PART 3

Up Close:
Thinking Critically
about Literary Forms

9

Writing about Essays

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

➤ identify the chief kinds of essays and understand their uses;

➤ recognize an essayist's persona and notice the effect of this "voice" on the essay; and

➤ analyze an essayist's style.

The word *essay* entered the English language in 1597, when Francis Bacon called a small book of ten short prose pieces *Essays.* Bacon borrowed the word from Michel de Montaigne, a French writer who, in 1580, had published some short prose pieces under the title *Essais*—that is, "testings" or "attempts," from the French verb *essayer*, "to try." Montaigne's title indicated that his graceful and personal jottings—the fruit of pleasant study and meditation—were not fully thought-out treatises but rather sketches that could be amplified and amended.

If you keep a journal, you are working in Montaigne's tradition. You jot down your tentative thoughts, perhaps your responses to a work of literature, partly to find out what you think and how you feel. Montaigne said, in the preface to his book, "I am myself the subject of my book," and in all probability you are the real subject of your journal. Your entries, recorded responses to other writers and your reflections on those responses, require you to examine yourself.

SOME KINDS OF ESSAYS

If you have already taken a course in composition (or even if you haven't), you are probably familiar with the chief kinds of essays. Essays are usually classified—roughly, of course—into the following modes: *expressive essays* (*meditation* or *speculation* or *reflection*); *exposition* (or *information*); *argument* (or *persuasion*); *narration* and *description*.

Of these, the EXPRESSIVE (or MEDITATIVE or SPECULATIVE or REFLECTIVE) essay is the closest to Montaigne. In an expressive essay, the writer seems

chiefly concerned with exploring an idea or a feeling. The organization usually seems casual, not a careful and evident structure but a free flow of thought—what the Japanese (who wrote with brush and ink) called "following the brush." The essayist is thinking, but he or she is not especially concerned with arguing a case, or even with being logical. We think along with the essayist, chiefly because we find the writer's tentative thoughts engaging. Of course the writer may in the long run be pressing a point, advancing an argument, but the emphasis is on the free play of mind, not on an orderly and logical analysis.

In the EXPOSITORY essay (of which there are a number of kinds) you are chiefly concerned with giving information. For example: in a PROCESS essay, you might show how to read a poem, or how to use a word processor; in a COMPARISON/CONTRAST essay, you may outline the contrasting NATO responses in the Gulf War and in the former Yugoslavia; in a CLASSIFICATION essay, you may differentiate the populations of people who support or do not support private health care in Canada; in a CAUSAL essay, you may lay out the health benefits of a vegetarian diet. Clear organization is important in these essays in order to help your reader gain information little by little, in a helpful order.

In the ARGUMENTATIVE (or PERSUASIVE) essay, the organization is apparent, and is reasonable—that is, it follows the rules of formal logic or critical thinking. For instance, you may announce a problem, define some terms, present and refute solutions you consider to be inadequate, and then, in a powerful ending, offer what you consider to be the correct solution. (This order produces what is sometimes called an INDUCTIVE ESSAY, ostensibly because it loosely follows what philosophers call inductive logic, in which the premises point to a valid conclusion but do not guarantee it.) Or, you may present a carefully thought-out thesis, move through a set of premises, data, and authoritative opinion that establishes the thesis, and then restate your conclusion. This form is usually called the DEDUCTIVE ESSAY, because it aims to follow deductive logic, in which a set of sound premises must arrive at a true conclusion.

NARRATIVE and DESCRIPTIVE essays are really types of expressive essays. For instance, a narrative essay may recount some happening—often a bit of autobiography—partly to allow the writer and the reader to meditate on it. Similarly, a description—let's say of an exhilarating ski down a mountain, or a family Christmas dinner—usually turns out to be offered not so much as information, but as something for the writer and reader to enjoy in itself, and perhaps to think about further.

Of course, most essays are not pure specimens. For instance, a process (informative) essay—let's say on how to use a cell phone—may begin with a paragraph that seeks to persuade you to use this particular model. Or it might begin with a very brief narrative, an anecdote of someone who switched from a standard phone to a web-ready digital phone, again in order to persuade the reader to buy the product. Similarly, an argument—and probably most of the essays that you write in English courses will be arguments advancing a thesis concerning the MEANING or STRUCTURE of a literary work—may well include some EXPOSITION. For instance, you might include a very brief summary in order to remind the reader of the gist of the work about which you will be arguing.

THE ESSAYIST'S PERSONA

Many of the essays that give readers the most pleasure are, like entries in a journal, chiefly reflective. An essay of this kind sets forth the writer's attitudes or states of mind, and the reader's interest in the essay is almost entirely in the way the writer sees things. It's not so much *what* the writer sees and says as *how* she says what she sees. Even in narrative essays—essays that recount biographical events—our interest is more in the essayist's *response* to the events than in the events themselves. When we read an essay, we almost say, "So that's how it feels to be you," and "Tell me more about the way you see things." The bit of history is less important than the memorable presence of the writer. Of course, a formal argumentative essay will reveal less of the writer—stressing, instead, rigorous logic and careful conclusions. But even in an informative essay with much data or a powerful argument it is pleasant to have a sense of the writer behind the words. Try to develop a VOICE that expresses who you are.

When you read an essay, try to imagine the kind of person who wrote it, the kind of person who seems to be speaking it. Then slowly reread the essay, noticing *how* the writer conveyed this personality or PERSONA (even while he or she was writing about a topic "out there"). The writer's persona may be revealed, for example, by common or uncommon words, by short or long sentences, by literal or FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, or by offering familiar or erudite examples.

Let's take a simple example of words that establish a persona. John Diefenbaker, the Prime Minister of Canada from 1957–63, always made speeches with a highly oratorical ring, full of allusions to the Bible and to early Canadian history. For example, in 1942, Diefenbaker began a speech to a party convention: "We meet in Winnipeg, the beginning of the plains. One hundred and thirty years ago my mother's forebears came to this very spot. [. . .]" He might have simply said, "We meet in Winnipeg"—but the language would have lacked the pioneering echo, and the persona would have been that of an ordinary person rather than that of a man who has about him something of the tone of a founder of the nation. The reference to his mother intensifies this link with the pioneers and also suggests that he is a dutiful son. He might simply have said, "My family arrived here in 1812," but in stating the number of years he makes his ancestry seem longer and gives himself something of the persona of an Old Testament prophet. As well, if he been precise in saying his family arrived in 1812, he might have triggered a reference to the War of 1812 in the minds of some listeners, changing the connotations of his announcement. What do you think of his use of the word *plains* rather than *prairies?* Why did he make this choice? Was it a wise choice for a Canadian politician speaking in Winnipeg to use the more American term for our flatlands?

Tone

By such devices as the *choice of words,* the *length of sentences,* and the *sorts of evidence* offered, an author sounds to the reader solemn or agitated or

witty or genial or severe. Only by reading closely can we hear in the mind's ear the writer's TONE—whether it is ironic or earnestly straightforward. While speakers can guide the responses of their audience by body language and gestures, by facial expressions, and by changes in tone of voice, writers have only words in ink on paper. As a writer, you are learning control of tone; that is, you take pains in your choice of words, in the way you arrange sentences, and even in the punctuation marks that you may find yourself changing in your final draft. These skills will pay off doubly if you apply them to your reading by putting yourself in the place of the writer whose work you are reading.

As a reader, you must make some effort to "hear" the writer's tone as part of the meaning the words communicate. Skimming is not adequate to that task. Thinking carefully about a piece of writing means, first of all, reading it carefully, listening for the sound of the speaking voice so that you can respond to the persona—the personality or character the author presents in the essay.

WRITING ABOUT AN ESSAYIST'S STYLE

Since much of the pleasure we receive from an essay is derived from the essayist's STYLE—the *how* with which an essayist conveys an attitude toward some aspect of reality that is revealed—your instructor may ask you to analyze the writer's style.

Read the following essay by David Suzuki. While reading it, annotate it wherever you are inclined (you may want to express responses in the margin and to underline puzzling words or passages that strike you as especially effective or as especially clumsy). Then reread the essay; since you will now be familiar with the essay as a whole, you may want to make further annotations, such as brief comments on Suzuki's diction, his use of repetition, or his tone.

David Suzuki, one of the best-known Canadian broadcasters, is also a geneticist, and journalist. He was born in 1936, taught at the University of British Columbia, and has hosted television programs such as *Science Magazine* and *The Nature of Things.* His writings appear in a number of magazines and other publications. He is always concerned with the link between science, human values, and the ecology.

A PLANET FOR THE TAKING
David Suzuki

Canadians live under the remarkable illusion that we are technologically   1
advanced people. Everything around us denies that assumption. We are, in many ways, a Third World country, selling our natural resources in exchange for the high technology of the industrialized world. Try going through your home and look-ing at the country of origin of your clothes, electrical appliances, books, car. The rare technological product that does have Canada stamped on it is usually from a branch plant of a multinational company centred in another country. But we dif-fer from traditional Third World countries. We have a majority population of Caucasians and a very high level of literacy and affluence. And we have been

able to maintain our seemingly advanced social state by virtue of an incredible bounty of natural resources.

Within the Canadian mystique there is also a sense of the vastness of this land. The prairies, the Arctic, the oceans, the mountains are ever present in our art and literature. This nation is built on our sense of the seeming endlessness of the expanse of wilderness and the output of nature and we have behaved as if this endlessness were real. Today we speak of renewable resources but our "harvest" procedures are more like a mining operation. We extract raw resources in the crudest of ways, gouging the land to get at its inner core, spewing our raw wastes into the air, water and soil in massive amounts while taking fish, birds, animals and trees in vast quantities without regard to the future. So we operate under a strange duality of mind: we have both a sense of the importance of the wilderness and space in our culture and an attitude that it is limitless and therefore we needn't worry.

Native cultures of the past may have been no more conservation-minded than we are but they lacked the technology to make the kind of impact that we do today. Canadians and Americans share one of the great natural wonders, the Great Lakes, which contain 20 percent of the world's fresh water, yet today even this massive body of water is terribly polluted and the populations of fish completely mixed-up by human activity. We speak of "managing" our resources but do it in a way that resembles the sledgehammer-on-the-head cure for a headache. On the west coast of Canada, Natives lived for millennia on the incredible abundance of five species of salmon. Today, the massive runs are gone and many biologists fear that the fish may be in mortal jeopardy because of both our fishing and management policies. Having improved fishing techniques this century to the point of endangering runs yet still knowing very little of the biology of the fish, we have assumed that we could build up the yield by simply dumping more back. But it wasn't known that sockeye salmon fry, for example, spend a year in a freshwater lake before going to sea. Millions of sockeye fry were dumped directly into the Fraser River where they died soon after. In Oregon, over-fishing and hydroelectric dams had decimated coho populations in the Columbia River. In one year, over 8 million fry were released of which only seven were ever caught. No one knows what's happening to the rest.

We act as if a fish were a fish, a duck a duck or a tree a tree. If we "harvest" once, we renew it by simply adding one or two back. But what we have learned is that all animals and plants are not equivalent. Each organism reflects the evolutionary history of its progenitors; in the case of salmon, each race and subrace of fish has been exquisitely honed by nature to return to a very specific part of the Pacific watershed. Similarly, in the enormous area of prairie pothole country in the centre of the continent, migratory birds do not just space themselves out according to the potholes that are empty. Scientists have discovered that the birds have been selected to return to a very restricted part of that area. And of course, our entire forestry policy is predicated on the ridiculous idea that a virgin stand of fir or cedar which has taken millennia to form and clings to a thin layer of topsoil can be replaced after clear-cut logging simply by sticking seedlings into the ground. How can anyone with even the most rudimentary understanding of biology and evolution ignore the realities of the complex interaction between organisms and the environment and attempt to manipulate wild populations as if they were tomato plants or chickens?

I believe that in large part our problems rest on our faith in the power of science and technology. At the beginning of this century, science, when applied

by industry and medicine, promised a life immeasurably better and there is no doubt that society, indeed the planet, has been transformed by the impact of new ideas and inventions of science. Within my lifetime I've seen the beginning of television, oral contraception, organ transplants, space travel, computers, jets, nuclear weapons, satellite communication, and polio vaccine. Each has changed society forever and made the world of my youth recede into the pages of history. But we have not achieved a technological utopia. The problems facing us today are immense and many are a direct consequence of science and technology. What has gone wrong?

I believe that the core of our 20th century dilemma lies in a fundamental   6
limitation of science that most scientists, especially those in the life sciences, fail to recognize. Most of my colleagues take it for granted that our studies will ultimately be applicable to the "big picture," that our research will have beneficial payoffs to society eventually. This is because the thrust of modern science has been predicated on the Newtonian idea that the universe is like an enormous machine whose entire system will be reconstructed on the basis of our understanding of the parts. This is the fundamental reductionist faith in science: the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. It does make a lot of sense—what distinguishes science from other activities that purport to provide a comprehensive "world view" is its requirement that we focus on a part of nature isolated to as great an extent as possible from the rest of the system of which it is a part. This has provided enormous insights into that fragment of nature, often accompanied by power to manipulate it. But when we attempt to tinker with what lies in the field of our view, the effects ripple far beyond the barrel of the microscope. And so we are constantly surprised at the unexpected consequences of our interference. Scientists only know nature in "bits and pieces" and assume that higher levels of organization are simply the expression of the component parts. This is what impels neurobiologists to study the chemical and electrical behaviour of single neurons in the faith that it will ultimately lead to an understanding of what creativity and imagination are, a faith that I don't for a moment think will ever be fulfilled (although a lot of useful information will accrue).

Physicists, who originally set this view in motion, have this century, with   7
the arrival of relativity and quantum theory, put to rest the notion that we will ever be able to reconstruct the entire universe from fundamental principles. Chemists know that a complete physical description of atoms of oxygen and hydrogen is of little value in predicting the behaviour of a water molecule. But biologists scream that any sense that there are properties of organization that don't exist at lower levels is "vitalism," a belief that there is some mystical life force in living organisms. And so biochemists and molecular biologists are intent on understanding the working of organisms by learning all they can about sub-cellular organization.

Ironically, ecology, long scorned by molecular biologists as an inexact science,   8
is now corroborating physics. In studying ecosystems, we are learning that a simple breakdown into components and their behaviour does not provide insight into how an entire collection of organisms in a natural setting will work. While many ecologists do continue to "model" ecosystems in computers in the hope that they will eventually derive a predictive tool, their science warns of the hazards of treating it too simply in management programs.

At present, our very terminology suggests that we think we can manage   9
wild plants and animals as though they were domesticated organisms. We speak of "herds" of seals, of "culling," "harvesting," "stocks." The ultimate expression of our narrow view (and self-interested rationalizations) is seen in how we

overlook the enormous environmental impact of our pollution, habitat destruction and extraction and blame seals and whales for the decline in fish populations or wolves for the decrease in moose—and then propose bounties as a solution!

But Canadians do value the spiritual importance of nature and want to   10
see it survive for future generations. We also believe in the power of science to sustain a high quality of life. And while the current understanding of science's power is, I believe, misplaced, in fact the leading edges of physics and ecology may provide the insights that can get us off the current track. We need a very profound perceptual shift and soon.

Annotations and Journal Entries

While reading the essay a second time, one student planning to write on Suzuki's style noticed the word choices in the second paragraph and marked them:

myth of endless supply

Within the Canadian mystique there is also a sense of the vastness of this land. The prairies, the Arctic, the oceans, the mountains are ever present in our art and literature. This nation is built on our sense of the seeming (endlessness) of the expanse of wilderness and the output of nature and we have

repeats fake words

behaved as if this (endlessness) were real. Today we speak of (renewable resources) but our ("harvest") procedures are more like a mining operation. We extract raw resources in the crudest of ways,

strong words

gouging the land to get at its inner core, spewing our raw wastes into the air, water and soil in massive amounts while taking fish, birds, animals

long sentence

and trees in vast quantities without regard to the future. So we operate under a strange (duality) of mind: we have both a sense of the importance of the wilderness and space in our culture and an

thesis

attitude that it is (limitless) and therefore we needn't worry.

He marked other paragraphs in more or less the same way, and then, while brainstorming, made some jottings:

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Myth--endless supply "endlessness" of Canada/space/
    resources
        Everything in Canada denies this myth
        3rd world country but with huge resources:  but not
            endless
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            land here for "millennia"--repeats word
            also repeats "harvest"
    --language covers up the destruction: "harvest,"
      "managing"
            strong words against destruction: "crudest";
                "gouging"; "spewing"; "raw wastes"
    Style: Suzuki's diction shows his concern; makes the
      reader pay attention
            long sentence--46 words--to show the harm we do
            --Really pulls reader along. Words make the long
                sentence OK and quick
            role of technology--can do more harm now
            ecology--everything has a role
            but buzz words cover up this ancient balance
            technology and science as solution? Misses big
                picture
            surprised at connections of human "interference"
    Part One: language tough, loaded
    Part Two; language changes--less loaded, more scientific
      words
            --"rudimentary"; "utopia"; "reductionist faith";
                "impels"; "accrue"
            --real long sentences here: 52 words, 53 words.
                Harder words make these sentences move slower,
                doesn't pull reader along; makes you think but
                less emotion
    Part Three: return to strong diction to make point.
      Here the repeated word "harvest"
            --long sentence again--53 words--a mix of tone.
                Less scientific but less loaded
            Comes back to idea of myth
    Last two sentences: good rhythm.
            --One longish, then final sentence short and
                strong.
            We need a shift--need to see importance of ecology
            words work to hide and reveal problem--need clear
                words to make change, I guess
            Is this the "perceptual shift"?

A Sample Essay on David Suzuki's Style

Ultimately, the student wrote the following short essay. You'll notice that it draws heavily on the notes on style and hardly at all on the notes on the

technology and science. Notes written during pre-writing are a source to draw on. Resist the temptation to work in, at all costs, everything you've produced.

             David Suzuki's Style: Shifting to the Truth
             David Suzuki feels passionately about the ecology
of the planet. He tries, in his essay, "A Planet for
the Taking," to warn his readers that living in a myth
will lead to our destruction. Canadians believe in "the
seeming endlessness of the expanse of wilderness and the
output of nature" (133), but Suzuki warns that this is
not true. Although he presents reasoned arguments for
his opinion, the strength of the essay is in Suzuki's
diction; by choosing very strong words in the right
places he tries to make his reader feel the truth of
what he says.
             Suzuki begins by speaking of the "illusion" in
which we live. He uses words like "remarkable" and
repeats the word millennia in two different ways. In
his first use, he points out that "Natives lived for
millennia on the incredible abundance" of nature. But
in his second use, he warns that it will take "millennia
to form" new forests to replace those carelessly cut
down. By repeating this word, Suzuki reminds the reader
of the eons it has taken nature to evolve the richness
we take for granted and how foolish we are to assume we
can easily or quickly duplicate her work. He underlines
this point by repeating the word harvest as well.
             As Suzuki points out, this word implies the
management (133; 134) of a renewable resource. If we
can convince ourselves that we control our land and can
manage it, then poor forest or mining methods seem more
acceptable. After all, we can always replace or regrow
a product. He uses words like "herds," "culling," and
"stocks" (134) to illustrate this attitude which comes
partly from our "reductionist faith in science" (134).
But, Suzuki argues, we do control the ecosystem and we
must see ourselves as part of a huge chain in which each
part is important.
             He uses words and phrases like "crudest of ways,"
"gouging," "spewing," "raw wastes" and "vast" (133) to
make his reader pay attention to the severity of our
destructive practices. He says we have only a

"rudimentary understanding of biology" (133) and are not
creating the "utopia" (133) we hope to achieve.

He uses long sentences where he wants special
effects. In the first case, the long sentence provides
a rhythm to carry the reader along. The sentence, full
of words like gouging, is 46 words long but it is
quickly read because of its powerful, loaded diction.
Later in the essay he has two very long sentences, of 52
and 53 words, but these sentences have harder words in
them and slow the reader down. Here, he chooses
scholarly words: our belief "impels" us to study bits
of the puzzle, assuming the parts will add up to the
whole; only small chunks of knowledge "will accrue"
(134). This diction encourages the reader to think
about Suzuki's comments on science.

The urgency of his message is again suggested in
the final section where he returns to modifiers like
"ultimate," "narrow," and "self-interested" (134) He
warns us that we live in "rationalizations" (134) rather
than observable facts. And the pace quickens.

It is by his careful word choice that David Suzuki
urges his reader to join him in concern for the ecology
of the planet. We don't just understand his warning; we
feel the danger around us. We agree that a "perceptual
shift" is needed "soon" (135).

⊞ Suggestions for Further Reading

For collections of essays, with useful introductions, see Philip Lopate, ed., *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (1994); Neil Waldman and Sarah Norton, eds., *Canadian Content*, 4th ed. (2000); Eva C. Karpinski and Ian Lea, *Pens of Many Colours: A Canadian Reader* (1993). This last collection offers essays by Canadians of a wide range of racial and ethic backgrounds.

On the essay, see also Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (1988); Alexander J. Butrym, ed., *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre* (1989).

10

Writing about Fiction: The World of the Story

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

➤ analyze plot in a work of fiction and understand techniques of organization;

➤ analyze character in a work of fiction;

➤ understand the use of foreshadowing, setting, atmosphere, symbolism, point of view, and theme;

➤ gather ideas for writing about fiction; and

➤ write an essay on any of these aspects of analysis.

PLOT AND CHARACTER

PLOT has two chief meanings: (1) what happens, the gist of the narrative (called in formalist criticism, the *fabula*), and (2) the writer's arrangement or structuring of the material into a story (*sjuzet*). Thus, in the first sense all tellings of the life of Prime Minister Mackenzie King have the same plot, but in the second sense a writer who begins with the sensational publication of King's diaries and then gives the earlier material is setting forth a plot that differs from one given by a writer who begins at the beginning. It is usual to say that a plot has an INTRODUCTION, a **COMPLICATION,** and a **RESOLUTION;** that is, it gets under way, then some difficulty or problem or complexity arises (usually a **CONFLICT** of opposed wills or forces), and finally there is some sort of settling down. A somewhat metaphoric way of putting it is to say that the plot can often be seen as the tying and then the untying of a knot; the end is the **DÉNOUEMENT** (French for "untying").

