of the reasons we read literature is to broaden our sense of life, one should be ready to acknowledge that others may not see the world exactly as we do, and that we may gain something important from a work because it violates our preconceptions.

Concept 5, Problem

The purpose of this stage of the critical process is to define for yourself and your reader the reasons that have motivated you to write a critical analysis of the work in question. To say that you are writing a paper because it is a course requirement is not adequate justification for an essay. If everything about a work is obvious, then there is no cause to write about it. In practice, however, there is probably no work of literature so simple and transparent that it does not produce a difficulty of one kind or another for the reader. The purpose of a critical analysis is to help other readers see what you see in the work. When readers share their solutions to problems within a text all benefit, potentially even the writer himself. Problem, then, is any aspect of a work that keeps a representative reader from fully responding to it; Problem is a particularly complex element of the text that must be fully understood before theme can be stated; Problem is that aspect of the text that holds the clue to the understanding of the basic Principle of human experience that links Ending Situation with Beginning Situation. There are two kinds of Problems the reader can encounter: Reader Problems and Writer Problems. Reader Problems are problems that derive from necessary complexities within the work. Because there are many aspects of life that are extremely difficult for us to deal with, the artist who wants to evoke an understanding of such issues must employ complex and sometimes hard-to-follow literary strategies. Often a work may seem flawed because the reader has responded in a conventional way, whereas the author is trying to

make us see that conventional wisdom in such a situation is a falsification of life. To demand simple, easy-to-read literature of a writer is to demand that life be easy. Honest writers will not bow to such temptation, and neither should good readers.

No matter how good a writer may be, at some point his writing will not be morally, intellectually, or technically up to the experience he's trying to encompass. When a writer fails, the reader is confronted with a Writer's Problem. A Writer's Problem is a complexity in the text that occurs when the writer has been unable to fully handle the issue he is addressing. It is much harder to deal with a Writer's Problem than a Reader's Problem, and students who have not had considerable experience writing critically should avoid attacking such problems. If you have a choice, always choose a work that seems to be within the writer's full control. If you must write on a flawed work, try to deal with it in terms of the aspect that is successful. The great danger of writing about what is flawed in a work is that it is easy, even for experienced critics, to find fault with what is, in fact, a work's great strength. Always start with the assumption that the writer knows exactly what he is doing and that any problems that you are having are due to your own inadequacies as a reader. If, after studying a work over an extended period of time, you are still unable to view it as successful, then you may be dealing with a Writer's Problem.

Concept 6, Approach to Problem

If you have read a work thoroughly enough to understand how each of these concepts applies, then you are almost ready to write the introductory, thesis paragraph of your critical essay. The only thing left to decide upon is the procedure you will follow in demonstrating the validity of your thesis in the body of your paper. Approach is a statement to your reader that outlines the critical strategy you intend to follow in the paper. For example, Problem will often concern the difficulty the reader has in

understanding the author's theme. Before the critic can recognize that Problem concerns Theme, he may need to analyze some aspect of the author's technique. For example, in defining your Approach for a paper on a short story you might need to explain that if one is to understand the story's theme, he must first recognize that the first person narrator, though intelligent and articulate, is untrustworthy, that in his indignant condemnation of another character he is, in fact, showing himself to be a smug, egotistical fool. Since we get the facts through his voice and since he seems to be intelligent and to have all the facts on his side, the unaware reader may assume that the narrator's perspective is the right one. Only a thorough investigation of how he says what he says will reveal the truth. It is your responsibility as a critic to demonstrate that the first-person narrator does not, in fact, represent the author's perspective. To prove your point, you will need to give a line-by-line discussion of the narrator's self-condemning language. In your statement of Approach it is your responsibility to tell your reader that a detailed analysis of the narrator's voice is the critical procedure you are going to follow. There may be many other aspects of the story that contribute to the theme, but you should limit yourself to only the one you think most important, in this instance, point of view. The author's subtle use of point of view produces a Problem for the reader; before Theme can be understood, this Problem must be solved. Your Approach to Problem will be a through analysis of the way the author has used point of view to reveal theme.

III. Outline of Steps to Follow in Reading and Writing Critically

- (1) Read the work of literature over once as you would normally. Let yourself respond easily and spontaneously as if writing an essay on it is the last thing you have in mind.
- (2) If you have trouble with any aspect of the language—vocabulary, grammar, syntax, punctuation, imagery, literary allusions—or if you notice language that ties in with other language of the text, underline the passage and keep reading. After you have finished the first

reading, go back over the work with whatever source books are necessary to explain what you missed. Much bad reading is due to the reader's unwillingness to research things he does not immediately understand. It is not honest of the reader to blame an author for bad writing when the "bad" writing consists of language the reader refuses to study. If you are reading a poem, it may be necessary at this point in your analysis to write a line-by-line prose Explication of the work.

- (3) After you think you understand that basic language of the text, sit down (as soon as possible after the first reading) and do an extended freewriting on the work (by extended I mean a minimum of an hour's writing). Try to state as fully and as specifically as possible all that you felt and thought as you were reading the work. As you write, try to pinpoint the specific words in the text that stimulated a specific thought or feeling. Try to explain the work from as many different perspectives as you are capable. Continue to write until you feel that you have a clear sense of what the work means to you personally and what the author's Theme is and how this Theme is generated. Try to pinpoint Problem, the complexity of the text, the special subtlety that the reader must recognize before he can understand Theme. You may have to freewrite on the work several times before you reach this stage of awareness, and in between each freewriting you may need to reread the work. After the first reading you should be prepared to underline important passages and make comments in the margins or in a notebook.
- (4) After reading and rereading the work, and after writing several preliminary freewritings, you will be ready to begin the process of turning your responses into a more public commentary. To do this you must first recognize that, though you and your reader share a common language and even a common culture, he is not you and cannot respond to a purely private

use of language. You must place yourself in the position of your reader and imagine at every moment how someone else would naturally respond to the language you are using. Relying on your rewritings and notes, try to formulate statements that cover each of the six analytical concepts given above. Go back over your prose and make sure that you have stated everything fully, clearly, and grammatically. Correct all mechanical errors, then retype. For many of the assignments in the courses for which this six-step analytical procedure was designed, the paper will now be ready to turn in. For other assignments in my courses and for papers of other instructors, another stage of composition is required.

(5) If you have been asked to write a formal critical essay, the next step is to write an introductory, thesis paragraph using the six analytical concepts given above. All that I've said above may suggest that I think the introduction should be constructed in such phrases as: "Dear reader, the Beginning Situation of John Donne's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' is such-and-such, etc." Though your introductory paragraph should treat each of the six concepts outline here, if you wrote an introduction phrased in this kind of mechanical way, your readers might be offended. This is particularly true since only Theme, of those terms used above, is commonly used.