Still another way of looking at the organization of the happenings in many works of fiction is to see the plot as a pyramid or triangle. The German critic Gustav Freytag, in *Techniques of the Drama* (1863), introduced this concept in examining the five-act structure of plays, but it can be applied to some fiction, too. In this view, we begin either with an unstable situation or with an apparently stable situation that is soon disrupted. The early happenings, with their increasing tension, constitute a RISING ACTION, which

culminates in a CLIMAX or CRISIS or TURNING POINT. (The word *climax* comes from a Greek word meaning "ladder." Originally, the climax was the entire rising action, but the word has come to mean the high point or end of the rising action.) What follows the decisive moment is the FALLING ACTION, which ends in a stable situation—a situation that the reader takes to be final. Of course, the characters need not die; the reader feels, however, that nothing more is to be said about them. Here is a diagram showing Freytag's Pyramid. Remember, however, that a story *need* not have this structure and, indeed, many contemporary writings do not.

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                                  climax

                    rising action         falling action

     unstable situation                  stable situation
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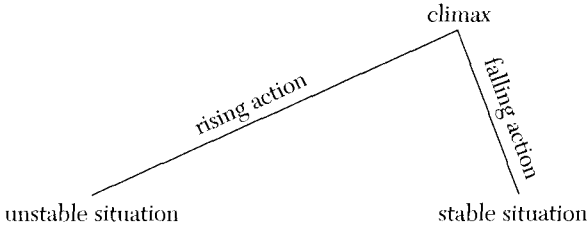
Early fiction tends to have a good deal of physical action—wanderings, strange encounters, births, and deaths. But in some fiction, particularly since the short stories of Chekhov, little seems to happen. These apparently plotless stories, however, usually involve a *mental action*—a significant perception, a decision, a failure of the will—and the process of this mental action is the plot.

The sense of causality is in part rooted in character. Things happen, in most good fiction, at least partly because the people have certain personalities or characters (moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities) and, given their natures, because they respond plausibly to other personalities. What their names are and what they look like may help you understand them, but probably the best guide to characters is what they do. As we get to know more about their drives and goals—especially the choices they make—we enjoy seeing the writer complete the portraits, finally presenting us with a coherent and credible picture of people in action. In this view, plot and character are inseparable. Plot is not simply a series of happenings, but happenings that come out of character, that reveal character, and that influence character. Henry James said: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" But, of course, characters are not defined only by what they do. The narrator often describes them, and the characters' words and dress reveal aspects of them.

You may want to set forth a character sketch, describing some person in the story or novel. You will probably plan to convey three things:

> appearance,
> personality, and
> moral or ethical values.

In preparing a character sketch, take these points into consideration:

1. What the person says (but remember that what he or she says need not be taken at face value; the person may be hypocritical or self-deceived or biased)
2. What the person does
3. What others (including the narrator of the story) say about the person
4. What others *do* (their actions may help indicate what the person could do but does not do)
5. What the person looks like—face, body, clothes. These may help convey the personality, or they may in some measure help disguise it. Details of this type are called CODES in poststructuralist criticism. A detail may be an INDEX to an established type of character or to a set of cultural assumptions which readers use to name characters. These SIGNS are often based in types and much contemporary criticism questions the validity of such signs while recognizing their power. They can create characters that *appear* essential in some way because cultural codes substitute for a person's real self. It seems less and less likely that character is, in fact, an essential quality.

Writing about a Character

A character sketch such as "Caravaggio, the 'Fifth Business'" may be complex and demanding, especially if the character is complex. In the example, the writer sees that Caravaggio can be viewed as a character himself, but that his true role is to reveal other characters.

An essay on a character, you will recall, is necessarily in some degree an interpretation, and, thus, even such an essay has a thesis or argument holding it together. Usually, however, you will want to do more than set forth your view of a character. Probably, you will discuss the character's function or contrast him or her with other characters or trace the development of personality. (One of the most difficult topics, the character of the narrator, will be discussed later in this chapter, under the heading "Point of View.") You probably will still want to keep in mind the five suggestions above for getting at a character, but you will also want to go further, relating your findings to additional matters of the sort we will examine now.

Organizing an Analysis of a Character
As you read and reread, you will highlight and annotate the text and will jot down notes, recording (in whatever order they come to you) your thoughts about the character you are studying. Reading with a view toward writing, you'll want to
1. jot down traits as they come to mind ("kind," "forgetful," "enthusiastic"); and
2. look back at the text, searching for supporting evidence (characteristic actions, brief supporting quotations), and of course you will also look for counterevidence so that you may modify your earlier impressions.

Brainstorming leads to an evaluation and a shaping of your ideas. Evaluating and shaping lead to a tentative outline. A tentative outline leads to the search for supporting evidence—the material that will constitute the body of your essay. When you set out to write a first draft, review your annotations and notes, and see if you can summarize your view of the character in one or two sentences:

> Because X is [. . .], [something occurs].

or

> Although X is [. . .], she is also [. . .].

That is, try to formulate a thesis sentence or a thesis paragraph—a proposition that you will go on to support. (Review the thesis sentence, discussed in Chapter 2.)

You want to let your reader know early, probably in your first sentence—and almost certainly by the end of your first paragraph—which character you are writing about and what your overall thesis is.

The body of your essay will be devoted to supporting your thesis. If you have asserted that although so-and-so is cruel and domineering, he nevertheless is endowed with a conscience, you will go on in your essay to support those assertions with references to passages that demonstrate them. This support does *not* mean that you tell the plot of the whole work; an essay on a character is by no means the same as a summary of the plot. Since you must support your generalizations, you will have to make brief references to specific episodes that reveal his personality, and almost surely you will quote an occasional word or passage.

An essay on a character may be organized in many possible ways. Much will depend on your purpose and thesis. For instance, you may want to show how the character develops—gains knowledge or matures or disintegrates. Or you may want to show what the character contributes to the story or play as a whole. Or, to give yet another example, you may want to show that the character is unbelievable. Still, although no single organization is always right, two methods are common and effective.

One effective way of organizing an essay on a character is to let the organization of your essay follow closely the sequence of the literary work; that is, you might devote a paragraph to the character as we first perceive him or her and then in subsequent paragraphs go on to show that this figure is later seen to be more complex than he or she at first appears. Such an essay may trace your changing responses. **Warning:** This organization can tempt you into giving plot summary, which you must avoid. If you move from point of development to point of development in your character, be sure that you are not reproducing the plot in the process.

A second effective way of organizing an essay on a character is to set forth, early in the essay, the character's chief traits—let's say the chief strengths and two or three weaknesses—and then go on to study each trait you have listed. The organization would (in order to maintain the reader's interest) probably begin with the most obvious points and then move on to the less

obvious, subtler points. The body of your essay, in any case, is devoted to offering evidence that supports your generalizations about the character.

What about a concluding paragraph? The concluding paragraph ought not to begin with a lead-in as obvious as, "Thus, we see," or "In conclusion," or "I recommend this story because [. . .]." In fact, after you have given what you consider to be a sound sketch of the character, it may be appropriate simply to quit. Especially if your essay has moved from the obvious traits to the more subtle and more important traits, and if your essay is fairly short (say, fewer than 500 words), a reader may not need a conclusion. Further, why blunt what you have just said by adding an unnecessary and merely repetitive summary? If you do feel that a conclusion is necessary, you may find it effective to write a summary of the character, somewhat as you did in your opening. For the conclusion, relate the character's character to the entire literary work; that is, try to give the reader a sense of the role that the character plays. Do not repeat the points you have already made.

A Sample Essay on a Character: "Caravaggio, the 'Fifth Business'"

Jane L. McDonald decided to write about Caravaggio, the "extra character" of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, for an English 104 class. Before writing, she reread the novel, highlighting certain passages about the character. She then reviewed the text and jotted down some key ideas, reproduced here.

```
Other characters fulfill roles of hero, lover,
protector
             Caravaggio is "fifth business"
                   --(an opera term, cf. Robertson
                   Davies's novel, Fifth Business)
he is necessary--we see other characters through him
he doesn't seem to care about his own identity
he does not speak--he listens intently
he helps people identify "ghosts" from their pasts and
     bury them in "sacred" places
he reveals the secret of the patient's identity
```

This material provided much of the first draft, which was submitted to peer review. The student then revised the draft, partly in accordance with the suggestions offered and partly in the light of her own further thinking. Here is the final version.

```
             Caravaggio, the "Fifth Business"

     The English Patient by Michael Ondaatje often feels

like a classic play.  As it unfolds, Kip is seen as the

hero, the lover, the protector; Hana is the heroine,
```

also lover, also protector. Almasy is the villain, both as cuckold and as enemy. Katharine is confidante to Almasy, his counterpart. Caravaggio takes the fifth role. We are allowed to know about the other characters because Caravaggio seeks to discover their identities. He is essential.

We know little of Caravaggio except that the World War is over for him; he has lost his work along with his thumbs. He withdraws and spends his days sitting in darkness, watching others but revealing nothing of himself (27).

It seems Caravaggio's own identity is of little interest to him. When asked his name he remains silent, only writing down his serial number (27). In hospital, however, he hears Hana's name and learns that she is in trouble. Now Caravaggio has a purpose: he must travel to Villa San Girolamo to find this daughter of his old friend and help her. He must discover who she is.

This actor is named only when he comes into Hana's company; then we learn he is "the man named Caravaggio" (31). He arrives at the Villa in silence, with "no clatter of footsteps [. . .] not a sound on the floor" (30). Nothing emanates from this character, not even noise. He begins to take identity only as Hana's father's friend, her "uncle from childhood" (55).

Ondaatje portrays Caravaggio as keen observer and listener. Even the use of the painter's name alerts the reader to his intensity of focus. Like the painter, his man sees people in different lights. Through him we see past Hana of the cold heart and past the accent of the burned man. In fact, because of his attention, Hana is eventually made whole again.

Caravaggio is indeed intrigued by all who surround him. His first night is spent on the roof, looking over the Italian countryside (31). When he becomes familiar with the exterior landscape, he turns his attention (and ours) to the interior landscape.

As the story progresses, we realize that not only Hana, but the other players as well are without identity. Caravaggio reveals their past lives; because of him Katharine's body, for example, is identified and her soul laid to rest.

In a room filled with false images of trompe l'oeil, the "English" patient awaits his death. This Englishman, whose existence is as false as the garden which surrounds him, will be made real by his death. He will remain forever unnamed and mourned only by Hana. Ondaatje moves Caravaggio into the presence of the burned man and it becomes the listener's job to piece together the stories which finally reveal the truth: "Let me tell you a story," Caravaggio says to Hana, "There was a Hungarian named Almasy [. . .]. I think the English patient is not English" (163).

Through Caravaggio, then, a number of tragedies are averted. The unidentified Englishman, who speaks of flower beds in Gloucestershire (163), vanishes. We see that he was never really there. And Almasy, the man who knows the mystery of Katharine's death, is found.

Although Caravaggio has lost his thumbs and probably his profession as thief, he is the one character who has not lost his own identity. He has only secreted it: "Caravaggio watches Hana, who sits across from him looking into his eyes, trying to read him [. . .] sniffing him out, searching for the trace"

```
(39).  But while others seek to discover him, his

presence allows them to be revealed.  The intensity with

which he listens gives them a reason to speak.  When we

last see him, he is walking away from the Villa San

Girolamo on a tightrope, momentarily caught in a flash

of lightning (297).  Then, having played out his role,

he is gone.


                     Work Cited

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     Vintage, 1993.
```

A few comments on this essay:

1. The title is informative and intriguing—more interesting, for example, than "The Character of Caravaggio."
2. The writer cites passages to illustrate her points, using the form prescribed by the instructor.
3. The final paragraph concludes with the departure of the character. Thus the essay more or less echoes the chronology of the book, but these last sentences are not mere plot-telling. Rather, they solidify the writer's view of Caravaggio's character and his importance to the novel.

FORESHADOWING

The writer of fiction provides a coherent world in which the details work together. FORESHADOWING, which eliminates surprise or at least greatly reduces it and thus destroys a story that has nothing except a surprise ending to offer, is a powerful tool in the hands of the writer of serious fiction. In a story such as Faulkner's classic, "A Rose for Emily," in which we are surprised to learn near the end that Miss Emily has slept beside the decaying corpse of her dead lover, we somehow expect something strange from the outset. We are not surprised by the surprise, only by its precise nature. The first sentence of the story tells us that after Miss Emily's funeral (the narrator begins at the end) the townspeople cross her threshold "out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant [. . .] had seen in at least ten years." As the story progresses, we see Miss Emily prohibiting people from entering the house, and we hear that after a certain point no one ever sees Homer Barron again, that "the front door remained closed," and (a few paragraphs before the end of the story) that the townspeople "knew that there was one room in that region above the stairs which no one had seen in forty years." The paragraph preceding the revelation that "the man himself lay in bed" is devoted to a description of Homer's dust-covered clothing and toilet

articles. In short, however much we are unprepared for the precise revelation, we are prepared to discover something macabre in the house; and, given Miss Emily's purchase of poison and Homer's disappearance, we have some idea of what will be revealed.

Joyce's "Araby" (Appendix A) is another example of a story in which the beginning is a preparation for all that follows. Consider the first two paragraphs:

> North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' school set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two stories stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.
>
> The former tenant of our house, a priest, had died in the back drawing-room. Air, musty from having been long enclosed, hung in all the rooms, and the waste room behind the kitchen was littered with old useless papers. Among these I found a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled and damp: *The Abbot*, by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant* and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*. I liked the last best because its leaves were yellow. The wild garden behind the house contained a central apple-tree and a few straggling bushes under one of which I found the late tenant's rusty bicycle pump. He had been a very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister.

Of course, the full meaning of the passage will not become apparent until you have read the entire story. In a sense, a story has at least three lives:

- when we read the story, sentence by sentence, trying to turn the sequence of sentences into a consistent whole;

- when we have finished reading the story and we think back on it as a whole, even if we think no more than "That was a waste of time"; and

- when we read a story, knowing already—even as we read the first line—how it will turn out at the end.

Let's assume that you have not read the whole of "Araby." On the basis only of a reading of the first two paragraphs, what might you highlight or underline? Here are the words that one student marked:

blind	musty
quiet	kitchen was littered
set the boys free	leaves were yellow
brown imperturbable faces	wild garden [. . .] apple-tree
priest	charitable priest

No two readers will come up with exactly the same list (if you live on North Richmond Street, you will probably underline it and put an exclamation mark in the margin; if you attended a parochial school, you'll probably underline "Christian Brothers' school"), but perhaps most readers, despite their varied experience, would agree that Joyce is giving us a picture of what he elsewhere called the "paralysis" of Ireland. How the story will turn out is, of

course, unknown to a first-time reader. Perhaps the paralysis will increase, or perhaps it will be broken. Joyce goes on adding sentence to sentence, trying to shape the reader's response and the reader goes on reading, making meaning out of the sentences.

As we read further in the story, we are not surprised to learn that the boy for a while manufactured quasi-religious experiences, religion being dead—remember the dead priest and his rusty bicycle pump. In his ears, shop-boys sing "litanies," his girlfriend's name springs to his lips "in strange prayers," and his vision of her is a "chalice" that he carries "safely through a throng of foes." He plans to visit a bazaar, and he promises to bring her a gift. After he has with some difficulty arrived at the bazaar, however, he is vastly disappointed by the trivial conversation of the attendants, by the counting of the day's receipts (money-changers in the temple), and by the darkness ("the upper part of the hall was now completely dark"). In the last line of the story he realizes: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." Everything in the story coheres; the dead-end street, the dead priest, the rusty pump—all are perfect preludes to this story about a boy's recognition of the nothingness that surrounds him. The "vanity" that drives and derides him is not only the egotism that moved him to think he could bring the girl a fitting gift, but also the nothingness that is spoken of in the biblical "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

In preparing to write about foreshadowing:

- Reread the story; now that you know how it ends, you will be able to see how certain early details are relevant to the ending.

- Underline or highlight these details, and perhaps jot down brief notes in the margins, such as "images of emptiness" or "later turns out ironically."

- Jot down on a sheet of paper key phrases from the text and annotate them with such comments as "The first of many religious images" and "same image appears later."

Organizing an Essay on Foreshadowing

What is the best way to organize an essay on foreshadowing? Probably you will work through the evidence chronologically, though your initial paragraph may discuss the end and indicate that the remainder of the essay will be concerned with tracing the way in which the author prepares the reader for this end and simultaneously maintains the right amount of suspense. Again, be wary of plot summary in any chronological order. You may want to move around within the sequence of the plot, pulling out examples of foreshadowing that illustrate particular aspects of your thesis. If the suspense is too slight, we stop reading, not caring what comes next. If it is too great, we are perhaps reading a story in which the interest depends entirely on some strange happening rather than a story with sufficiently universal application to make it worthy of a second reading.

Your essay may study the ways in which details gain in meaning as the reader gets farther into the story. Or it may study the author's failure to keep details relevant and coherent, the tendency to introduce material for its momentary value at the expense of the larger design. An essay on an uneven story may do both: It may show that although there are unfortunate irrelevancies, considerable skill is used in arousing and interestingly fulfilling the reader's expectations. If you feel that the story is fundamentally successful, the organization of your thoughts may reflect your feelings. After an initial paragraph stating the overall position, you may discuss the failures and then go on at greater length to discuss the strengths, ending strongly on your main point. If you feel that the story is essentially a failure, perhaps first discuss its merits briefly and then go on to your main point—the unsatisfactory nature of the story. To reverse this procedure would be to leave the reader with an impression contrary to your thesis.

SETTING AND ATMOSPHERE

Foreshadowing normally makes use of SETTING. The setting or environment in the first two paragraphs of Joyce's "Araby" is not mere geography, not mere locale: It provides an ATMOSPHERE, an air that the characters breathe, a world in which they move. Narrowly speaking, the setting is the physical surroundings—the furniture, the architecture, the landscape, and the climate— and these often are highly appropriate to the characters that are associated with them. Thus, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* the passionate Earnshaw family is associated with Wuthering Heights, the storm-exposed moorland, whereas the mild Linton family is associated with Thrushcross Grange in the sheltered valley below. King's "Borders" also has two settings: the Canadian border town, Coutts, and the American town, Sweetgrass. A reader of the story probably agrees with King that the descriptive name, "Sweetgrass," sounds more Canadian and the abrupt name more American; the fact that the reverse is true assists the story's theme that borders are arbitrary.

Broadly speaking, setting includes not only the physical surroundings but also a point or several points in time. The background against which we see the characters and the happenings may be specified as morning or evening, spring or fall, and this temporal setting in a good story will probably be highly relevant; it will probably be part of the story's meaning, perhaps providing an ironic contrast or exerting an influence on the characters. (Think of the normally convivial dinner party setting in Timothy Findley's "Dinner Along the Amazon," a story of miscommunication and loneliness within partnerships.)

Note: Although your instructor may ask you to write a paragraph describing the setting, more often he or she will want something more complicated, such as an essay on the *function* of the setting. For such an essay, you may find it useful to begin with a paragraph or two describing the setting or settings, but be sure to go on to analyze the significance of this material.

Symbolism

Writers of fiction do not write only about things that have happened to them. They write about things they have seen or heard, and also about thoughts and emotions. Inevitably, writers use SYMBOLS. Symbols are neither puzzles nor colourful details but are among the concrete embodiments that give the story whatever accuracy it has. For instance, in "The Wall," in Chapter 1, Vigneault may only be creating verisimilitude by having his mason work on "the exterior wall of his prison," but as we read the story we probably feel— because of the emphasis on the *strength* of the wall—that it in some way emphasizes the imprisonment, the interior space, and the mental space occupied by the mason. The occupation of the visitor, who is a monk, is also loaded with special significance and strikes the reader as a clue to a deeper meaning. Noticing these signs, readers may see more than the narrator sees or says.

Let's assume that if writers use symbols, they want readers to perceive— at least faintly—that certain characters or places or seasons or happenings have rich implications, stand for something more than what they are on the surface. Indeed, Baudelaire once described literature as a *forêt de symboles* (forest of symbols). How do writers help us to perceive these things? By emphasizing them—for instance, by describing them at some length, or by introducing them at times when they might not seem strictly necessary, or by calling attention to them repeatedly.

Consider, for example, the name tag with a small Canadian flag at one end and a small American flag at the other worn by the duty-free shop manager, Mel, in King's "Borders" (Appendix B). Because both flags appear on the same tag, but at either end, the national symbols become literary ones. Working in the space between two border stations, Mel inhabits the same "non-country" inhabited by the mother but he can return to whichever country he lives in without subjugation. She must compromise her "Blackfoot" heritage to claim citizenship in Canada. Once this symbol is read, other national symbols like the flagpoles, the water towers, and the guards' guns become more powerful. They are not just details added for realism. King seems to put considerable emphasis on these items and, indeed, on many apparently minor details. But here is a caution. To say that the detail of the relative size of the water towers on each side of the border stands for a larger debate about the North American obsession with size, the Canadian sense of inferiority in the face of the "big" United States, and the congruent Canadian belief that our abundant water resource gives us power is not to say that whenever water appears in a story it stands for resources or national pride. Indeed, water is a primitive symbol that often stands for renewal and can also stand for the "river of death."

Does the water in some way stand for renewal here? For the rebirth of Aboriginal pride? Probably not—though readers might disagree. The legends of Coyote that the mother tells the narrator do suggest pride in racial heritage and the fact that the mother "expected me to remember each one" underlines their importance. The arrival of television vans in the morning contrasts a symbol of modern North American life with these ancient mythical

symbols. King reinforces this point by telling us that the television lights "hurt my eyes." It seems King does wish to talk about the enormous cultural power of television, but this theme is secondary to his interest in the Native sense of time and place between "borders." He does not, therefore, invest the television crews or their paraphernalia with much symbolic significance— though it is certainly ironic that the media seems to end the standoff. He gives much more attention to the guns worn by the guards, showing us thumbs "jammed into gun belts" and "notches" in pistol grips. King might have developed these symbols further or even considered guns as Freudian symbols of male potency and power over the Native woman and her boy child, but that would have created a different story. (It would have invited a psychoanalytic interpretation.) ALLEGORY is an older, more direct comparison where a concrete object stands for a quality. Do not confuse allegory with symbol.

A Sample Essay on Setting as Symbol

The following essay is about Thomas King's "Borders" (Appendix B). If you have not yet read the story, take a moment now to do so.

Here is a scratch outline. Not all of the notes ended up in the final version, of course, but they obviously were a great help in shaping the essay.

```
thesis: setting here not geographical place, but
        political, cultural place
title?
        King and Borders
        First Canadian Sense of Place
        Flagpoles and Place
        A Mother's Pride
        Setting as Symbol
        Setting as Symbol: Borders in [ ... ]
        Moving Between Countries
        Moving Between: Setting in King's [ ... ]
Setting in "Borders":
        Define setting??? place and time
King gives age of narrator, not date
King gives careful details of the physical setting and
        of Alberta and Salt Lake City; also names Coutts
        and Sweetgrass
"You'll be able to see the tops of the flagpoles, too.
        That's where the border is"
"It's the water.  From here on down, they got lousy
        water"
"I found her sitting on her blanket leaning against the
        bumper of the car"
```

why the guns on the crossing guards? authority? violence
      of American life? Child's viewpoint? Influence of
      TV Cop shows on the narrator????

~~Salt Lake City is where Mormons live in the USA. Is
      there a contrast with Christianity and the Native
      beliefs the Mother tells in the Coyote legend?~~

old way of life
"If you tried to look [. . .] in certain directions, you
      couldn't see a thing"
Slides in and out of present time and memory time
Mother's stories come from old time; TV crew comes from
      contemporary time
End with a quotation? Or with something about being
      trapped or having no borders?

Title implies   Moving Between:
thesis.   Setting in Thomas King's "Borders"
                     In reading Thomas King's "Borders," a
                reader is aware exactly where the story is set
                but is not always clear on when the action is
                taking place. The narrator, a twelve-year-old
Opening   First Nations boy, remembers the events which
paragraph
identifies author led to his sister, Laetitia, leaving the
and story. Topic   family home on a reservation in Alberta and
(setting) is
introduced.   moving to Salt Lake City in the USA. He also
                recounts the events over a three-day period in
                the present during which he and his mother are
                trapped between the USA and Canada, living in
                the neutral zone between two border crossings.
                     The narrator tells us many details about
                the geographical setting. When Laetitia wants
                to move, her mother points out the natural
                beauty of their home: "You can still see the
                mountains from here" (360). The reader sees
                "the prairies move in the sunlight" (366) in
                Canada, while later, looking into the United
                States, "all you could see was an overpass
Quotations
support points. that arched across the highway [. . .] "

(360-361). The mother points out that Canada
already has all the glamorous-sounding things
which the sister is hoping to find in Utah.
Her boyfriend, who has been in Salt Lake,
shows the Mormon Tabernacle and the skiing
mountains on a map. The mother replies that
people "come from all over the world to ski at
Banff. Cardston's got a temple, if you like
those kinds of things" (363). The mother's
pride in Canada is important, because later

Transition ("but") she will deny being a Canadian. The symbols
leads to
significance of of the Canadian setting are important to her,
setting. but more important is her native heritage as a
Introduces thesis. Blackfoot. The story is full of symbols of
place which are also symbols of heritage and
belonging.

In Coutts, the Canadian border town, King
not only points out the typical convenience
store and gas station, but a museum which
(significantly) is boarded up. Museums hold
people's histories and memories; in Canada we
are not good at remembering our history and
that is one of the themes which King wants to
convey by his symbolic setting. By putting
the action in between the two countries, King
asks the reader to consider whether

Thesis nationality has to do with political
boundaries or with a sense of belonging, a
familiarity. The tribal memories conveyed in
the Coyote legends are what the mother expects
the boy "to remember" so she "tell[s] them
slow, repeating parts" (366). King wants his
narrator (and the reader) to understand that
it is this sense of "place" within myth that
really defines our identity, not the physical
space we inhabit. And yet he is also subtle
enough to point out that even the Mother has
another kind of identity in her pride of being

Canadian and her dislike for the American way of life. The story does not pretend that we each identify in only one way.

Transition to second aspect of setting.

The time of the story is also laid out carefully, but it shifts. Within the past and present time, King blurs details. Right at the beginning the boy tells us "When I was twelve, maybe thirteen, my mother announced we were going to Salt Lake City to visit my sister" (359). He says that "over time" (364) Laetitia gained her mother's approval for the move. This vague time is also part of King's theme. In Native folklore, time is less precise than in Western history and since the Mother insists she is "Blackfoot" rather than Canadian (or American), we expect her to live in the fluid time of her people. In an

Quotation from author supports thesis.

interview, King said of his fiction that "I don't make any distinction between the past and the present" (qtd. Geddes). By moving in time, the story emphasizes that time is less important than belonging. The mother is "slow" when she tells her ancient stories. The boy has a more contemporary sense of time, just as he likes hamburgers. He comments that the second night sleeping in the car was "not as much fun" (365) as the first night, but it is all still an adventure for him. The basic necessities are available (water, some food, cover at night) so the two are able to live outside either country and, somehow, outside time, as well. The time is symbolic in the same way the space is. The two travellers are frozen in time by the refusal of the authorities to let them enter either country, but their Blackfoot identity doesn't operate in the same linear time the guards experience, anyway. Time and place together form setting,

Thesis is hammered home. but the particular sense of time and place in this story also symbolize the different perception of the Blackfoot family.

It is her insistence on recognition, summed up in her view of time and place, which marks the Mother's pride. It is also the lesson the narrator learns. As he says,

Concluding paragraph wraps up essay; reiterates key idea of pride. "Pride is a good thing to have, you know. Laetitia had a lot of pride, and so did my mother. I figured that someday, I'd have it, too" (364).

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POINT OF VIEW

The Dublin in "Araby" is the Dublin that James Joyce thought existed, but it must be remembered that although an author *writes* a story, someone else *tells* it. The story is seen from a particular POINT OF VIEW, and this point of view in large measure determines our response to the story. A wide variety of terms has been established to name differing points of view, but the following labels are among the commonest. We may begin with two categories: third-person points of view (in which the narrator is, in the crudest sense, not a participant in the story) and first-person points of view (in which the "I" who narrates the story plays a part in it).

Third-Person Narrators

The THIRD-PERSON POINT OF VIEW itself has several subdivisions. At one extreme is the OMNISCIENT NARRATOR, who knows everything that is going on and can tell us the inner thoughts of all the characters. The omniscient narrator may editorialize, pass judgments, reassure the reader, and so forth,

in which case he or she may sound like the author. Here is Thomas Hardy's editorially omniscient narrator in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, telling the reader that Tess was mistaken in imagining that the countryside proclaimed her guilt:

> But this encompassment of her own characterization, based upon shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess's fancy—a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason.

Still, even this narrator is not quite Hardy; he does not allude to his other books, his private life, or his hope that the book will sell. If he is Hardy, he is only one aspect of Hardy, quite possibly a fictional Hardy, a disembodied voice with particular characteristics.

Another sort of third-person narrator, the **SELECTIVE OMNISCIENT**, takes up what Henry James called a "center of consciousness," revealing the thoughts of one of the characters but (for the most part) seeing the rest of the characters from the outside only. Wayne Booth, in a thoughtful study of Jane Austen's *Emma*, explains the effectiveness of selective omniscience in this novel. He points out that Emma is intelligent, witty, beautiful, and rich. But she is flawed by pride, and, until she discovers and corrects her fault, she almost destroys herself and her friends. How may such a character be made sympathetic, so that we will hope for the happy conclusion to the comedy? "The solution to the problem of maintaining sympathy despite almost crippling faults," Booth says,

> was primarily to use the heroine herself as a kind of narrator, though in third person, reporting on her own experience [. . .]. By showing most of the story through Emma's eyes, the author insures that we shall travel with Emma rather than stand against her. It is not simply that Emma provides, in the unimpeachable evidence of her own conscience, proof that she has many redeeming qualities that do not appear on the surface; such evidence could be given with authorial commentary, though perhaps not with such force and conviction. Much more important, the sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for good fortune for the character with whom he travels, quite independently of the qualities revealed.

> —*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983) 245–46.

Booth goes on to point out in a long and careful analysis that "sympathy for Emma can be heightened by withholding inside views of others as well as by granting them of her."

In writing about point of view, one tries to suggest what the author's choice of a particular point of view contributes to the story. Wayne Booth shows how Jane Austen's third-person point of view helps keep sympathetic a character who otherwise might be less than sympathetic. Notice that Booth states the problem—how to draw an intelligent but proud woman so that the reader will wish for a happy ending—and he presents his answer convincingly, moving from "It is not simply [. . .]." to "Much more important [. . .]." (To reverse the order would cause a drop in interest.) He then moves from a discussion of the inside treatment of Emma to the outside treatment of the other characters, thus substantiating and enlarging his argument.

Possibly, one could reverse this procedure, beginning with a discussion of the treatment of the characters other than Emma and then closing in on Emma, but such an essay may seem slow in getting under way. The early part may appear unfocused. The reader will for a while be left wondering why in an essay on point of view in *Emma* the essayist does not turn to the chief matter, the presentation of the central character.

The THIRD-PERSON NARRATOR, then, although not in the ordinary sense a character in the story, is an important voice in the story, which helps give shape to it. Another type of third-person narrator is the so-called EFFACED NARRATOR. (Some critics use the term DRAMATIC POINT OF VIEW or OBJECTIVE POINT OF VIEW.) This narrator does not seem to exist, for (unlike the editorially omniscient narrator) he or she does not comment in his or her own voice and (unlike the omniscient and selective omniscient narrators) does not enter any minds. It is almost improper to speak of an effaced narrator as "he" or "he or she," for no evident figure is speaking. The reader hears DIALOGUE and sees only what a camera or a fly on the wall would see. The following example is from Morley Callaghan's *A Fine and Private Place:*

At the door he fumbled for his key.
"My God," Al said. "That's Shore."
"Are you sure?"
"It's the same hat he had on in the picture" (25).

But even an effaced narrator has, if we think a moment, a kind of personality. The story the narrator records may seem "cold" or "reportorial" or "objective," and such a TONE or VOICE (the attitude of the narrator, as it is detected) may be an important part of the story. Rémy de Gourmont's remark, quoted in Ezra Pound's *Literary Essays,* is relevant: "To be impersonal is to be personal in a special kind of way [. . .]. The objective is one of the forms of the subjective."

In writing about a third-person narrator, speak of "the narrator" or "the speaker," not of "the author."

First-Person Narrators

To turn to FIRST-PERSON, or PARTICIPANT, POINTS OF VIEW, consider the "I" who narrates "Araby." You may recall that the narrator says, at the end, "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity," when he experiences an EPIPHANY. In "Araby," this "I" is a major character; so he is in Bill Schermbrucker's *Mimosa.* He may, however, also be a minor character, a mere witness. (Dr. Watson narrates tales about Sherlock Holmes, Maureen narrates the other characters' lives in Alice Munro's "Open Secrets.") Of course, the narrator, even when a relatively minor character, is still a character, and, therefore, in some degree the story is about him or her. Although "Open Secrets" is primarily about the mystery of a missing girl, it is also about Maureen's changing perception of the townsfolk.

First-person narrators may not fully understand their own report. Take the narrator of Munro's story, "The Albanian Virgin." In telling us about the

old woman she visits in the hospital, she uses an **INNOCENT EYE**, a device in which a good part of the effect consists in the discrepancy between the narrator's imperfect awareness and the reader's superior awareness. We see the connection between the mysterious heroine of the inner story, "Lottar," and the old woman's name, "Charlotte"—or we think we do. But we are uncertain if Charlotte is truly proposing a movie plot (as she says she is doing) or narrating her own exotic life. In short, Charlotte is an **UNRELIABLE NARRATOR**. One of the intriguing aspects of this story is the conflict between these two styles of narration; the **MAGIC REALISM** of the story arises from the juxtaposition of the apparently honest details of the persona's narration of her life with Charlotte's exotic narration. These levels of realism are further complicated for some readers who know that Munro herself moved from Southern Ontario to Victoria just as her PERSONA says she did. At what point is Alice Munro using first-person narration to tell her own story, at what point is her persona telling a fiction from her own INNOCENT EYE, and at what point is Charlotte actually telling the story but keeping certain facts from the reader? Of course the effect of the story comes from the fact that all these points of view operate together, linking the various levels of perception of each narrator.

On the other hand, we sometimes feel that a first-person narrator (Conrad's Marlow in several novels is an example) is a very thinly veiled substitute for the author. Nevertheless, the words of a first-person narrator require the same kind of scrutiny that we give to the words of the other characters in a story or play. The reader must deduce the personality from what is said. For instance, the narrator of "Araby" never tells us that he was a good student, but, from such a passage as the following, we can deduce that he was a bookish boy until he fell in love: "I watched my master's face pass from amiability to sternness; he hoped I was not beginning to idle."

A first-person narrator is not likely to give us the help that an editorially omniscient narrator gives. We must deduce from this passage from "Araby" that the narrator's uncle drinks too much: "At nine o'clock I heard my uncle's latchkey in the hall-door. I heard him talking to himself and heard the hall-stand rocking when it had received the weight of his overcoat. I could interpret these signs." In a first-person narrative it is sometimes difficult for the reader to interpret the signs. In a sense, the author has given the reader two stories: the story the narrator tells and the story of a narrator telling a story.

An essay on point of view in a first-person story will probably characterize the narrator at some length. For instance, it will point out that the narrator is a not-too-bright adult who is eagerly telling a new acquaintance something about life in this town. The essay will then go on to show how this narrator's character colours the story that he or she tells. The essay will, for instance, explain that because the narrator is rather simple, he does not understand that he is in fact recounting a story about murder and not—as he thinks—a curious accident; that is, the essay will discuss how the reader's response resembles or differs from the narrator's.

In writing about point of view in a first-person narrative such as Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*, after an introductory remark to the effect that Dunstan Ramsay narrates the story, use the character's name or a pronoun ("Ramsay

realizes the importance of Mrs. Dempster in his life.") in speaking of the narrator.

Caution: Essays on narrative point of view have a way of slipping into essays on what the story is about. Of course, point of view *is* relevant to the theme of the story, but if you are writing about point of view, keep this focus in sight, explaining, for instance, how it shapes the theme.

NOTES AND A SAMPLE ESSAY ON NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW IN JAMES JOYCE'S "ARABY"

Here are some of the notes—a journal entry and a rough outline—and the final version of an essay on the narrator in Joyce's "Araby" (Appendix A). Doubtless some of the notes were based on passages that the student had underlined or highlighted in the text.

```
1st person point of view, but what sort of person?
    Several sorts
      Opening paragraph seems objective point of view
    Boy is sensitive to beauty: likes a book because

      pages are yellow (191); plays in stable where he

      hears "music from the buckled harness" (192);

    Boy is shy: hardly talks to girl: "I had never

      spoken to her" (192); "At last she spoke to me"

      (193) Here narrator is personal, not objective omniscient.

        But he plays with other boys; they don't seem

          to regard him as different.  Typical boy?

          Prob. not.  "My eyes were often full of

          tears" (193).  But not from "the rough tribes from
                                      the cottages."
        But narrator is no longer a kid; grownup, looking

          back on childhood; sometimes he seems almost

          amused by his childhood ("Her name sprang to my

          lips at moments in strange prayers and praise

          which I myself did not understand, 192-93);

          sometimes seems a bit hard on his earlier self:

          ("all my foolish blood"; "What innumerable follies

          laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts,"
                                              So, a third aspect to
          193); My soul luxuriated" (193)    narrator
              Ending: very hard on self: "I saw myself as a
  The third aspect,
  or maybe even creature driven and derided by vanity" (196).
    a fourth But opening is very different, unemotional.  In
```

fact, come to think of it, opening isn't even
clearly a first-person narrator. But there is a
special personality in semi-comic comment that houses
themselves were conscious of decent lives within them.

The Three First-Person Narrators of Joyce's "Araby"
James Joyce's "Araby" is told by a first-person
narrator, but this point of view is not immediately
evident to a reader. The story at first seems to be
told by an objective third-person narrator:

> North Richmond Street, being blind, was a
> quiet street except at the hour when the
> Christian Brothers' School set the boys free.
> An uninhabited house of two stories stood at
> the blind end, detached from its neighbours in
> a square ground. The other houses of the
> street, conscious of decent lives within them,
> gazed at one another with brown imperturbable
> faces (271).

These words seem objective and omniscient, but the very
next paragraph begins by saying, "The former tenant of
our house [...]." The word "Our" indicates that the
narrative point of view is first-person. On rereading
the first paragraph of the story, a reader probably
still feels that the paragraph is chiefly objective, but
perhaps the reader now gets a little sense of an
individualized speaker in the passage about the houses
being "conscious of decent lives within them," and the
houses have "imperturbable faces." That is, the
narrator personifies the houses, making them "conscious"
and rather smug. Apparently he is detached, and
somewhat amused, as he thinks back to the middle-class
neighbourhood of his childhood.

In many passages, however, the narrator describes
his romantic childhood without any irony. For instance,
he says that when he was in love with the girl, his
"body was like a harp and her words and gestures were
like fingers running upon the wires" (355). We can say,
then, that so far the narrator has two aspects: (1) an

adult, who looks back objectively, or maybe with a little sense of irony, and (2) an adult who looks back almost nostalgically at himself when he was a child in love.

But there is a third aspect to the narrator, revealed in several passages. For instance, he says that the girl's name was "like a summons to all [his] foolish blood" (354) and that he engaged in "innumerable follies" (355). What may seem to be the strongest passage of this sort is at the very end of the story, and it is the strongest partly because it is in such an emphatic place: "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity [...]" (358). But this passage is not exactly what it first seems to be. The narrator is not condemning himself, saying that as a child he was "driven and derided by vanity." He is saying, now, as an adult, that at the time of the experience he saw himself as driven and derided by vanity.

The fact that he says "I saw myself" is almost a way of saying "I saw myself, falsely, as [...]." That is, the narrator makes it clear that he is giving the child's view, and the reader understands that the child was unusually sensitive. In several passages the narrator has distanced himself from the child (as in the "foolish blood" passage) but the reader does not see the child as foolish, just as highly romantic. The very fact that the narrator calls the child "foolish" is enough for a reader mentally to come to the child's defense, and in effect say, "Oh, no, don't be so hard on yourself."

The earlier passages in which the narrator condemns his childhood experience thus serve to help the reader to take the child's part. And now, at the end of the story, when the narrator reports the child's severe judgment on himself, the reader leaps to the child's defense. If the narrator had not occasionally commented negatively on his childhood, readers might themselves

have thought that the child was acting absurdly, and
also thought that the narrator was too pleased with
himself, but since the narrator occasionally passes a
negative judgment on the child, and ends by telling us
that the child judged himself severely too, the reader
almost certainly wants to reassure the child that his
behaviour was not nearly so bad as he thought it was--
and in fact it was really quite touching.

In some ways, then, this narrator is an unreliable
narrator. Such a narrator is usually a naive person,
who doesn't understand what is really going on in the
story. The narrator of "Araby" is not naive--he is
obviously a very sophisticated person--but sometimes is
an unreliable guide so far as his own childhood goes.
But because the narrator sometimes takes a very critical
view of his childhood, a reader mentally defends the
child. The third (critical) aspect of the narrator,
then, actually serves to make the reader value the
child's behavior rather than judge it negatively.

<center>Work Cited</center>

Joyce, James. "Araby." Rpt. in <u>An Introduction to
     Literature</u>. Eds. Sylvan Barnet, et al. 11th ed.
     New York: Longman, 1993. 271-75.

A few comments on this essay may be useful:

1. *The title* is engaging—the idea of *three* first-person narrators at first
sounds paradoxical. And it probably is enough if a title is engaging and
proves to be relevant. But keep in mind that the best title often is one that
gives the reader a hint of your thesis. Here, for instance, the title might
have been "How Reliable Is the Narrator in 'Araby?'" or perhaps "Reliable
and Unreliable Narrators in Joyce's 'Araby.'" This last version catches a
reader's attention for two reasons: It speaks of narrators in the plural (most
readers will wonder who narrates the story other than the narrator they
have in mind), and it raises the issue of reliability (most readers probably
assume that the narrator is reliable). Again, none of this is to say that the
student's title is weak. The point here is to indicate that the choice of a title
is important.

2. *The organization* is reasonable. It begins with the beginning and it
ends with the end. Such an organization is not a requirement, but it is not
to be shunned. Do not, however, allow such an organization to turn what

should be an analytic essay into a long summary of the story. You are arguing a thesis, not writing a summary.

3. *The proportions are appropriate.* The thesis is that the third, or critical, voice in the essay is important in (paradoxically) getting sympathy for the boy, and so the third voice is given the most space.

4. *Quotations* are used in order to let the reader know exactly what the writer is talking about. They are used as part of the argument, not as padding.

THEME: VISION OR ARGUMENT?

Because modern fiction makes subtle use of it, point of view can scarcely be neglected in a discussion of THEME—what a story is about. Modern criticism usually prefers not to hear the author's voice directly, as the reader often did in older fiction. We would rather see than be lectured. We are less impressed by

> It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention

(from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) than by this passage from the same book:

> Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

The second quotation, but not the first, gives us the sense of reality that we have come to expect from fiction. Thomas Hardy's novels in particular have been censured on this account; the modern sensibility is uneasy when it hears Hardy's own voice commenting on the cosmic significance of the happenings, as when in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* the narrator says: "In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things, the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving." The passage goes on in this vein at some length. Even in passages of dialogue, we sometimes feel that we are getting not a vision of life but a discourse on it, as in this famous exchange between Tess and her brother:

> "Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?"
> "Yes."
> "All like ours?"
> "I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubbard-tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted."
> > "Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?"
> > "A blighted one."

Partly, we feel that overt commentary (even when put into the mouths of the characters) leaves the world of fiction and invites us to judge it separately

as philosophy. Partly the difficulty is that twentieth-century novelists and readers have come to expect the novel to do something different from what Hardy and his contemporaries expected it to do. As the novelist Flannery O'Connor puts it in *Mystery and Manners* (1957), we expect a storyteller to speak "*with* character and action, not *about* character and action" (76).

Determining and Discussing the Theme

First, we can distinguish between STORY and THEME in fiction. Story is concerned with "How does it turn out? What happens?" Theme is concerned with "What does it add up to? What MOTIF holds the happenings together? What does it make out of life, and, perhaps, what wisdom does it offer?" A theme in a literary work is sometimes distinguished from a THESIS, an arguable message such as "People ought not to struggle against Fate." The theme, it might be said, is something like "The struggle against Fate" or "The Process of Maturing" or "The Quest for Love." In any case, the formulation of a theme normally includes an abstract noun or a phrase, but it must be remembered that such formulations as those in the previous sentence are finally only shorthand expressions for highly complex statements. (We discuss theme further in the chapter on drama.)

In a good work of fiction, the details all contribute to the writer's general purpose. In Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*, for example, there are many references to religion, the circus, and magic. These references contribute to our sense of the reality in Davies' depiction of Canada in the first half of the twentieth century, but they do more: They help comment on the ignorance of the people who consider Ramsay to be a boring and inconsequential Canadian schoolteacher, the shallowness of the religion Ramsay was taught as a boy as opposed to the deep spirituality he finds in his travels, and the role in his life of his "fool Saint." They prepare the reader for a Jungian reading of Ramsay's life, a reading that Davies seems to invite. One might study the author's references to the relation of magic, religion, and character in hopes of a deeper understanding of the novel.

Preliminary Notes and Two Sample Essays on the Theme of Thomas King's "Borders"

Here are the notes and the final essays of two students who chose to write about the theme of King's "Borders" (Appendix B).

The first student, after reading and rereading the story, jotted down the following notes as a sort of preliminary outline. Some of the notes were based on passages he had underlined. Notice that the jottings include some material specifically on the story and other material—references to the outside world—that is relevant to what the student takes to be the theme of the story. When he reviewed his notes before starting on a first draft, the student deleted some of them, having decided that they were not especially useful for his essay. Still, they were worth jotting down; only in retrospect can a writer clearly see which notes are useful.

Canadians and Americans need labels

    --citizenship

Need symbols of these labels so they can locate themselves in a universe they understand. These form much of pop culture.

    --nationalities

    --guns

        --"guy in a dark blue suit"

        --"Thank you," he said, his fingers patting the butt of his revolver.

        --"swaying back and forth" are like "two cowboys headed for a bar or a gunfight"

    --border stations

    --pins with flags on them and names

    --names of towns

"a name tag with a tiny American flag on one side and a tiny Canadian flag on the other" Americans and Canadians share many of these pop culture symbols

    --hamburgers, pop

    --TV

and he wants the symbols of North American pop culture: ("But we can stop at one of those restaurants, too, right?"; "Hamburgers would be even better because they got more stuff for energy.") Mother doesn't want these things. Sister wants a less "boring" life than on the reserve. ~~Canadian life is boring vs. American lifestyle is exciting.~~

~~"Sister's boyfriend has visited Salt Lake; So has her friend, Charlotte, although it's not clear when she was there~~

~~Salt Lake City is symbol of American way of life~~

Possible title:

    First Nations People See Different Signs

    Lost in Symbol

    Icons at the Border

    We All Need Signs of Who We Are

After writing a draft and then revising it, the author submitted the revision to a group for peer review. Ultimately, he turned in the following essay.

Icons at the Border

The young narrator and his mother in Thomas King's "Borders" find themselves trapped between the Canadian and American border crossings. But they also find themselves trapped between competing symbols of two related ways of life. Neither are the heritage or lifestyle that the mother wants for her family. In fact, the symbols they encounter are so strong that they can be seen as icons for the two North American ways of life. King tells us that these images are not appropriate for his First Nations narrator, even though the boy and his sister are drawn to them.

The story concerns a Blackfoot family who has to decide whether to live in Canada or the United States. The sister moves to Salt Lake City, claiming that "life around here is too boring" (365). She is interested in the American city because it is larger--"Oh, this one is real big" (363)--and has features like the Temple, but the reader notices that her descriptions also point out undesirable features of American life: "They got armed guards and everything." Laetitia moves into an apartment with a swimming pool even though, as the mother tells her friend, "[...] she can't even swim" (360). She is seeking an urban life.

The images of American life, however, are not that different from the images of Canadian life off the reserve. The mother points out that the lifestyles are similar: Canadians ski and go to Church just like people in Utah. The two border towns are so close together they seem to be one city. The names of these two towns suggest Canadian and American values but, in fact, the names are reversed from what the boy expects, the "nice name" of Sweetgrass being on the American side even though it reminds the boy of Canadian names like Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw. The father is American; the mother is Canadian.

It seems that the boy and his sister are drawn to these images of urban, North American life. He wants to go to "one of those restaurants" (360) and he wants a hamburger. The American border guards have guns and King makes a point of drawing our attention to them, but for the young boy, they seem fascinating rather than dangerous. For him the border guards "swaying back and forth" are like "two cowboys headed for a bar or a

gunfight" (362). He sees things in terms of American movies and TV. Both border stops have flagpoles that announce the symbols of each country, but they seem somewhat interchangeable. The mother warns Laetitia that she won't get "good coffee" because "from here on down, they got lousy water" (360), but the reader realizes the sister can buy her "water in bottles" (360). In modern North American life consumers believe they can compensate for whatever is missing in their lives.

The TV crews stand for the intrusion of media in people's lives in North America. The boy says their lights "hurt my eyes" but he doesn't seem to realize the life he has in "a nice house on the reserve," and "a couple of horses we rode when we went fishing" (366) is more satisfying than the manufactured world represented by TV.

It is the mother who refuses to accept either country as her natural place. Her refusal leads to the humorous entrapment between borders, but the theme is not funny. It is very important to her that the son learn his native legends; she tries to speak to her daughter in Blackfoot even though the girl replies in English. She is secretly fond of Canada, but at heart she is Blackfoot. The icons of urban, North American life that tempt the sister and fascinate the little boy do not seduce the mother. She knows that the TV lights prevent her from seeing "a thing" (366) and that she can only see herself by looking inward. King wants the reader to see more than the innocent eye of his narrator shows us. He wants us to reject the easy symbols of urban life and look for real values.

Work Cited

King, Thomas. "Borders." Rpt. in Sylvan Barnet, Reid Gilbert, and William E. Cain. A Short Guide to Writing about Literature. Second Canadian Edition. Don Mills, ON: Pearson Education Canada, 2004. 359–367.

Now for the notes and the essay by a second student. This writer came to a very different conclusion about the theme of "Borders." After reading this student's notes and her essay, you may want to compare the two essays. Do you find one essay more interesting than the other? More persuasive? If so, why? You may feel that even though the essays come to different conclusions, the two essays are equally interesting and equally valid.

~~Assumptions about each side of the border~~

   ~~--names~~

   ~~--rude people~~

   ~~--"I had to dress up, too, because my mother didn't~~
   ~~want us crossing the border looking like~~
   ~~Americans."~~

"But must belong to one group or the other "But you have
   to be American or Canadian."
"Boy thinks of himself as Canadian" ("I told Stella we
   were Blackfoot and Canadian.")
"a name tag with a tiny American flag on one side and a
   tiny Canadian flag on the other"
       Mother is Canadian; father is American (so sister
          can go where she pleases)
       Which side? "Canadian side or American side?" asked
          the guard. "Blackfoot side," she said
       Guard can't understand her reply: Citizenship =
          Blackfoot
              --"Ma'am?"
              "Blackfoot," my mother repeated.
              "Canadian?"
              "Blackfoot."

Would have been easier to say Canadian, (boy will) but
   Mother refuses.
Coyote is also symbol of Native religion
       Coyote = trickster, same as Raven and Nanabush
       Coyote isn't always wise or good, but is
          responsible for the world the way we find it.
       Cf. Sheila Watson, Double Hook--also about Coyote
          legends
time and space are more fluid--connections are to
   family.
TV as anchor of North American life/religion/
   communication
TV lights "hurt" the boys eyes; sometime if he looks "in
   certain directions," you couldn't see a thing. He
   doesn't "see" his mother's stories but hears them--
   "slow" and as if they mean something.
       ~~TV is quick and glib~~
Mother anchors herself in old stories and in her sense
   of her race. But boy is less certain of his position.
   Other people in the story see them as displaced:

```
"reporters would come over and ask me questions about
how it felt to be an Indian without a country."  (Boy
misses point of the question)
Possible title:
     Thomas King's Mythology
     Do We Share the Land?
     Coyote Went Fishing
     Under the Stars
```

When you read the essay, you'll notice that for a title the author settled on the last of her four tentative titles. The first title, "Thomas King's Mythology," is too broad since the essay is not on all of King's work but on only one story. The second tentative title, "Do We Share the Land?" is acceptable, but it sounds a bit clumsy, so the choice came down to the last two titles or to some entirely new title that the writer might discover during the process of revising her drafts. The two final choices are less descriptive than the title of the last example essay, but they capture a sense of the theme within the language of the story itself. They imply rather than state the thesis. They aim to intrigue the reader. Sometimes titles of this type are a powerful choice.

Notice also that some points mentioned in the preliminary notes—for instance, the reference to Americans being rude or dressing badly—are omitted from the essay. The reference to a well-known Canadian novel which also deals with Coyote was not developed (nor did the student research other stories by King which also deal with Coyote) because the student recognized that it would make the essay too long if she were to move away from her primary source. (If the assignment were to write a longer essay, these references could be pursued to expand the evidence for the thesis.) And some points scarcely mentioned in the outline are emphasized in the essay. In drafting and revising the essay, the writer found that certain things weren't relevant to her point, and so she dropped them and found that others required considerable amplification.

```
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English 212-03
Prof. Robert Hartborn
January 14, 2003


                    Under the Stars
The choice of Salt Lake City as the destination for
the narrator's sister's escape from her reservation
life is a key to the theme of Thomas King's
"Borders."  This city is the centre of Mormon life in
the United States.  As the Mother points out, there
is also a temple in Cardston, Alberta, "if you like
those kinds of thing" (363).  Christian churches can
be found in either country; she doesn't value them.
First Nations' myth and the legends of Coyote form
the basis of the mother's belief system.
```

Coyote was a great chief of the ancient days before people came to the earth and animals lived alone. He had many powers, but he was unlike the Christian God. King has said in the introduction to his anthology of Native fiction, <u>All My Relations</u>, that the First Nations' philosophy depends on strong family ties, ties that extend beyond the nuclear family to include the "extended relationship we share with all human beings." These relationships go further:

> the web of kinship extending to the animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, "all my relations" is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family [. . .]. (ix)

The mother wants her son to learn about these legends so she tells them to him "slow, repeating parts as she went, as if she expected me to remember each one" (366). The setting is most important here. The mother tells these stories at night, under the stars, in the space between Canada and the United States, in a space without a European nationality. She remembers when her grandmother used to take her "and my sisters out on the prairies and tell us stories about all the stars" (366).

The boy is only partly interested in her stories. He hopes the duty free store manager, Mel, will bring him a hamburger. He is always interested in details of modern life--hamburgers, pop, guns, TV, a "fancy car" (366). This is realistic for a boy of "twelve maybe thirteen" (359), but it also shows King's concern that young native people will forget their heritage. But King's point is subtler. The boy's lack of real interest does not mean he rejects the mother's values. He has simply not yet learned enough about his own myths and values. He does not yet have the "pride" his mother has (364).

The setting forces the issue of citizenship. From the point of view of the guards, they must claim nationality. The first guard can't even understand the mother's reply because he is so used to hearing a response that fits with his sense of nation and myth:

"Citizenship?"

"Blackfoot," my mother told him.

"Ma'am?"

"Blackfoot," my mother repeated.

"Canadian?"

"Blackfoot." (361)

The guards can't understand the mother's refusal to name a country and "it didn't take them long to lose their sense of humour" (362). Even though they remain outwardly polite, it is clear that the mother's refusal to obey the rules of the dominant North American culture has annoyed the guards: "The one guard stopped smiling altogether" (362). They make the family wait a long time. They send a woman to speak to the mother (perhaps trying to be non-threatening), but this American woman has a gun, too.

The problem is all about legalities and technicalities. "Everyone who crosses our border has to declare their citizenship. Even Americans. It helps us keep track [. . .]" (362). "It's a legal technicality, that's all" (362). "But you have to be American or Canadian" (364). But the mother isn't being difficult. She feels more connection to Canada than the USA, but she truly believes herself to be Blackfoot first and foremost. This sense of identity stems from her sense of aboriginal mythology, her connection to the land. In the non-native system, connections are political and geographical and rules must be obeyed. In the mother's system time and space are more fluid and connections are to family.

King repeatedly points out that they are in no-man's land. The shopkeeper has "a name tag with a tiny American flag on one side and a tiny Canadian flag on the other" (365) and he inhabits the world between. But Mel can return to whichever side of the border he lives in at the end of his day. That is because he plays by the rules. The guards, Mel, and the TV reporters assume that the family has no place, that they are without a country. But the important comment King makes is that these two First Nations people actually "own" both countries and can inhabit either because they are stewards of the land, itself. The boy doesn't quite realize this fact, but his

mother does. And King wants the readers to under-
stand, too. Far from having no country, the mother
rejects systems that name countries. Since the
father is an American citizen, the children can move
to either country and every person does actually have
a legal citizenship. But the refusal of the mother
to name herself as Canadian suggests to those
ignorant of her belief system that she has no home.
The reporters ask the boy "how it felt to be an
Indian without a country" (366). He misunderstands
their question because he knows he has a home "on the
reserve" (366). The mother, however, knows that a
home on a reserve in Canada or the USA is still a
kind of prison between the borders of the native and
non-native world, and she also knows that reserves
are a product of the value system of the European
cultures. Even the word Indian is a European mis-
understanding of who these people are. That is why
she is so anxious that her son understand his own
legends and find his own place. It is in knowing his
own religion that the boy will understand his place.

Time seems to move slowly for the family. The
story also moves back and forth in time. A strict
sense of time is part of the North American way of
life. The mother moves in a slower time, connected
to the rhythms of the stars. She knows that the same
sky is over Canada and the USA and that the legendary
sisters and grandmother moon shine down on all
people. She has a kind of peace despite the
inconvenience of sleeping in the car and being kept a
prisoner. This is the peace which King wants the boy
and the reader to understand. It is a peace that
comes from pride in her beliefs even if those beliefs
are not respected by the dominant culture.

The sister may move to Salt Lake City, which is
home to Mormon Christians, and there may also be a
temple in Cardston, but for the mother in Thomas
King's "Borders" a deeper truth exists outside, "sit-
ting on her blanket" (366). It is the truth in the
land and it exists even when the land rolls "over a
hill" (367) and the flagpoles disappear.

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📖 Suggestions for Further Reading

E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) remains an engaging introduction
to the art of prose fiction, by an accomplished practitioner. Other highly
readable books by story writers and novelists include: Flannery O'Connor,
Mystery and Manners (1969); William Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*
(1971); Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story* (1977).

For academic studies, see also Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The
Nature of Narrative* (1966), on oral as well as written fiction; Robert Liddell,
Robert Liddell on the Novel (1969), a volume combining two earlier books by
Liddell, *A Treatise on the Novel* and *Some Principles of Fiction*; Norman
Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (1975); Seymour Chatman, *Story and
Discourse* (1978); Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (1983);
Gerald Prince, *Narratology* (1982).

For essays defining the short story and sketching its history see Susan
Lohafer, and Jo Ellyn Clarey, eds., *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989).
Also helpful is Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (1983).

Among journals devoted to narrative are: *Journal of Narrative Technique,
Modern Fiction Studies; Novel: A Forum; Studies in Short Fiction;* and *Journal
of Canadian Fiction*. Although they publish articles on all genres, the journals,
Canadian Literature and *SCL* (*Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en
littérature canadienne*) offer frequent essays on fiction.

A study of how writers explore voice, character, and such aspects, from
a Canadian writer's point of view, is Jack Hodgins' *A Passion for Narrative*
(1993).

Useful studies of Canadian fiction from a feminist perspective include
Elizabeth Abel, *The Voyage In: Fiction of Female Development* (1983);
Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies
of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (1985); and *A Mazing Space: Writing
Canadian/Women Writing* (1986).

For contemporary theoretical approaches, see Linda Hutcheon, *The
Canadian Postmodern* (1988); James Phelan, and Peter J. Rabinowitz, eds.,
Understanding Narrative (1994); Frank Davey, *Reading Canadian Reading*
(1988); or Lorna Irvine, *Subversion* (1986).

For post-colonial readings, see Smaro Kamboureli, ed., *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (1996); or Victor J. Ramraj, ed., *Concert of Voices: An Anthology of World Writing in English* (1995).

✓ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about Fiction

Here are some questions that may help to stimulate ideas about stories. Not every question is, of course, relevant to every story, but if after reading a story and thinking about it, you then run your eye over these pages, you will probably find some questions that will help you to think further about the story—in short, that will help you to get ideas.

It's best to do your thinking with a pen or pencil in hand. If some of the following questions seem to you to be especially relevant to the story you will be writing about, jot down—freely, without worrying about spelling—your initial responses, interrupting your writing only to glance again at the story when you feel the need to check the evidence.

Title
✓ Is the title informative? What does it mean or suggest? Did the meaning seem to change after you read the story? Does the title help you to formulate a theme?
✓ If you had written the story, what title would you use?

Plot
✓ Does the plot grow out of the characters, or does it depend on chance or coincidence? Did something at first strike you as irrelevant that later you perceived as relevant? Do some parts continue to strike you as irrelevant?
✓ Does surprise play an important role, or does foreshadowing? If surprise is very important, can the story be read a second time with any interest? If so, what gives it this further interest?
✓ What conflicts does the story include? Conflicts of one character against another? Of one character against the setting, or against society? Conflicts within a single character?
✓ Are the conflicts resolved? If so, how?
✓ Are certain episodes narrated out of chronological order? If so, were you puzzled? Annoyed? On reflection, does the arrangement of episodes seem effective? Why or why not? Are certain situations repeated? If so, what do you make out of the repetitions?
✓ List the major structural units of the story. In a sentence or two summarize each unit that you have listed.
✓ In a sentence summarize the conclusion or resolution. Do you find it satisfactory? Why or why not?

Character

✓ List the traits of the main characters.

✓ Which character chiefly engages your interest? Why?

✓ What purposes do minor characters serve? Do you find some who by their similarities and differences help to define each other or help to define the major character? How else is a particular character defined— by his or her words, actions (including thoughts and emotions), dress, setting, narrative point of view? Do certain characters act differently in the same, or in a similar, situation?

✓ How does the author reveal character? By explicit authorial (editorial) comment, for instance, or by revelation through dialogue? Through depicted action? Through the actions of other characters? How are the author's methods especially suited to the whole of the story?

✓ Is the behaviour plausible—that is, are the characters well motivated?

✓ If a character changes, why and how does he or she change? (You may want to jot down each event that influences a change.) Or did you change your attitude toward a character not because the character changes but because you came to know the character better?

✓ Are the characters round or flat? Are they complex, or, on the other hand, highly typical (for instance, one-dimensional representatives of a social class or age)? Are you chiefly interested in a character's psychology, or does the character strike you as standing for something, such as honesty or the arrogance of power?

✓ How has the author caused you to sympathize with certain characters?

✓ How does your response—your sympathy or lack of sympathy—contribute to your judgment of the conflict?

Point of View

✓ Who tells the story? How much does the narrator know? Does the narrator strike you as reliable? What effect is gained by using this narrator?

✓ How does the point of view help shape the theme?

✓ Does the narrator's language help you to construct a picture of the narrator's character, class, attitude, strengths, and limitations? (Jot down some evidence, such as colloquial or—on the other hand—formal expressions, ironic comments, figures of speech.) How far can you trust the narrator? Why?

Setting

✓ Do you have a strong sense of the time and place? How and at what points in the story has the author conveyed this sense? If you do not strongly feel the setting, do you think the author should have made it more evident?

✓ What is the relation of the setting to the plot and the characters? (For instance, do houses or rooms or their furnishings say something about their residents? Is the landscape important?) Would anything be lost if the descriptions of the setting were deleted from the story or if the setting were changed?

Symbolism

✓ Do certain characters seem to you to stand for something in addition to themselves? Does the setting have an extra dimension?

✓ Do certain actions in the story—for instance entering a forest at night, or shutting a door, or turning off a light—seem symbolic? If so, symbolic of what?

✓ If you do believe that the story has symbolic elements, do you think they are adequately integrated within the story, or do they strike you as being too obviously stuck in?

Style

✓ How would you characterize the style? Simple? Understated? Figurative? Or what?

✓ How has the point of view shaped or determined the style?

✓ Do you think that the style is consistent? If it isn't—for instance, if there are shifts from simple sentences to highly complex ones—what do you make of the shifts?

Theme

✓ Do certain passages—the title, some of the dialogue, or some of the description, the names of certain characters—seem to you to point especially toward the theme? Do you find certain repetitions of words or pairs of incidents highly suggestive and helpful in directing your thoughts toward stating a theme? Flannery O'Connor, in *Mystery and Manners,* says, "In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the action of the story itself, and when that happens, they become symbolic in the way they work." Does this story work that way?

✓ Is the meaning of the story embodied in the whole story, or does it seem stuck in, for example in certain passages of editorializing?

✓ Suppose someone asked you to state the point—the theme—of the story. Could you? Is there only one theme, or a number of (related) themes? Would you say that the theme of a particular story reinforces values you hold, or does it to some degree challenge them? (It is sometimes said that the best writers are subversive, forcing readers to see something that they do not want to see.)

11

Writing about Drama

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

➤ respond to a play as drama, or theatre, or as both;

➤ differentiate tragedy and comedy;

➤ understand conventional terms used to analyze tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy;

➤ write about theme, plot, characterization, motivation, costume, gesture, and setting in drama; and

➤ recognize some theatrical conventions.

The essays you write about plays will be similar in many respects to analytic essays about fiction. You may, however, be asked to treat performance aspects of the play as well as textual ones, if your class is reading drama as text-in-performance, as well as reading it as literature. (Contemporary critics differentiate *drama*, the literary text, from *theatre*, the play in performance.) Unless you are writing a review, however, you won't try to write about all aspects of the play; you'll choose some significant topic. For instance, if you are writing about Judith Thompson's *Lion in the Streets*, you might contrast the aspirations of Sue with those of Karen, or you might compare the sexual illusions of the mistress, Lily, with those of the challenged woman, Scarlett, or the victim, Sherry. Or you might examine the symbolism, perhaps limiting your essay to the "Lion" itself, but perhaps extending it to include other symbols, such as the telephone, the wheelchair, or the stick Isobel carries throughout the play. Or you might consider the religious symbolism. Similarly, if you are writing an analysis, you might decide to study the construction of one scene of a play, or even the construction of the entire play. In Thompson's play, for example, you might explore the way the numerous short scenes form recurring patterns that lead to the final resolution.

The list of questions at the end of the chapter may help you find a topic for the particular play you choose.

A SAMPLE ESSAY

The following student essay discusses *Lion in the Streets.* While in a second-year course, Christopher Walker examined how Thompson explores evil by the use of language and a kind of MAGIC REALISM, using illustrations from the central play and also from Thompson's earlier play, *White Biting Dog.* He mentions various characters, but, since his concern is with the use of language and states of consciousness, he does not (for instance) examine any of the characters in detail. An essay might well be devoted to examining (for example) Thompson's assertion that "I don't want to write industrial plays that play to psychology classes," but Walker is careful not to allow his essay to become a character study or simply a discussion of states of mind: Instead, he turns the evidence to illustrate how Thompson captures an audience and makes it consider the evil in society.

Preliminary Notes

After deciding to write on evil in the play, with an eye toward seeing how the author makes her spectators look at the issue, Walker reread *Lion in the Streets,* jotted down some notes, and then typed them. On rereading the typed notes, he added a few observations in handwriting.

```
1. begins by making the audience confront its own
   knowledge of evil in society
   a. does this in both plays
2. Thompson captures the audience
   a. uses very poetic language
   b. uses high speed action--nothing seems quite real
   c. moves audience into a dream-world--Magic Realism
3. language is the key--attacks the mind of the auditor
   a. language shows characters' need to escape evil and
      get "grace"
4. language is very musical
   a. central Canadian dialect; very naturalistic speech
   b. has effect of drawing in audience--hypnotizes
      listeners
   c. What is it about this musical
      language that hooks the audience?
5. Collective unconscious
   a. dream-like state of both plays seems to be action
      from the coll. uncon.
6. What is revealed when we dream with Thompson?
   a. her/our inner child
   b. plays show contrast--innocence of inner child and
      evil of adult society
```

- good question to ask

7. Real problem in society is that we — *deny capacity for evil*
   deny this contrast
   a. examples from the plays of people who can be mean
      to others
8. Solution is for everyone to admit their potential
   evil, find their child's good side
   a. Cape and his mother face death;
      may learn to love   *even her own death* ⟶
   b. Isobel overcomes hatred of her killer and forgives
      --achieves grace
   Forgives audience.
9. Thompson shows that language, dreams can lead
   to grace

Here's the essay written from these notes:

Title is focused; it
announces topic
and thesis.

                    A Reality in Dreams:
                 Thompson's Moral Quest
        In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in
     Brick, Judith Thompson reveals the purpose of
     her plays' focus on evil:

Opening
paragraph closes
in on thesis.

                    Well, because it's theatrical, it's
                    what's true, and it's like the
                    purpose the church used to serve:
                    for an hour a week we would confront
                    our spirits [. . .]. In the theatre
                    I think what we must do is confront
                    the truth, confront the emotional
                    truth of our lives, which is mixed
                    in the swamp of minutiae, everyday
                    minutiae. (37)

                    Such a mix occurs in Thompson's White

Organization:
starts with first
element of thesis.

     Biting Dog and Lion in the Streets. Thompson
     captures the audience with poetic dialogue and
     erratic action that invades the unconscious.
     Once inside the world she creates, the
     theatregoer cannot escape her moral attack on
     the nature of society, and her belief that

grace, the freedom of the spirit, is what must
be achieved to rid ourselves of evil.

Highly poetic language is what captures
the unconscious of the spectators. Kathy
Chung, in a review of Lion in the Streets,
Brief but effective describes Thompson's dialogue as a place where
quotations. "her characters seem to lose the division
between a private and public self" (132).
Chung pinpoints Thompson's ability to show a
character's private need to achieve grace and
the emotions and thoughts that go along with
that need. This need for grace is at the
centre of the conflict in a scene in Lion in
the Streets when Christine, a reporter,
interviews Scarlett, a cerebral palsy patient,
and exploits her. Scarlett condemns
Christine; Christine physically attacks her
and says, "The way you, you, you talked to me
like that. Like, like, like you belong. In
the world. As if you belong. Where did you
get that feeling? I want it. I need it"
(Lion 49).

Reduces focus to   Thompson's language is also very musical.
musical language. The central Canadian dialect, combined with an
acute sense of the rhythms of language creates
hypnotic speech in her plays. A disclaimer at
the beginning of White Biting Dog illustrates
Thompson's commitment to this kind of
dialogue: "Because of the extreme and
deliberate musicality of this play, any
attempts to go against the textual rhythms
[. . .] are disastrous" (ii). Interviews
reveal the music in Thompson's own speech:
"It's acknowledging that, yes, it's a jungle
out there, there's a war, but we have our
wonderful spirits and great strength, and yes,
we have the Force [. . .]" (qtd. in Wachtel
41). So, what is it about the exposure of the

Rhetorical
question.

private self in a musical language that seizes the person experiencing Judith Thompson?

"We do share a collective unconscious and we have as much in common with [. . .] the so-called deranged fellow [. . .] as you and I have with each other," Thompson tells Wachtel (40). She captures this collective unconscious and burdens it with moral questions in the dream states of her plays. The world of White Biting Dog for example, consists of such nightmarish things as Glidden covering his stomach in peat moss, the dead dogs being kept in the deep-freeze for years, a talking dog, and action that is in constant, incongruous flux. Lion in the Streets is even more dream-based. Rodney, a gay businessman, acts out an imagined confrontation with his boyhood lover; he kills this man--and the audience witnesses it--but it is just a daydream. Where White Biting Dog is dream-like in dialogue and

Evidence from
both plays
supports thesis.

atmosphere, Lion in the Streets makes the characters' dreams part of the play's reality; reality and dream often get blurred in our own dreams, and this is how Thompson taps into the collective unconscious. Just as a powerful dream can weigh on our minds for days, so do these plays. The difference is that Thompson's plays also have direct access to the conscious mind and thus they are more immediate and permanent than are dreams. She writes in a kind of magic realism.

Moves to next
thesis element.

Central to the conflicts in these two plays is the inner-child. "Children," says Thompson, "are a huge part of ourselves They're the beautiful, pure god in us [. . .] we try to beat it down and make it cower [. . .] [but] it takes over in a terrible way, too--the terrible tyrant it can be" (qtd. in Wachtel 40).

While Thompson recognizes how tyrannical the inner-child can be, she also says of her characters in Lion in the Streets: "All of them have something they find precious and beautiful" (qtd. in Wachtel 40). This ability to see the beauty in things contrasts with the tyrannical and selfish actions that dominate Thompson's work. The characters who are able to see the beauty, and are thus made better, purer, provide a target for the tyranny and thus show its horrible nature. Pony, in White Biting Dog, embodies this wondrous purity: "I was lying on my fold-out in my furnished bachelor on Albany and I got this UNRESISTIBLE urge to get up and go for a walk. And when urges like that come along, I listen to them so I did. I just walked where my feet took me" (White 11). This kind of freedom of self is part of being a child. Pony provides Cape, a character who embodies tyranny, with a means to expose his evil; he, in effect, uses up her goodness to save his own soul.

The essayist is thinking and commenting, not merely summarizing the plot.

This evil, found in Cape, is found also in a great many of Thompson's characters. There is something that makes this evil possible, something that Thompson calls "a pathological state of denial" in which we, "as a society, as a culture," are living: "Just having to walk past homeless people, having to--just deny, deny, deny" (qtd. in Wachtel 38). Thompson's characters exhibit the ability to deny compassion to others who are in pain, as do most people in the real world. It is this denial that allows Christine to exploit Scarlett's fantasy on the grounds that "I have a job, Scarlett, I have a child to support [. . .]" (Lion 48). The characters

Extends point to include other plays.

are so trapped in states of denial that they become pathological. Cape is so trapped that he cannot love; he cannot have any kind of a genuine mutual relationship with anyone. Thompson describes the kind of person Cape represents: "So these are people I find Horrifying because they can distance themselves from a person and you think they're laughing with you but actually they're watching you" (qtd. in Tomc 20).

Thompson condemns this tyranny and denial and offers a solution in what she calls "grace." In <u>White Biting Dog</u> grace is a starting point on a path towards resolution. Cape and his mother face the deaths of people who love them and, in their pain and sorrow, may themselves begin to find the ability to love.

Last part of thesis is introduced.

In <u>Lion in the Streets</u>, grace is the final resolution. When Isobel tells her murderer that she loves him, she receives grace, and, in turn, sends a message to the audience to seek such peace: "I take my life. I want you all to take your life. I want you all to have your life" (63). She is, in fact, telling people to escape and control their fears, their "lions." Thompson describes to Wachtel what this scene with Isobel means: "It's very hopeful [. . .]. It's the triumph of the spirit" (40). It is the freedom of the spirit.

Useful, thoughtful summary of thesis.

Judith Thompson has the ability to make a person come instantly into touch with the evil and the possible virtues of people. She sinks these ideas into the unconscious and the conscious mind through a dream-like atmosphere and the use of a poetic, mesmerizing language that is at once confusing and unavoidable. It

is in reaching the collective unconscious that her plays become so powerful. The inner-child, it would seem, is the rendezvous point of good and evil; its evil must be controlled and its purity set free. The progression from White Biting Dog to Lion in the Streets shows

Strong ending looks to a positive interpretation.

Thompson's growing ability to control atmosphere and language and to lead the audience to the idea of grace. The confusion within her plays gives way to an exciting and positive experience.

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TYPES OF PLAYS

Most of the world's great plays written before the twentieth century may be regarded as one of two kinds: TRAGEDY or COMEDY. Roughly speaking, tragedy dramatizes the conflict between the vitality of the single life and the laws or limits of life. The TRAGIC HERO reaches a height, going beyond the experience of others but at the cost of his or her life. Comedy dramatizes the vitality of the laws of social life. In comedy, the good life is seen to reside in the shedding of an individualism that isolates, in favour of a union with a genial and enlightened society. These points must be amplified a bit before we go on to the point that, of course, any important play does much more than can be put into such crude formulas.

Tragedy

Tragic heroes usually go beyond the standards to which reasonable people adhere; they do some fearful deed that ultimately destroys them. This deed

is often said to be an act of **HUBRIS**, a Greek word meaning something like "overweening pride." It may involve, for instance, violating a taboo, such as that against incest, or taking life. But if the hubristic act ultimately destroys the man or woman who performs it, it also shows that person (paradoxically) to be in some way more fully a living being—whether by heroic action or by capacity for enduring suffering—than the other characters in the play. Othello kills Desdemona, Lear gives away his crown and banishes his one loving daughter; but both of these men seem to live more fully than the other characters in the plays. For one thing, they experience a kind of anguish unknown to those who surround them and who outlive them. (If the hero does not die, he or she usually is left in some deathlike state, as is the blind Oedipus in *Oedipus the King.*)

In tragedy, we see humanity pushed by agony and grief to an extreme. This purgation of emotion is called **CATHARSIS** (purgation). After the tragic figure departs the stage, we are left in a world of smaller people. The closing lines of almost any of Shakespeare's tragedies may be used to illustrate the point. *King Lear,* for example, ends thus:

> The oldest hath bore the most: we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

What has just been said may be true of many tragedies, but it certainly is not true of all. You might consider whether the points just made are illustrated in your play. Is the hero guilty of hubris? Does the hero seem a greater person than the others in the play? An essay examining such questions probably requires not only a character sketch but also some comparison with other characters. Tragedy commonly involves irony of two sorts: unconsciously ironic deeds and unconsciously ironic speeches. Ironic deeds have some consequence more or less the reverse of what the doer intends.

Macbeth thinks that by killing Duncan he will gain happiness, but he finds that his deed brings him sleepless nights. Brutus thinks that by killing Caesar he will bring liberty to Rome, but he brings tyranny. In an unconsciously IRONIC SPEECH, the speaker's words mean one thing to him or her but something more significant to the audience, as do all of Oedipus' speeches. [1]

When Oedipus speaks of suffering, or taking on the sins of his people, we are aware—as he is not—that his fate is to do precisely that. Sophocles' use of ironic deeds and speeches is so pervasive, especially in *Oedipus the King,* that SOPHOCLEAN IRONY has become a critical term.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle named the moment when the deed backfires or has a reverse effect (such as Macbeth's ultimately tragic effort to gain happiness), as a **PERIPETEIA** or a **REVERSAL**.

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[1] **DRAMATIC IRONY** (ironic deeds or happenings, and unconsciously ironic speeches) must be distinguished from **VERBAL IRONY**, which is produced when the speaker is conscious that his or her words mean something different from what they say. In *Macbeth*, Lennox says: "The gracious Duncan / Was pitied of Macbeth. Marry, he was dead! / And the right valiant Banquo walked too late. / [. . .] / Men must not walk too late." He *says* nothing about Macbeth having killed Duncan and Banquo, but he *means* that Macbeth has killed them.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, by the way, has influenced all drama criticism in the West and most of the terms we use about tragedy come from this book. Two cautions are needed, however: First, Aristotle did not set out to "define" theatre, but to record what was happening in the Greek theatre of his day and, second, contemporary criticism of Aristotle's opinions in the *Poetics* and elsewhere is opening up the accepted definitions of theatre to new interpretations.

When a character comes to perceive what has happened (Macbeth: "I have lived long enough: my way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf"), he experiences what Aristotle termed an ANAGNORISIS, or **RECOGNITION**. Strictly speaking, for Aristotle, the recognition was a matter of literal identification: for example, that Oedipus was the son of a man he killed. In Macbeth, the recognition in this sense is that Macduff, "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped," is the man who fits the prophecy that Macbeth can be conquered only by someone not "of woman born."

In his analysis of drama, Aristotle says that the tragic HERO comes to grief through his HAMARTIA, a term sometimes translated as **TRAGIC FLAW** but perhaps better translated as TRAGIC ERROR. Thus, it is a great error for Othello to trust Iago and to strangle Desdemona, for Lear to give away his kingdom, and for Macbeth to decide to help fulfil the prophecies. If we hold to the translation "flaw," we begin to hunt for a fault in their characters; and we say, for instance, that Othello is gullible, Lear self-indulgent, or Macbeth ambitious. In doing this, we may overlook their grandeur or other nuances of character that help to form their doom. Perhaps that is one reason why classic tragedy is less often written today and often seems too uncomplicated in its treatment of character. Another may be that grand tragedy depends upon absolutes (good and evil; greed and selflessness) and many people today do not accept such absolutes, nor that a character is unfailingly drawn to one side of such a binary.

Writing about Tragedy

When writing about tragedy, probably the commonest essay topic is on the tragic hero. Too often the hero is judged mechanically: He or she must be noble, must have a flaw, must do a fearful deed, must recognize the flaw, must die. The previous paragraph cautions you to look beyond such a formula. An essay that seeks to determine whether a character is a tragic character ought at its outset to make clear its conception of tragedy and the degree of rigidity, or flexibility, with which it will interpret some or all of its categories. For example, it may indicate that although nobility is a *sine qua non*, nobility is not equivalent to high rank. Any figure with certain mental or spiritual characteristics may, in such a view, be an acceptable TRAGIC HERO.

An essay closely related to the sort we have been talking about measures a character by some well-known theory of tragedy. For example, one can measure Sgt. Walsh, in Sharon Pollock's *Walsh*, against Aristotle's remarks on tragedy. The organization of such an essay is usually not a problem: Isolate the relevant aspects of the theoretical statement, and then examine the character to see if, point by point, he illustrates them. But remember that even if Walsh fulfils Aristotle's idea of a tragic figure, you need not accept

him as tragic; conversely, if he does not fulfil Aristotle's idea, you need not deny him tragic status. Aristotle may be wrong.

Comedy

Although a comedy ought to be amusing, the plays that are called comedies are not just collections of jokes. Rather, they are works that are entertaining throughout and that end happily, usually by returning the world of the play to the set of accepted norms that govern the society of the spectators. In this way, comedy serves to reiterate the values of the society even though it begins by apparently toppling them.

At the beginning of a comedy we find banished dukes, unhappy lovers, crabby parents, jealous husbands, and harsh laws; but at the end we usually have a unified and genial society, often symbolized by a dance or marriage feast to which everyone, or almost everyone, is invited. Early in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* for instance, we meet quarrelling young lovers and a father who demands that his daughter either marry a man she does not love or enter a convent. Such is the Athenian law. At the end of the play the lovers are properly matched, and the social classes are reinstated to everyone's satisfaction.

Speaking broadly, most comedies fall into one of two classes: SATIRIC COMEDY and ROMANTIC COMEDY. In satiric comedy the emphasis is on the obstructionists—the irate fathers, hard-headed businessmen, and other members of the Establishment who at the beginning of the play seem to hold all the cards, preventing joy from reigning. They are held up to ridicule because they are repressive monomaniacs enslaved to themselves, acting mechanistically instead of responding to the ups and downs of life. The outwitting of these obstructionists, usually by the younger generation, often provides the resolution of the plot. Jonson, Molière, and Shaw are in this tradition; their comedy, according to an ancient Roman formula, "chastens morals with ridicule"; that is, it reforms folly or vice by laughing at it. In romantic comedy (one thinks of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It,* and *Twelfth Night*) the emphasis is on a pair or pairs of delightful people who engage our sympathies as they run their obstacle race to the altar. Obstructionists are found here too, but the emphasis is on festivity.

Writing about Comedy

Essays on comedy often examine the nature of the humour. Why is an irate father, in this context, funny? Or why is a young lover, again in this context, funny? Commonly, one will find that at least some of the humour is in the disproportionate nature of their activities (they get terribly excited) and in their inflexibility. The following is a skeleton of a possible essay on why Jaques in *As You Like It* is amusing:

> Jaques is insistently melancholy. In the Eden-like Forest of Arden, he sees only the dark side of things.
>
> His monomania, however, is harmless to himself and to others; because it causes us no pain, it may entertain us.

Indeed, we begin to look forward to his melancholy speeches. We delight in hearing him fulfill our expectations by wittily finding gloom where others find mirth.

We are delighted, too, to learn that this chastiser of others has in fact been guilty of the sort of behavior he chastises.

At the end of the play, when four couples are wed, the inflexible Jaques insists on standing apart from the general rejoicing.

Such might be the gist of an essay. It needs to be supported with details, and it can be enriched, for example, by a comparison between Jaques's sort of jesting and Touchstone's; but it is at least a promising draft of an outline.

In writing about comedy, you may be concerned with the function of one scene or character, but whatever your topic, you may find it helpful to begin by trying to decide whether the play is primarily romantic or primarily satiric (or something else). One way of getting at this is to ask yourself to what degree you sympathize with the characters. Do you laugh *with* them, sympathetically, or do you laugh *at* them, regarding them as at least somewhat contemptible?

Tragicomedy

The term **TRAGICOMEDY** has been used to denote (1) plays that seem tragic until the happy ending, (2) plays that combine tragic and comic scenes, and (3) plays that combine the anguish of tragedy with the improbable situations and unheroic characters and funny dialogue of comedy. This last sort of TRAGICOMEDY (also called BLACK COMEDY) has attracted most of the best dramatists of our time—for example, Beckett, Pinter, and Ionesco. They are the dramatists of the **ABSURD** in two senses: the irrational and the ridiculous. These writers differ from one another and from play to play, but they all are preoccupied with the loneliness of people in a world without the certainties afforded by God or by optimistic rationalism. This loneliness is heightened by a sense of impotence derived partly from an awareness of our inability to communicate in a society that has made language meaningless, and partly from an awareness of the precariousness of our existence.

The result of developments in thought by people such as Darwin, Marx, and Freud seems to be that a "tragic sense" in the twentieth century commonly meant a despairing or deeply uncertain view, something very different from what it meant in Greece and in Elizabethan England. This uncertainty is not merely about the cosmos or even about character or identity. In 1888, in the preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg called attention to the new sense of the instability of character:

> I have made the people in my play fairly "characterless." The middle-class conception of a fixed character was transferred to the stage, where the middle class has always ruled. A character there came to mean an actor who was always one and the same, always drunk, always comic or always melancholy, and who needed to be characterized only by some physical defect such as a club foot, a wooden leg, or a red nose, or by the repetition of some [. . .] phrase [. . .]. Since the persons in my play are

> modern characters, living in a transitional era more hurried and hysterical than the previous one at least, I have depicted them as more unstable, as torn and divided, a mixture of the old and the new.

Along with a sense of characterlessness, the drama (and the underground film and novel) developed a sense of plotlessness or, at least, rejected the fundamental untruthfulness of the traditional plot that moved by cause and effect. Ionesco, for example, has said that a play should be able to stop at any point; it ends only because—as in life—the audience at last has to go home to bed. Moreover, Ionesco has allowed directors to make heavy cuts, and he has suggested that endings other than those he wrote are possibilities. Many **POSTMODERN** plays allow provisional interpretations or alternate endings.

The "tragic sense" of the twentieth century seems to be in flux again as we move into a new century. Postmodern plays (and other texts) mix comedy and tragedy even more casually than is done in TRAGICOMEDY, but not always with the same Modernist despair. Comedies are often sociological statements that highlight conditions some might call tragic; tragedies present serious dilemmas but often, today, poke fun at our reaction to what seems tragic. A kind of emptiness, often accompanied by violence, empties out many plays of any direct statement you could call either tragic or comic.

Every play is different from every other play; each is a unique and detailed statement, and the foregoing paragraphs give only the broadest outlines. The analyst's job is to try to study the differences, as well as the similarities, in an effort (in Henry James's words) "to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticized thing and make it one's own."

ASPECTS OF DRAMA

Theme

If we have perceived the work properly, we ought to be able to formulate its THEME, its underlying idea, its moral attitudes, its view of life. Some critics, it is true, have argued that the concept of theme is meaningless. They hold that *Macbeth,* for example, gives us only an extremely detailed history of one imaginary man. In this view, *Macbeth* says nothing to you or me; it only says what happened to some imaginary man. Even *Julius Caesar* says nothing about the historical Julius Caesar or about the nature of Roman politics. On this we can agree; no one would offer Shakespeare's play as evidence of what the historical Caesar said or did. But surely the view that the concept of theme is meaningless and that a work tells us only about imaginary creatures is a desperate one. We *can* say that we see in *Julius Caesar* the fall of power or (if we are thinking of Brutus) the vulnerability of idealism.

We must, however, avoid the danger of equating the play with the theme that we sense underlies it. If, for example, we say that *Rhinoceros* is "an attack on collective hysteria and the epidemics that lurk beneath the surface of reason" (as Ionesco himself said of his play), we do not believe that our

statement of the theme is the equivalent of the play itself. We recognize that the play presents the theme with such detail that our statement is only a wedge to help us enter into the play, so that we may more fully appropriate it. And we realize that more than one theme may be found in most plays. And we realize that our interpretation of theme (as well as the author's) is subject to those factors that have moulded us within a particular society and that allow us to see in certain ways.

Some critics (influenced by Aristotle's statement that a drama is an imitation of an action) use *action* in a sense equivalent to theme. In this sense, the action is the underlying happening—the inner happening. So, for example, the action illuminates "the enlightenment of someone" or "the coming of unhappiness" or "the finding of the self by self-surrender." One might say that the theme of *Macbeth*, for example, is embodied in some words that Macbeth himself utters: "Blood will have blood." Of course, this is not to say that these words and no other words embody the theme or the action. Critics such as Francis Fergusson, who are influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics,* assume that the dramatist conceives of an action and then imitates it or sets it forth by means of first a plot and characters and then by means of language, GESTURE, and perhaps spectacle and music. When the Greek comic dramatist Menander told a friend he had finished his play and now had only to write it, he must have meant that he had the action or the theme firmly in mind and had worked out the plot and the requisite characters. All that remained was to set down the words.

Plot and Meaning

PLOT is variously defined sometimes as equivalent to "story" (in this sense a synopsis of *Romeo and Juliet* has the same plot as *Romeo and Juliet*) but more often, and more usefully, as the dramatist's particular arrangement of the story. In Chapter 10, we introduced the formalist terms for these two different ways of relating the story. In drama, the distinction is particularly important since the arrangement of the story (the *sjuzet*) is often quite out of sequence, quite "theatrically" designed, and the audience must extract the set of events (the *fabula*) from what is performed before it. The spectators may or may not be aware that they are creating this *fabula* in relation to their own ways of knowing who they are and the PERFORMATIVITY by which they construct themselves. This sort of analysis, which is now very common in drama criticism, explores the SPECTATORIAL EXPERIENCE, the interaction between watching and participating, both off-stage as well as on. (An extreme example is the carnival, where, as David Edgar noted in 1988, the spectator need only step off the pavement to become part of the spectacle. The same experience is always true in theatre, though it is less physical in a proscenium auditorium. It is concerned with the roles of subject and object and interrogates the role of the viewer—who owns the GAZE—in creating the object(s) seen on stage.) The question of whether a play is simply an aesthetic experience or always tells a story is currently under discussion among critics who argue in both directions. Speaking of dance, Janet Wolff says that the spectators do not simply enjoy an aesthetic spectacle,

for the true experience of art involves the understanding of meaning. Indeed this is not merely a precept to be followed, but necessarily true since perception itself always includes meaning.

—Janet Wolff, *Hermeneutic Philosophy and the Sociology of Art*
(London, 1975) 109.

This seems to be very true in drama. Consider, for example, the opening scene of Thompson's *Lion in the Streets.* Isobel begins with important exposition, but she also tells us that what we are viewing is a "pickshur." Her dialect establishes character, but it also tells the audience what to expect. As she says, "You know me very hard." This diction error (she means "you know me very well," of course) not only tells us about her command of English— part of plot and characterization—but warns that the action we are about to see is going to be hard, rough. It is also going to make us "know" her in a way we don't yet. Isobel tells the viewers not to be afraid, which reminds us again that we are watching a play and, at the same time, foreshadows harsh upcoming scenes that might well bother us. Each viewer's personal reaction to children, to new immigrants, to the language, and to the theatre itself— whether one wants to be entertained in a fantasy world or to participate in an intellectual debate that one knows to be an artistic contrivance—conditions how the viewer responds to Isobel's speech. Even the degree of familiarity with theatre convention (like the appearance of a ghost, such as Hamlet's Father, in Act 1) governs how a viewer "reads" Isobel's speech. A play like this, which is METADRAMATIC, destroys plot on one hand by referring to itself *as a play,* but on the other hand helps the audience to construct the plot on a deeper level, by including the viewer's own perceptions and sense of identity. It is a good example of how PLOT and MEANING are interwoven.

Handbooks on the drama often suggest that a plot (arrangement of happenings) should have a RISING ACTION, a CLIMAX, and a FALLING ACTION. This sort of plot may be diagrammed as a pyramid: The tension rises through complications or crises to a climax, at which point the climax is the apex, and the tension allegedly slackens as we witness the DÉNOUEMENT (unknotting). (This is Freytag's Pyramid, discussed in Chapter 10.) Many playwrights have used a structure like this. No law, however, demands such a structure, and a hunt for the pyramid usually causes the hunter to overlook all the crises but the middle one. William Butler Yeats once suggestively diagrammed a good plot not as a pyramid but as a line moving diagonally upward, punctuated by several crises. The writer can also use FLASHBACK. It has been said that in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* "nothing happens, twice." Perhaps it is sufficient to say that a good plot has its moments of *tension* followed by *release,* but that the location of these will vary with the play. They are the product of conflict, but not all conflict produces tension; there is conflict but little tension in a hockey game when the home team is ahead 10–0, two minutes remain on the clock, and the visiting team has four men in the penalty box.

Regardless of how a plot is diagrammed, the EXPOSITION is the part that tells the audience what it has to know about the past, the ANTECEDENT ACTION. The mother in *Sticks and Stones* (part of James Reaney's trilogy, *The Donnellys*)

who tells her son that those who wouldn't join a secret society in Ireland in 1844 are still being persecuted in Ontario in 1867 is giving the audience the exposition needed to follow this historical plot. The exposition in Shakespeare's *Tempest* is almost ruthlessly direct: Prospero tells his naïve daughter, "I should inform thee farther," and for about 150 lines he proceeds to tell her why she is on an almost uninhabited island. The Elizabethans (and the Greeks) sometimes tossed out all pretence at dialogue and began with a PROLOGUE, like the one spoken by the Chorus at the opening of *Romeo and Juliet:*

> Two households, both alike in dignity
> > In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
> From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
> > Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
> From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
> > A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life [. . .].

Sharon Pollock importantly uses a prologue in *Walsh,* as does George F. Walker in *Zastrozzi,* but, today, the exposition is often revealed in small scenes or remarks that extend far into the play.

Exposition can do much more than simply inform the audience about events. It can give us an understanding of the characters who themselves are talking about other characters, it can evoke a MOOD, and it can generate tension. When we summarize the opening act and treat it as "mere exposition," we are probably losing what is, in fact, dramatic in it. The first scene of *Walsh,* for example, does not exist merely to tell the audience certain facts; it rounds out the character of Sgt. Walsh and it prefigures his moral decline.

In fact, exposition usually includes FORESHADOWING of this kind. Details given in the exposition, which we may at first take as mere background, often turn out to be highly relevant to later developments. For instance, in the very short first scene of *Macbeth* the Witches introduce the name of Macbeth, but in such phrases as "fair is foul" and "when the battle's lost and won" they also give glimpses of what will happen. Similarly, during the exposition in the second scene we learn that Macbeth has loyally defeated Cawdor, who betrayed King Duncan, and Macbeth has been given Cawdor's title. Later we will find that, like Cawdor, Macbeth betrays Duncan; that is, in giving us the background about Cawdor, the exposition is also telling us something about what will happen to Macbeth—though we don't realize it when we first see or read the play.

Writing about Plot

In writing about an aspect of plot, you may want to consider one of the following topics:

1. Is the plot improbable? If so, is the play weaker or stronger?
2. Does a scene that might at first glance seem unimportant or even irrelevant serve an important function?
3. If certain actions that could be shown onstage take place *offstage,* what is the reason? In *Macbeth,* for instance, why do you suppose the murder

of Duncan takes place offstage, whereas Banquo and Macduff's family are murdered onstage? Why might Shakespeare have preferred not to show us the murder of Duncan? What has he gained? (A good way to approach this sort of question is to think of what your own reaction would be if the action were shown onstage.)

4. If the play has several conflicts—for example, between pairs of lovers or between parents and their children and also between the parents themselves—how are these conflicts related? Are they parallel? Or contrasting?

5. Does the arrangement of scenes have a structure? For instance, do the scenes depict a rise and then a fall? Where is the actual climax? Is there more than one?

6. Does the plot seem satisfactorily concluded? Any loose threads? If so, is the apparent lack of a complete resolution a weakness or strength in the play?

7. Does the play exhibit METADRAMATIC elements? That is, does it refer to itself, or make obvious how its effects work, or play with illusion, showing that it is only make-believe? If so, does this rupture of illusion help the point of the play?

An analysis of plot, then, will consider the arrangement of the episodes and the effect of juxtapositions, as well as the overall story. A useful essay may be written on the function of one scene. Such an essay may point out, for example, that the long, comparatively slow scene (4.3) in *Macbeth*, in which Malcolm, Macduff, an English doctor, and Ross converse near the palace of the King of England, is not so much a leisurely digression as may at first be thought. After reading it closely, you may decide that the scene has several functions. For example, it serves to indicate the following:

1. The forces that will eventually overthrow Macbeth are gathering.
2. Even good men must tell lies during Macbeth's reign.
3. Macbeth has the vile qualities that the virtuous Malcolm pretends to have.
4. Macbeth has failed—as the King of England has not—to be a source of health for the realm.

Once you have come to such conclusions (probably by means of brainstorming and listing), the construction of an essay on the function of a scene is usually fairly simple: An introductory paragraph announces the general topic and thesis—an apparently unnecessary scene will be shown to be functional—and the rest of the essay demonstrates the functions, usually in climactic order if some of the functions are more important than others.

How might you organize such an essay? If you think all of the functions are equally important, perhaps you will organize the material from the most obvious to the least obvious, thereby keeping the reader's attention to the end. If, on the other hand, you believe that although justifications for the scene can be imagined, the scene is nevertheless unsuccessful, say so; announce your view early, consider the alleged functions one by one, and explain your reasons for finding them unconvincing as you take up each point.

Sometimes an analysis of the plot will examine the relationships between the several stories in a play: A *Midsummer Night's Dream* has supernatural lovers, mature royal lovers, young Athenian lovers, a bumpkin who briefly becomes the lover of the fairy queen, and a play (put on by buffoons) about legendary lovers. How these are held together and how they help define each other and the total play are matters that concern anyone looking at the plot. Richard Moulton suggested in 1893 that Shakespeare's subplots "have the effect of assisting the main stories, smoothing away their difficulties and making their prominent points yet more prominent." Moulton demonstrates his thesis at some length, but a very brief extract from his discussion of the Jessica–Lorenzo story in *The Merchant of Venice* may be enough to suggest the method. The main story concerns Shylock and his rivals, Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia. Shylock's daughter, Jessica, is not needed for the narrative purpose of the main story. Why, then, did Shakespeare include her? (**Remember**: When something puzzles you, you have an essay topic at hand.) Here is part of Moulton's answer:

> A Shylock painted without a tender side at all would be repulsive [. . .] and yet it appears how this tenderness has grown hard and rotten with the general debasement of his soul by avarice, until, in his ravings over his loss, his ducats and his daughter are ranked as equally dear.
>
> I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!
>
> For all this we feel that he is hardly used in losing her. Paternal feeling may take a gross form, but it is paternal feeling none the less, and cannot be denied our sympathy; bereavement is a common ground upon which not only high and low, but even the pure and the outcast, are drawn together. Thus Jessica at home makes us hate Shylock; with Jessica lost we cannot help pitying him.
>
> —*Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (Oxford, 1893) 79.

Characterization and Motivation

CHARACTERIZATION, or personality, is defined most obviously in drama (as in fiction), by what the characters do (a stage direction tells us that "Hedda paces up and down, clenching her fists"), by what they say (she asks her husband to draw the curtains), by what others say about them, and by the setting in which they move. But in theatre, character is also established by a range of gestures, by body positions, by voice inflection, costume, and so on. In fact, it is dangerous to rely on STAGE DIRECTIONS since every performance of a play is restaged and may or may not resemble other productions or the printed text. Do not read stage directions as if they were descriptions in fiction: They are merely guidelines in production. In current performance analysis, critics are very wary indeed of stage directions. If you are writing about a play you haven't seen, you might try to watch a video or film version in order to determine how the characters look and act (remembering that these will use the conventions of each medium and will not exactly resemble a stage production). If you can't see a performance, you must use the stage directions,

but also try to bring the play to life in your mind—and if your staging does not obey the directions, use your own version, but defend it.

The characters are also defined in part by other characters whom they resemble to some degree. Remember that when characters appear like other characters or types they are often ICONIC or SYMBOLIC. You will want to determine whether they are "real" people or simply fulfilling established roles. In his wordless play, *The Overcoat*, Morris Panych picks up types from Gogol's short story, but invests some with subtle personal traits, making them "real" persons in the fiction who act with and against representative types who are somehow "unreal" in the fiction. Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras have each lost their fathers—they are all examples of a type of young man—but Hamlet spares the praying King Claudius, whereas Laertes, seeking vengeance on Hamlet for murdering Laertes' father, says he would cut Hamlet's throat in church; Hamlet meditates about the nature of action, but Fortinbras leads the Norwegians in a military campaign and ultimately acquires Denmark. Here is Kenneth Muir commenting briefly on the way Laertes helps us to see Hamlet more precisely. (Notice how Muir first offers a generalization, then supports it with details, and finally, drawing a conclusion from the details he has just presented, offers an even more important generalization that effectively closes his paragraph.)

> In spite of Hamlet's description of him as "a very noble youth," there is a coarseness of fibre in Laertes which is revealed throughout the play. He has the stock responses of a man of his time and position. He gives his sister copy-book advice; he [leaves her to go] to Paris [. . .] and after his father's death and again at his sister's grave he shows by the ostentation and "bravery of his grief" that he pretends more than he really feels. He has no difficulty in raising a successful rebellion against Claudius, which suggests that the more popular prince could have done the same. Laertes, indeed, acts more or less in the way that many critics profess to think Hamlet ought to act; and his function in the play is to show precisely the opposite. Although Hamlet himself may envy Laertes' capacity for ruthless action we ought surely to prefer Hamlet's craven scruples.

> —*Shakespeare: The Great Tragedies* (London, 1961) 12–13.

Muir has not exhausted the topic in this paragraph. If you are familiar with *Hamlet*, you may want to think about writing an entire essay comparing Hamlet with Laertes.

Other plays provide examples of such FOILS or characters who set one another off. Macbeth and Banquo both hear prophecies, but they act and react differently; Sue and Lily are both in love with Bill in *Lion in the Streets*, but their responses to him are very different. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps Didi and Gogo are contrasted with Pozzo and his slave Lucky, the former two suggesting (roughly) the contemplative life, the latter two the practical or active (and, it turns out, mistaken) life.

Any analysis of a character, then, will probably have to take into account the other characters that help show what he or she is, that help set forth his or her MOTIVATION (grounds for action, inner drives, goals). In Ibsen's *Doll's House*, Dr. Rank plays a part in helping define Nora:

This is not Rank's play, it is Nora's. Rank is a minor character—but he plays a vital dramatic role. His function is to act as the physical embodiment, visible on the stage, of Nora's moral situation as she sees it. Nora is almost hysterical with terror at the thought of her situation—almost, but it is part of her character that with great heroism she keeps her fears secret to herself; and it is because of her reticence that Rank is dramatically necessary, to symbolize the horror she will not talk about. Nora feels, and we feel, the full awfulness of Rank's illness, and she transfers to herself the same feeling about the moral corruption which she imagines herself to carry. Nora sees herself, and we see her seeing herself (with our judgment), as suffering from a moral disease as mortal, as irremediable as Rank's disease, a disease that creeps on to a fatal climax. This is the foe that Nora is fighting so courageously.

> —John Northam, "Ibsen's Search for the Hero," *Ibsen*, ed. Rolf Fjelde (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1965) 103.

Costumes, Gestures, and Settings

Characters on stage physically and thematically "point" to other characters, and that helps build character (and theme). Critics talk about DEIXIS, a Greek word with the same root as "index finger," to discuss this "pointing out" or "pointing to." Certain gaits or costumes or postures, then, INDEX characters (the spastic movements of the paraplegic characters in David Freeman's *Creeps;* Hamlet's "inky cloak," or the corset and garter belt of the prostitute in Brad Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love;* the cocky stance of the "greasy, seedy and potentially violent" ghost, Screamin' John McGee, in John Gray's *Rock and Roll*). The text of a play includes the costumes that the characters wear, the GESTURES that the characters make, and the SETTINGS in which the characters move. As Ezra Pound says, "The medium of drama is not words, but persons moving about on a stage using words." SEMIOTIC criticism is especially interested in analyzing the words and their relationship to the non-verbal SIGNS.

Let's begin with COSTUME, specifically with Nora Helmer's changes of costume in Ibsen's *A Doll's House.* In the first act, Nora wears ordinary clothing, but in the middle of the second act she puts on "a long, many-coloured shawl" when she frantically rehearses her tarantella. The shawl is supposed to be appropriate to the Italian dance, but surely its multitude of colours also helps express Nora's conflicting emotions, her near hysteria, expressed, too, in the fact that "her hair comes loose and falls down over her shoulders," but "she doesn't notice." The shawl and her dishevelled hair, then, *speak* to us as clearly as the dialogue does.

In the middle of the third act, after the party and just before the showdown, Nora appears in her "Italian costume," and her husband, Torvald, wears "evening dress" under an open black cloak. She is dressed for a masquerade (her whole life has been a masquerade, it turns out), and Torvald's formal suit and black cloak help express his stiffness and the blight that has forced her to present a false front throughout their years of marriage. A little later, after Nora sees that she never really has known her husband for the selfish creature he is, she leaves the stage, and when she returns she is "in an

everyday dress." The pretence is over. She is no longer Torvald's "doll." When she finally leaves the stage—leaving the house—she "wraps her shawl around her." This is not the "many-coloured shawl" she used in rehearsing the dance, but the "big, black shawl" she wears when she returns from the dance. The blackness of this shawl helps express the death of her old way of life; Nora is now aware that life is not child's play.

Ibsen did not invent the use of costumes as dramatic language; it goes back to the beginnings of drama, and one has only to think of Lear tearing off his clothing or of the fresh clothing in which Lear is garbed after his madness in order to see how eloquently costumes can speak. In Panych's *The Overcoat*, of course, the eponymous costume worn by The Man (who has almost no personality without it) entirely creates his character and finally takes on a stage life of its own—dancing around on its coat rack.

To this may be added the matter of disguises—for example, Edgar's disguise in *King Lear*—which are removed near the end of plays, when the truth is finally revealed and the characters can be fully themselves. In short, the removal of disguises *says* something. All the cross-dressing comedies of Shakespeare (such as *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*) rely for their comic resolution on this moment of costume disclosure.

GESTURES, too, are a part of the language of drama. Helmer "playfully pulls [Nora's] ear," showing his affection—and his domineering condescension; Nora claps her hands; Mrs. Linde (an old friend of Nora's) "tries to read but seems unable to concentrate," and so forth. All such gestures clearly and naturally convey states of mind. One of the most delightful and revealing gestures in Ibsen's play occurs when, in the third act, Helmer demonstrates to Mrs. Linde the ugliness of knitting ("Look here: arms pressed close to the sides") and the elegance of embroidering ("[. . .] with your right [hand] you move the needle— like this—in an easy, elongated arc"). None of his absurd remarks throughout the play is quite so revealing of his absurdity as this silly demonstration.

Some gestures or stage directions that imply gestures are a bit more complex. For example, when Nora "walks cautiously over to the door to the study and listens," this direction conveys Nora's fear that her husband may detect her foibles—or even her crime. We read this stage direction almost at the start of the play, when we do not yet know who is who or what is what, but we do know from this gesture alone that Nora is not at ease even in her own home. Similarly, when Nora "wildly" dances during her rehearsal in the second act, the action indicates the terrible agitation in her mind. One other, quieter example: In Act 3, when the dying Dr. Rank for the last time visits Nora in order to gain comfort, she lights his cigar, and a moment later Rank replies—these are his last words—"And thanks for the light." Thus, we not only hear words about a cigar, but we *see* an act of friendship, a flash of light in this oppressive household.

Gesture may be interpreted even more broadly: The mere fact that a character enters, leaves, or does not enter may be highly significant. John Russell Brown comments on the actions and the absence of certain words that in *Hamlet* convey the growing separation between King Claudius and his wife, Gertrude:

Their first appearance together with a public celebration of marriage is a large and simple visual effect, and Gertrude's close concern for her son suggests a simple, and perhaps unremarkable modification [. . .]. But Claudius enters without Gertrude for his "Prayer Scene" (3.3) and, for the first time, Gertrude enters without him for the Closet Scene (3.4) and is left alone, again for the first time, when Polonius hides behind the arras. Thereafter earlier accord is revalued by an increasing separation, often poignantly silent, and unexpected. When Claudius calls Gertrude to leave with him after Hamlet has dragged off Polonius' body, she makes no reply; twice more he urges her and she is still silent. But he does not remonstrate or question; rather he speaks of his own immediate concerns and, far from supporting her with assurances, becomes more aware of his own fears:

> O, come away!
> My soul is full of discord and dismay.   (5.1.44–45)

Emotion has been so heightened that it is remarkable that they leave together without further words. The audience has been aware of a new distance between Gertrude and Claudius, of her immobility and silence, and of his self-concern, haste and insistence.

—*Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (New York, 1967) 139.

Sometimes the dramatist helps us interpret the gestures: Shaw and Michael Cook, for example, give notably full stage directions. Detailed stage directions, however, are rarely seen before the middle of the nineteenth century. **Remember:** Do not assume that stage directions will always be used in performance or that your mental performance is less valid than the ideal performance the notes suggest.

Settings have changed through theatre history. Drama of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for example, the plays of Ibsen or Chekhov) is often thought to be "realistic," but even a realistic playwright or stage designer selects his or her materials.

We should distinguish between REALISM and **NATURALISM**. In simple terms, realism refers to an issue or theme, and naturalism to the display of the inner workings of a real thing. Naturalistic sets, in the theatre, carefully reproduce the exact workings of real places—with running water in sinks and stoves that heat up and boil kettles. It is possible to present a realistic theme in a non-naturalistic setting (think of early *Star Trek* episodes), but a naturalistic setting will almost always present a drama with a realistic theme (think of French's four Mercer plays, in which family stress is played out in an exactly reproduced family home). Ibsen often created meticulous stage directions to recreate the heavy nineteenth-century drawing room with its heavy draperies and bulky furniture: such naturalistic settings help convey his vision of a bourgeois world that oppresses any individual who struggles to affirm other values.

Apparently naturalistic sets can, then, serve other dramatic and symbolic purposes. In the setting of *Hedda Gabler,* for example, Ibsen uses two suggestive details as more than mere background: Early in the play Hedda is distressed by the sunlight that shines through the opened French doors, a

detail that we later see helps reveal her fear of the processes of nature. More evident and more pervasive is her tendency, when she cannot cope with her present situation, to move to the inner room, at the rear of the stage, in which hangs a picture of her late father. In theatre, non-verbal devices are every bit as important as verbal ones or the figures and TROPES of fiction and poetry. Here is Ibsen on such theatrical devices:

> I can do quite a lot by manipulating the prosaic details of my plays so that they become theatrical metaphors and come to mean more than what they are; I have used costume in this way, lighting, scenery, landscape, weather; I have used trivial every-day things like inky fingers and candles; and I have used living figures as symbols of spiritual forces that act upon the hero. Perhaps these things could be brought into the context of a modern realistic play to help me to portray the modern hero and the tragic conflict which I now understand so well.

> —Qtd. in John Northam. "Ibsen's Search for the Hero." *Ibsen,* ed. Rolf Fjelde (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1965) 99.

Twentieth-century dramatists are often explicit about the symbolic qualities of the setting. Here is an example from Michael Cook's *Jacob's Wake.* Only a part of the long initial stage direction is given here.

> The play can be staged in a variety of ways. The most obvious representation is one of total realism [. . .] An acceptable alternative would be a stark, skeletonized set. The levels would have to remain essentially the same, but a structure as white as bone [. . .] [would be needed, with] only the ribs poking towards an empty sky [. . .] [to] free the director for an existential interpretation of the play (9).

A second example is part of Bryan MacDonald's description of the destruction of the set in the final moments of *Whale Riding Weather.* MacDonald so feels the nature of his one-room set to be symbolic that his directions throughout the play form a kind of poetic complement to the dialogue:

> Furniture slides.
> The pen collapses.
> The plaster on the walls
> begins to crack.
> The lights fade into lapis blue
> And emerald green: flashes
> fragments of light
> like that created
> when too much pressure
> is applied to closed eyelids (126).

Material such as this cannot be skimmed. These directions and the settings they describe are symbols that help give the plays their meaning. An essay might examine in detail the degree to which the setting contributes to the theme of the play. Take, for example, Cook's setting. The two-level construction is the most important aspect, but an essayist might also point out the "stiff, formal photographs" of the Skipper and his wife—she, "sad and

beautiful"; he, with the "walrus moustache of the male"—which dominate the walls. Important, too, is the "illuminated prayer with a sorrowing Christ" which announces the family's Roman Catholic religion but also the notion of pain and sacrifice. An essayist might notice how poor the plain furniture is and yet how it captures a kind of plain, hard-working lifestyle. It would be important to mention Cook's insistence that there "should be a sense of confining, of a claustrophobic intensity"; it is this constriction that leads to the play's symbolic conclusion.

Because Shakespeare's plays were performed in broad daylight on a stage that (compared with Ibsen's, Cook's, and MacDonald's) made little use of scenery, he had to use language to manufacture his settings. But the attentive ear or the mind's eye responds to these settings, too. Early in *King Lear,* when Lear reigns, we hear that we are in a country "With plenteous rivers, and wide-skirted meads"; later, when Lear is stripped of his power, we are in a place where "For many miles about / There's scarce a bush." Radio drama was extremely popular in Canada until the arrival of television, and Canadian radio plays form an important part of our theatre history. These plays, of course, rely on language to create mental settings.

In any case, a director must provide some sort of setting—even if only a bare stage—and this setting will be part of the play. Thompson's *Lion in the Streets*, with which we began this chapter, uses a simultaneous set where a number of acting areas help the flow of the "daisy chain" structure and also suggest the dream-like quality of Isobel's quest for grace. The set helps to disrupt the audience's attempt to see a safe, fictional world. It forces the spectators to construct the world of Isobel's memories—all in a day and out of time—and, by doing so, forces them also to see something of their own lives in the types on stage. The ending, in which Isobel ascends to heaven, could have been shown in an elaborate effect. By calling, instead, for a simple symbolic gesture to signify Isobel's DISCOVERY of grace, Thompson requires the spectators to create for themselves a picture of forgiveness and a place of heavenly peace. She refuses to provide easy CLOSURE, making the audience take home the set—and the play—in their minds and replay it. In a review of a production, or an essay of performance analysis, you will almost surely want to pay some attention to the function of the setting.

CONVENTIONS

Artists and their audience have some tacit—even unconscious—agreements. When we watch a motion picture and see an image dissolve and then reappear, we understand that some time has passed. Such a device, unrealistic but widely accepted, is a CONVENTION. In the theatre, we sometimes see on the stage a room, realistic in all details except that it lacks a **FOURTH WALL** preventing our view. We do not regret the missing wall, and, indeed, we are scarcely aware that we have entered into an agreement to pretend that this strange room is an ordinary room with the usual number of walls. Sometimes the characters in a play speak verse, or rap, although outside the theatre no

human beings speak verse or rap for more than a few moments. Again we accept the device because it allows the author to make a play. In *Hamlet*, the characters are understood to be speaking Danish, in *Julius Caesar*, Latin, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Greek, yet they all speak English for our benefit. (This illusion is broken on purpose in bilingual plays, such as David Fennario's *Balconville* and Rick Salutin's *Les Canadiens*, in which characters are meant to be actually speaking English or French or both, and in Tomson Highway's and Drew Hayden Taylor's plays, in which characters speak Cree and Ojibway without translation.)

Two other conventions are especially common in older drama: the SOLILOQUY and the ASIDE. In the former, although a solitary character speaks his or her thoughts aloud, we do not judge him or her to be a lunatic; in the latter, a character speaks in the presence of others but is understood not to be heard by them, or to be heard only by those to whom he or she directs those words. The soliloquy and the aside strike us as artificial—and they are. But they so strike us only because they are no longer customary. Because we are accustomed to it, we are not bothered by the artificiality of music accompanying dialogue in a film. The conventions of the modern theatre are equally artificial but are so customary that we do not notice them. For example, we have substituted the voice-over, or projected images, or telephone conversations, or TV programmes in the background as versions of the soliloquy and aside. Some plays, such as Fraser's *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*, use such devices as a "secondary score" of voices, songs, ghost stories, and action that play across the main action, in the same way as the classic Chorus or a repeated aside. The Elizabethans, who saw a play acted without a break, would probably find strange our assumption that, when we return to the auditorium after a fifteen-minute intermission, the ensuing action may be supposed to follow immediately the action before the intermission. (Plays such as Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, in which the action has continued while we were out in the lobby, are very disconcerting for most audiences.) The theatre is a place of illusion and participation; like all those who have watched drama over the centuries, we agree to these conventions in order to act out the drama together. Although many modern plays break these illusions on purpose, the theatre, as a form, relies on this WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF.

🔲 Suggestions for Further Reading

Among useful reference works are: Stanley Hochman, ed., *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (1984); Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 4th ed. (1983); Martin Banham, ed., *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* (1995); Myron Matlaw, *Modern World Drama: An Encyclopedia* (1972); Daniel Gerould, ed., *Theatre, Theory, Theatre: The Major Critical Texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel* (2000); Eugene Benson and L. W. Conolly, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* (1989); Eugene Benson and L. W. Conolly, eds., *English-Canadian Theatre* (1987); L. W. Conolly, ed., *Canadian Drama*

and the Critics (1987); Ric Knowles, *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies* (1999).

Two useful introductions to the nature of drama are Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (1964), and J. L. Styan, *The Elements of Drama* (1969), and J. L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and* Performance (1996). A collection of plays with particularly useful introductions is W. B. Worthen, ed., *The HBJ Anthology of Drama* (2000).

More specialized studies are: Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker* (1946); C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama,* 3 vols. (1982–85); Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and the Theatre* (1984); Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1990); Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980); Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (1990); Robert Wallace, *Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada* (1990); Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* (1993); Mary Jane Miller, *Turn Up the Contrast: CBC Television Drama Since 1952* (1987); Alan Filewod, *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada* (1987); Anton Wagner, ed., *Contemporary Canadian Theatre: New World Visions, a Collection of Essays Prepared by the Canadian Theatre Critics Association* (1985); Edward Buller, *Indigenous Performing and Ceremonial Arts in Canada, A Bibliography* (1976).

A quarterly journal, *Modern Drama,* publishes articles on Canadian, American, and English drama from 1850 to the present. It also includes an annual bibliography of studies of this material. *Theatre Journal* is an important journal of contemporary criticism; *Canadian Theatre Review* is a journal that mixes academic articles with essays from theatre professionals; it provides an excellent overview of what is current in the country. The journals *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches Théâtrales au Canada,* and *Essays in Theatre/Études Théâtrales* publish articles on Canadian and world literature. *Theatre Research International* publishes essays from theatre scholars around the world.

✓ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about Drama

The following questions may help you to formulate ideas for an essay on a play.

Plot and Conflict

- ✓ Does the exposition introduce elements that will be ironically fulfilled?
- ✓ During the exposition do you perceive things differently from the way the characters perceive them?
- ✓ Are certain happenings or situations recurrent? If so, what significance do you attach to them?
- ✓ If there is more than one plot, do the plots seem to you to be related? Is one plot clearly the main plot and another plot a sort of subplot, a minor variation on the theme?

✓ Take one scene of special interest and indicate the structure, for example from stability at the beginning to the introduction of an instability, and then to a new sort of stability or resolution.

✓ Do any scenes strike you as irrelevant?

✓ Are certain scenes so strongly foreshadowed that you anticipated them? If so, did the happenings in these scenes merely fulfill your expectations, or did they also in some way surprise you?

✓ What kinds of conflict are there? One character against another, one group against another, one part of a personality against another part in the same person?

✓ How is the conflict resolved? By an unambiguous triumph of one side or by a triumph that is also in some degree a loss for the triumphant side? Do you find the resolution satisfying, or unsettling, or what? Why?

Character

✓ What are the traits of the chosen character?

✓ A dramatic character is not likely to be thoroughly realistic, a copy of someone we might know. Still, we can ask if the character is consistent and coherent. We can also ask if the character is complex or is, on the other hand, a rather simple representative of some human type. Is the character a false icon, say, of a gender stereotype? If so, is the author using the stereotype to a purpose, perhaps in a subversive manner?

✓ How is the character defined? Consider what the character says and does and what others say about him or her and do to him or her. Also consider other characters who more or less resemble the character in question, because the similarities—and the differences—may be significant.

✓ How trustworthy are the characters when they characterize themselves? When they characterize others?

✓ Do characters change as the play goes on, or do we simply know them better at the end? If characters change, why do they change?

✓ What do you make of the minor characters? Are they merely necessary to the plot, or are they foils to other characters? Or do they serve some other functions?

✓ If a character is tragic, does the tragedy seem to proceed from a moral flaw, from an intellectual error, from the malice of others, from sheer chance, or from some combination of these?

✓ What are the character's goals? To what degree do you sympathize with them? If a character is comic, do you laugh with or at the character?

✓ Do you think the characters are adequately motivated?

✓ Is a given character so meditative that you feel he or she is engaged less in a dialogue with others than in a dialogue with the self? If so, do you feel that this character is in large degree a spokesperson for the author, commenting not only on the world of the play but also on the outside world? If so, does the character cease to seem real within the world of the play? Is the character meant to be real?

Nonverbal Language

✓ If the playwright does not provide full stage directions, try to imagine for a least one scene what gestures and tones might accompany each speech. (The first scene is usually a good one to try your hand at.)

✓ What nonverbal signs is the author using? How do the characters "point" to one another? How is music or sound used? Lighting? Effects? What do the actors' bodies signify?

✓ What do you make of the setting? Does it help reveal character? Do changes of scene strike you as symbolic? If so, symbolic of what? What stage signs does the set provide for the spectator to "read"?

The Play on Film

✓ If the play has been turned into a film, what has been added? What has been omitted? Why? Are the conventions of film taking over from the original conventions of the stage? Is the camera a member of the cast or a silent narrator?

✓ Has the film medium been used to advantage—for example, in focusing attention through close-ups or reaction shots? Or do some of the inventions—for example, outdoor scenes that were not possible in the play—seem mere busywork, distracting from the urgency or the conflict or the unity of the play?

✓ Have the meanings written on the actors' bodies changed now that they are close-up, or enlarged? Have social constructions typical of moviemaking changed the bodies into something different from the playwright's intention?

12

Writing about Poetry

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

➢ differentiate the poet from the persona and write about this distinction;

➢ respond to figurative language;

➢ notice imagery and symbolism;

➢ analyze the structure of a poem;

➢ explicate a poem;

➢ use the technical terms of versification; and

➢ write about aspects of prosody, including metrics.

THE SPEAKER AND THE POET

The SPEAKER or VOICE or MASK or PERSONA (Latin for *mask*) that speaks a poem is not usually identical with the poet who writes it. The author assumes a role, or counterfeits the speech of a person in a particular situation. Robert Browning, for instance, in "My Last Duchess" (1842) invented a Renaissance duke who, in his palace, talks, in a DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE, about his first wife and his art collection with an emissary from a count who is negotiating to offer his daughter in marriage to the duke.

In reading a poem, an important question to ask yourself is this: Who is speaking? If an audience and a setting are suggested, keep them in mind, too, although these are not always indicated in a poem. For instance, Phyllis Webb's "And in Our Time" is the utterance of an impassioned lover, but we need not assume that the beloved is actually in the presence of the lover. The poem apparently represents a state of mind—a sort of talking to one-self—rather than an address to another person.

AND IN OUR TIME
Phyllis Webb

A world flew in my mouth with our first kiss
and its wings were dipped in all the flavours of grief,
Oh, my darling, tell me, what can love mean in such a world,
and what can we or any lovers hold in this immensity
of hate and broken things?
Now it is down, down, that's where your kiss travels me,
and, as a world tumbling shocks the theories of spheres,
so this love is like falling glass shaking with stars
the air which tomorrow, or even today, will be
a slow, terrible movement of scars.

Clearly, the speaker is someone passionately in love. The following questions invite you to look more closely at how the speaker of "And in Our Time" is characterized.

Questions to Stimulate Ideas about "And in Our Time"
This chapter, near the end, will list many questions that you may ask yourself in order to get ideas for writing about any poem. Here, however, are a few questions about this particular poem, to help you to think about it.

1. How does this poem communicate the speaker's state of mind? For example, in line 6, what—beyond the meaning of the words—is communicated by the repetition of "down"? In line 3, what is the tone of "Oh, my darling"? (TONE means something like emotional colouring, as for instance when one speaks of a "sinister tone," a "bitter tone," or an "eager tone.")
2. PARAPHRASE (put into your own words) the first section of the poem, the first five lines. What does this stanza communicate about the speaker's love for the beloved? Compare your paraphrase and the original. What does the original imagery (the picture of a world flying into a mouth in line 1; the "taste" of that world in line 2) communicate?
3. PARAPHRASE the second part of the poem. How did you express the verb use in the construction, "your kiss travels me," in your version? If you had trouble fitting it in, do you think the poem would be better off without it? If not, why not? Was your version much longer at this point, trying to capture a complex idea?

The voice speaking a poem, however, often does have the ring of the author's own voice, and to make a distinction between speaker and author may at times seem perverse. In fact, some poetry (especially contemporary poetry) is highly autobiographical. Still, even in autobiographical poems it may be convenient to distinguish between author and speaker. The speaker of a given poem is, let's say, the American poet Sylvia Plath in her role as parent, or Sylvia Plath in her role as daughter, not simply Sylvia Plath the poet.

The Language of Poetry: Diction and Tone

How is a VOICE or MASK or PERSONA created? From the whole of language, the author consciously or unconsciously selects certain words and grammatical constructions; this selection constitutes the persona's DICTION. It is, then, partly by the diction that we come to know the speaker of a poem. Just as in life there is a difference between people who speak of a *belly button,* a *navel,* and an *umbilicus,* so in poetry there is a difference between speakers who use one word rather than another. Of course, it is also possible that all three of these words are part of a given speaker's vocabulary, but the speaker's choice among the three would depend on the situation; that is, in addressing a child, the speaker would probably use the word *belly-button* (or even *tummy-button*); in addressing an adult other than a family member or close friend, the speaker might be more likely to use *navel;* and if the speaker is a physician addressing an audience of physicians, he or she might be most likely to use *umbilicus.* This is only to say that the dramatic situation in which one finds oneself helps define oneself, helps establish the particular role that one is playing.

Some words are used in virtually all poems: *I, see, and,* and the like. Still, the grammatical constructions in which they appear may help define the speaker. In Webb's "And in Our Time," for instance, such expressions as "the theories of spheres" (referring to the medieval cosmology) or "immensity of hate" indicate an educated speaker. The syntax of "the air which tomorrow, or even today, will be" indicates a precise individual.

Speakers have attitudes toward themselves, their subjects, and their audiences, and, consciously or unconsciously, they choose their words, pitch, and modulation accordingly; all these add up to their tone. In written literature, tone must be detected without the aid of the ear, although it's a good idea to read poetry aloud, trying to find the appropriate tone of voice. The reader must understand by the selection and sequence of words the way the words are meant to be heard—playfully, angrily, confidentially, ironically, or whatever. The reader must catch what Frost calls "the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination."

Writing about the Speaker:
Margaret Atwood's "This is a Photograph of Me"

Suppose we try to establish "by whom, where, and when" Atwood's poem is spoken. We may not be able to answer all three questions in great detail, but let's see what the poem suggests. As you read it, you'll notice—alerted by the parentheses—that the poem has *two* speakers, one of whom is a narrator: The poem is a tiny drama. Thus, the parenthesis at the beginning of line 15 signals to us that the first speech is finished.

This Is a Photograph of Me
Margaret Atwood

It was taken some time ago.
At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;   5
then, as you scan
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up   10
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photography was taken   15
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say   20
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually   25
you will be able to see me.)

Suppose we ask: Who are these two speakers? What is their relation-
ship? Is the voice of the drowned person also the voice of the narrator? If
so, why is the last part marked off? Or is the first part narrated quite dispas-
sionately while the second part is the cry of the dead person? Does the title
influence your opinion by using the pronoun "me"? Probably these ques-
tions cannot be answered with absolute certainty, but some answers are more
probable than others. For instance, the pronoun "I" in lines 16, 17, and 21
seem to echo the "me" of the title and argue for one voice. Yet the title need
not—usually should not—be read as part of the text, so it may be the poet is
intentionally leading the reader toward one conclusion and then altering the
point of view.

Let's put the questions (even if they may turn out to be unanswerable) into
a more specific form.

Questions

1. A narrator speaks lines 1–14. A persona, "I," speaks lines 15–26. Are you sure these are the voices of two people?
2. Who is the "you" in lines 6, 24, and 26? Is it the reader? Are you sure? Could it be the "I" of line 16? If so, how do lines 24 and 26 make sense?
3. Is the parenthesis "(balsam or spruce)" in line 9 simply a grammatical structure or is it actually the first time you hear the parenthetical voice of the "I"? Why—then—does "I" interrupt with this detail?
4. How would you characterize the tone of lines 6–14? Of the last three lines of the poem?

If you haven't jotted down your responses, consider doing so before reading what follows.

Journal Entries

Given questions somewhat like these, students were asked whether they could identify the speakers and then to add whatever they wished to say. One student recorded the following thoughts:

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I think this is two voices.  The narrator just tells us
about this photograph he found.  The title fools you or
foreshadows the switch in speaker.  Maybe that's the
reason for it--to set us up for the change, but to delay
it.  Anyway, the photo is old and smeared and the
narrator just talks about it like a scientist or
historian.  It doesn't mean anything to him.  But to the
other voice it is really important.  It is a record of
her drowning.  (I think it's a woman who drowned and a
man who found the photo.  He isn't very concerned about
emotions, just about exact details, but she is emotional
about it.  After all, she died!)  On the other hand, she
is pretty careful about details, too, like "the effect
of water on light is a distortion."  Does that mean the
other voice is coming back in?  But she says it is
"difficult" to be precise and the other voice is very
precise.  So this is a second voice.  She is quite
bitter, I think.  People haven't seen her in life, I
bet, just like they can't see her in death.  You have to
look hard.  "Eventually" on a line by itself like that
seems to say that she must wait and wait for people to
see her.  The guy looking at the photo certainly won't
see her quickly because he's too interested in his own
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description. Maybe that's why he pauses to identify the
kind of tree. Or maybe she is mocking him. I'm not
sure if this bit is her voice. I don't think she would
interrupt. Maybe that's why no one sees her, because
she's too quiet and passive. Speaking inside a ( ) is
pretty passive. Maybe she should speak out.

Another student thought only one voice was speaking to the reader:

As the poem goes on, we learn that "I" drowned at a spot
in the lake seen in the picture, but it starts by
telling us details about the photo itself. The title is
important because it tells the reader before you start
what the photograph is about. There's never any
suspense. That makes it weirder when we learn that the
"I" died the day before the photo was taken. Obviously
he isn't really in this snapshot, just the place he
died. So why say it is a photograph of "me"? I think
the speaker is saying that just as the photo is
"blurred" and "blended with the paper," so our lives are
blurry and can't be "precisely" seen. The guy who died
is still trying to be precise but realizes there is an
optical distortion. He says if we look carefully enough
at the photo we'll see details of the branches and
houses and stuff and that will also let us see the
actual details of his life. It's neat how Atwood makes
you realize that a photo isn't just a record of actual
objects, but has a three-dimensional quality. Secrets
might be in the "grey flecks" that seem to blend. You
have to "scan" a life like that, too. Most of us just
see how someone looks or what they wear but that is all
distorted. The photos we take of other people, even
when we just look at them (like with camera eyes), won't
reveal anything unless we look hard. Then,
"eventually," they will. That's why I think it is one
voice, saying he has been faulty like everyone else at
seeing properly. The voice in line 9 is like an inner
voice that has learned through death how to see better.
Now it speaks to itself and makes the camera eye look
more carefully. Tell me exactly what kind of tree.
What "ought" that blurred line be? Maybe only when it's
too late can we realize how to "read" a picture of
another person or even of ourselves. After we're dead.
And take the time to do it right. Our eyes don't tell
us enough about ourselves. I think the word play on
"eye" and "I" would make a good essay about this idea.

A Brief Exercise

1. Evaluate one of these two journal entries by students. Do you think the comments are convincing, plausible, or weak, and *why* do you think so? Can you offer additional supporting evidence, or counterevidence?

2. Two small questions: Why do you think Atwood broke line 3 after "smeared" rather than letting it be a modifier of "print" in line 4? Second, in lines 17–18, Atwood has the speaker say, "I am [. . .] in the centre / of the picture." Why is the speaker in the centre? Given that we can't see the speaker, should he or she be in one corner, rather out of view? What is achieved by having the invisible speaker dead centre (as it were)?

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

It is, of course, an exaggeration to say, as the American poet Robert Frost has said, that "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another." Poets do, however, often use figurative language—saying one thing in terms of something else. Words have their literal meanings, but they can also be used so that something other than the literal meaning is implied. "My love is a rose" is, literally, nonsense, for a person is not a five-petaled, many-stamened plant with a spiny stem. But the suggestions of rose (at least for Robert Burns, the Scottish poet who compared his beloved to a rose in the line, "My Love is like a red, red rose") include "delicate beauty," "soft," and "perfumed," and, thus, the word *rose* can be meaningfully applied—figuratively rather than literally—to "my love." The beloved is fragrant, with skin that is perhaps like a rose in texture and (in some measure) colour and, like a rose, the beloved will not keep such beauty long. The poet has communicated his perception very precisely.

People who write about poetry have found it convenient to name the various kinds of figurative language. Just as the student of geology employs such special terms as *kames* and *eskers,* the student of literature employs special terms to name things as accurately as possible. The following paragraphs discuss the most common terms.

In a SIMILE, items from different classes are explicitly compared by a connective such as *like, as,* or *than,* or by a verb such as *appears* or *seems.* (If the objects compared are from the same class, for example, "Geographically, Vancouver is like Hong Kong," no simile is present.)

This land like a mirror turns you inward
—*Gwendolyn MacEwen*

[. . .] winter pears, green and hard as ovaries
—*Marilyn Bowering*

All of our thoughts will be fairer than doves.
—*Elizabeth Bishop*

Seems he a dove? His feathers are but borrowed.
—*Shakespeare*

A **METAPHOR** asserts the identity, without a connective such as *like* or a verb such as *appears,* of terms that are literally incompatible.

then air is kisses, kisses
                    —*P. K. Page*

The rushing river of cars
makes you a stillness. . . .
            —*Margaret Avison*

I write because I can't sing
I am the book exiled
        —*Lola Lemire Tostevin*

In the following poem, Keats's excitement on reading Chapman's sixteenth-century translation of the Greek poet Homer is communicated first through a metaphor and then through a simile.

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER
John Keats (1795–1821)

Much have I traveled in the realms of gold,	
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;	
Round many western islands have I been	
Which bards in fealty° to Apollo hold.	*loyalty* 4
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told,	
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne:°	*property*
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene°	*vast expanse*
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:	8
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies	
When a new planet swims into his ken;	
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes	
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men	12
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—	
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.°	*in Central America*

We might pause for a moment to take a closer look at Keats's poem. If you write an essay on the figurative language in this sonnet, you will probably discuss the figure involved in asserting that reading is a sort of travelling (it brings us to unfamiliar worlds) and especially that reading brings us to realms of gold. Presumably, the experience of reading is valuable. "Realms of gold" not only continues and modifies the idea of reading as travel, but in its evocation of El Dorado (an imaginary country in South America, thought to be rich in gold and, therefore, the object of search by Spanish explorers of the Renaissance) it introduces a suggestion of the Renaissance appropriate to a poem about a Renaissance translation of Homer. The figure of travelling is amplified in the next few lines, which assert that the "goodly states and king-doms" and "western islands" are ruled by poets who owe allegiance to a higher authority, Apollo.

The beginning of the second sentence (line 5) enlarges this already spacious area with its reference to "one wide expanse," and the ruler of this area (unlike the other rulers) is given the dignity of being named. He is Homer, "deep-browed"—"deep" suggesting not only his high or perhaps furrowed forehead, but the profundity of the thoughts behind the forehead. The speaker continues the idea of books as remote places, but now he also seems to think of this place as more than a rich area; instead of merely saying that until he read Chapman's translation he had not "seen" it (as in line 2) or "been" there (line 3), he says he never breathed its air; that is, the preciousness is not material but ethereal, not gold but something far more exhilarating and essential.

This reference to air leads easily to the next dominant image, that of the explorer of the illimitable skies (so vast is Homer's world) rather than of the land and sea. But the explorer of the skies is conceived as watching an *oceanic* sky. In hindsight we can see that the link was perhaps forged earlier in line 7, with "serene" (a vast expanse of air *or* water); in any case, there is an unforgettable rightness in the description of the suddenly discovered planet as something that seems to "swim" into one's ken.

After this climactic discovery, we return to the Renaissance Spanish explorers (though, in fact, Balboa, and not Cortez, reached the Pacific) by means of a simile that compares the speaker's rapture with Cortez's as he gazed at the expanse before him. The writer of an essay on the figurative language in a poem should, in short, try to call attention to the aptness (or ineptness) of the figures and to the connecting threads that make a meaningful pattern.

Some Important Figures of Speech

Two types of metaphor deserve special mention: SYNECDOCHE and METONYMY. This is particularly the case in contemporary Canadian poetry, where simile and metaphor are more and more giving way to metonymy. Many poets feel that metaphors create false comparisons by suggesting links between phenomena where no linkage honestly exists. Such contrived comparisons may be part of a CONSTRUCTIONIST METANARRATIVE (see Chapter 8). Very often similes and even metaphors join notions we have been taught to connect, but which may actually each be part of a larger, unexplained whole. As Pat Lowther says in her poem "Coast Range,"

> The land is what's left
> after the failure
> of every kind of metaphor.

SYNECDOCHE is the name for a figure in which the whole is replaced by the part, or the part by the whole. For example, "bread," in "Give us this day our daily bread," replaces all sorts of food. The "agonized Y" which "initials their faith" in A. M. Klein's "Political Meeting" stands for the whole crucifix as well as the question "why."

In METONYMY, something is named that replaces something closely related to it. For example, James Shirley names certain objects ("Scepter and crown,"

and "scythe and spade"), using them to replace social classes (powerful people, and poor people) to which the objects are related:

> Scepter and crown must tumble down
> And in the dust be equal made
> With the poor crooked scythe and spade.

PERSONIFICATION is the attribution of human feelings or characteristics to abstractions or to inanimate objects.

> Just north of town
> the mountains start to talk
>> —*Pat Lowther*

> . . . and in the darkness rises
> The body-odour of race.
>> —*A. M. Klein*

> Hope, thou bold taster of delight.
>> —*Richard Crashaw*

Crashaw's personification, "Hope, thou bold taster of delight," is also an example of the figure called **APOSTROPHE**, an address to a person or thing not literally listening. Wordsworth begins a sonnet by apostrophizing Milton:

> Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour

and Bliss Carmen apostrophizes the "Spirit of things unseen":

> Be thou my aspiration
> Consuming and serene

Connotation and Denotation

What conclusions can we draw about figurative language?

First, figurative language, with its literally incompatible terms, forces the reader to attend to the **CONNOTATIONS** (suggestions, associations) rather than to the **DENOTATIONS** (dictionary definitions) of one of the terms.

Second, although figurative language is said to differ from ordinary discourse, it is found in ordinary discourse, as well as in literature. "It rained cats and dogs," "War is hell," "Don't be an ass," "Mr. Know-it-all," and other tired figures are part of our daily utterances. But through repeated use, these, and most of the figures we use, have lost whatever impact they once had and are only a shade removed from expressions that, though once figurative, have become literal: the *eye* of a needle, a *branch* office, the *face* of a clock.

Third, good figurative language is usually concrete, condensed, and interesting. The *concreteness* lends precision and vividness; when Keats writes that he felt "like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken," he characterizes his feelings more sharply than if he had said, "I felt excited." Through his brief life, Keats made astonishing progress at learning to create exact figures rather than vague ones. A comparison of his

earlier and later poems, separated by only a few years, makes this clear. His simile isolates for us a precise kind of excitement, and the personification of "swims" vividly brings up the oceanic aspect of the sky. The effect of the second of these three qualities, *condensation*, can be seen by attempting to paraphrase some of the figures. A paraphrase will commonly use more words than the original, and it will have less impact—as the gradual coming of night usually has less impact on us than a sudden darkening of the sky, or as a prolonged push has less impact than a sudden blow. The third quality, *interest*, is largely dependent on the previous two; the successful figure often makes us open our eyes wider and take notice. Keats's "deep-browed Homer" arouses our interest in Homer as "thoughtful Homer" or "meditative Homer" does not. Similarly, when W. B. Yeats says

> An aged man is but a paltry thing,
> A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
> Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
> For every tatter in its mortal dress,

the metaphoric identification of an old man with a scarecrow jolts us out of all our usual unthinking attitudes about old men as kind, happy folk who are content to have passed from youth into age.

Preparing to Write about Figurative Language

As you prepare to write about figurative language, consider

1. the areas from which the images are drawn (for instance, myth, religion, science, commerce, nature);
2. the kinds of images (for instance, similes, metaphors, overstatements, understatements);
3. any shifts from one type of imagery to another (for instance, from similes to metaphors, metaphor to metonymy, or from abundant figures of speech to literal speech) and the effects that the shifts arouse in you; and
4. the location of the images (perhaps they are concentrated at the beginning of the poem or in the middle or at the end) and if parts of the poem are richer in images than other parts, consider their effect on you.

If you underline or highlight images in your text or in a copy of the poem that you have photocopied, you'll probably be able to see **IMAGE PATTERNS**, and you can indicate the connections by drawing arrows or perhaps by making lists of related images. Thinking about these patterns, you will find ideas arising about some of the ways in which the poem makes its effect. With a little luck, you will be able to formulate a tentative thesis for your essay, though as you continue to work—say, as you write a first draft—you will probably find yourself modifying the thesis in the light of additional thoughts that come to you while you are putting words onto paper.

Imagery and Symbolism

When we read *rose*, we may call to mind a picture of a rose, or perhaps we are reminded of the odour or texture of a rose. Whatever in a poem appeals to any of our senses (sight, smell, taste, sound, touch—including sensations like heat and cold) is an image. In short, images are the sensory content of a work, whether literal or figurative. When a poet says "My rose" and is speaking about a rose, we have no figure of speech—though we still have an image. If, however, "My rose" is a shortened form of "My love is a rose," some would say that the poet is using a metaphor; but others would say that because the first term ("My love is") is omitted, the rose is a symbol. A poem about the transience of a rose might compel the reader to feel that the transience of female beauty is the larger theme even though it is never explicitly stated, because a rose has been associated in Western symbolism with the female; it is a YONIC symbol as opposed to a PHALLIC symbol.

Some symbols are conventional symbols—people have agreed to accept them as standing for something other than their literal meanings: A Western poem about a cross would probably be about Christianity; similarly, the desert is generally seen as a symbol of emptiness as well as aridity and—as we've been discussing—the rose has long been a symbol for love as well as for the woman. In Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway,* the husband communicates his love by proffering this conventional symbol: "He was holding out flowers—roses, red and white roses. (But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words.)" Later in the novel, he thinks of his wife and, immediately, again buys her a bouquet of flowers. Objects that are not conventional symbols, however, may also give rise to rich, multiple, indefinable associations. The following poem uses the traditional symbol of the rose, but in a non-traditional way.

THE SICK ROSE
William Blake (1757–1827)

O rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

A reader might perhaps argue that the worm is invisible (line 2) merely because it is hidden within the rose, but an "invisible worm / That flies in the night" is more than a long, slender, soft-bodied, creeping animal; and a rose that has, or is, a "bed / Of crimson joy" is more than a gardener's rose. Blake's worm and rose suggest things beyond themselves—a stranger, more vibrant world 'han the world we are usually aware of. They are, in short, symbolic, though readers will doubtless differ in their interpretations. Perhaps we find

ourselves half thinking, for example, that the worm is male, the rose female, and that the poem is about the violation of virginity. Or that the poem is about the destruction of beauty: Woman's beauty, rooted in joy, is destroyed by a power that feeds on her. But these interpretations are not fully satisfying: The poem presents a worm and a rose, and yet it is not merely about a worm and a rose. These objects resonate, stimulating our thoughts toward something else, but the something else is elusive. This is not to say, however, that symbols mean whatever any reader says they mean. A reader could scarcely support an interpretation arguing that the poem is about the need to love all aspects of nature. All interpretations are not equally valid; it's the writer's job to offer a reasonably persuasive interpretation.

A symbol, then, is an image so loaded with significance that it is not simply literal, and it does not simply stand for something else; it is both itself *and* something else that it richly suggests, a kind of manifestation of something too complex or too elusive to be otherwise revealed. Blake's poem is about a blighted rose and at the same time about much more. In a symbol, as Thomas Carlyle wrote, "the Infinite is made to blend with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there."

STRUCTURE

The arrangement of the parts, the organization of the entire poem, is its structure. Sometimes a poem is divided into blocks of, say, four lines each, but even if the poem is printed as a solid block, it probably has some principle of organization—for example, from sorrow in the first two lines to joy in the next two, or from a question in the first three lines to an answer in the last line.

Consider this short poem by an English poet of the seventeenth century.

UPON JULIA'S CLOTHES
Robert Herrick (1591–1674)

Whenas° in silks my Julia goes,	*whenever*
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows	
That liquefaction of her clothes.	
Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see	
That brave° vibration, each way free,	*splendid*
O, how that glittering taketh me.	

Annotating and Thinking about a Poem

One student began thinking about this poem by photocopying it, double-spaced, and by making the following notes on her copy. (To give yourself room to make annotations, it is sometimes worth the effort to copy out a short poem with double or triple spacing—though it is certainly quicker to mark up a photocopy or your own text.)

```
          Upon Julia's Clothes
```

Whenas in silks my Julia goes, —— *cool tone?*

"Then, then"–} 3 { Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows

more excited? } That liquefaction of her clothes.

almost at a { Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see

loss for words? 3 { That brave vibration, each way free,

O, how that glittering taketh me. *free to do what?*

— emotional?   *free from what?*

The student developed further ideas by thinking about several of the questions that, at the end of this chapter, we suggest you ask yourself while rereading a poem. Among the questions are these:

Does the poem proceed in a straightforward way, or at some point or points does the speaker reverse course, altering his or her tone or perception?
What is the effect on you of the form?

With such questions in mind, the student was stimulated to see if Herrick's poem has some sort of reversal or change and, if so, how it is related to the structure. After rereading the poem several times, thinking about it in the light of these questions and perhaps others that came to mind, she produced the following notes:

```
Two stanzas, each of three lines, with the same
   structure
Basic structure of 1st stanza: When X (one line), then Y
   (two lines)
Basic structure of second stanza: Next (one line), then
   Z (two lines)
```

When she marked the text after reading the poem a few times, she noticed that the last line—an exclamation of delight ("O, how that glittering taketh me")—is much more personal than the rest of the poem. A little further thought enabled her to refine this last perception:

```
Although the pattern of stanzas is repeated, the somewhat
analytic, detached tone of the beginning ("Whenas,"
"Then," "Next") changes to an open, enthusiastic
confession of delight in what the poet sees.
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Further thinking led to this:

```
Although the title is "Upon Julia's Clothes," and the
first five lines describe Julia's silken dress, the poem
finally is not only about Julia's clothing but about the
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effect of Julia (moving in silk that liquefies or seems
to become a liquid) on the poet.
```

This is a nice observation, but when the student looked again at the poem the next day and started to write about it, she found that she was able to refine her observation.

```
Even at the beginning, the speaker is not entirely
detached, for he speaks of "my Julia."
```

In writing about Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes," the student tells us the thoughts did not come quickly or neatly. After two or three thoughts, she started to write. Only after drafting a paragraph and rereading the poem did she notice that the personal element appears not only in the last line ("taketh *me*") but even in the first line ("*my* Julia"). In short, for almost all of us, the only way to get to a good final essay is to read, to think, to jot down ideas, to write a draft, and to revise and revise again. Having gone through such processes, the student came up with the following excellent essay.

By the way, the student did not hit on the final version of her title ("Herrick's Julia, Julia's Herrick") until shortly before she typed her final version. Her preliminary title was

```
          Structure and Personality in
        Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothing"
```

That's a bit heavy-handed but at least it is focused, as opposed to such an uninformative title as "On a Poem by Herrick." She soon revised her tentative title to

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      Julia, Julia's Clothing, and Julia's Poet
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That's quite a good title: It is neat, and it is appropriate since it moves (as the poem and the essay do) from Julia and her clothing to the poet himself. Of course, this title doesn't tell the reader exactly what the essay will be about, but it does stimulate the reader's interest. The essayist's final title, however, is even better. Again, it is neat (the balanced structure, and structure is part of the student's topic), and it moves (as the poem itself moves) from Julia to the poet.

The Finished Essay

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Anna West
English 201
14 February 2003

            Herrick's Julia, Julia's Herrick

    Robert Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes" begins as a
description of Julia's clothing and ends as an
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expression of the poet's response not just to Julia's clothing but to Julia herself. Despite the apparently objective or detached tone of the first stanza and the first two lines of the second stanza, the poem finally conveys a strong sense of the speaker's excitement.

The first stanza seems to say, "Whenas" X (one line), "Then" Y (two lines). The second stanza repeats this basic structure of one line of assertion and two lines describing the consequence: "Next" (one line), "then" (two lines). But the logic or coolness of "Whenas," "Then," and "Next," and of such rather scientific language as "liquefaction" (a more technical-sounding word than "melting") and "vibration" is undercut by the breathlessness or excitement of "Then, then" (that is very different from a simple "Then"). It is also worth mentioning that although there is a personal rather than a fully detached note even in the first line, in "my Julia," this expression scarcely reveals much feeling. In fact, it reveals a touch of male chauvinism, a suggestion that the woman is a possession of the speaker's. Not until the last line does the speaker reveal that, far from Julia being his possession, he is possessed by Julia, overwhelmed by her: "O, how that glittering taketh me." If he begins coolly, objectively, and somewhat complacently, and uses a structure that suggests a somewhat detached mind, in the exclamatory "O" he nevertheless at last confesses that he is enraptured by Julia. In this moment, the poem becomes personal, subjective and moving.

Other things, of course, might be said about this poem. For instance, the writer says nothing about the changes in the metre and their possible value in the poem. Nor does she say anything about the sounds of any of the words (she might have commented on the long vowels in "sweetly flows" and shown how the effect would have been different if instead of "sweetly flows" Herrick had written "swiftly flits"), but such topics might be material for another essay. You can't say everything about a text in one essay. Furthermore, another reader might have found the poem less charming—even offensive in its exclusive concern with Julia's appearance and the sexuality of her "liquefaction." Still, this essay is, in itself, an interesting and perceptive discussion of the way the poet used a repeated structure to set forth a minia-ture drama in which observation is, at the end, replaced by emotion.

Some Kinds of Structure

Although every poem has its own structure, if we stand back from a given poem we may see that the structure is one of three common sorts: repetitive, narrative, or logical.

Repetitive Structure

REPETITIVE STRUCTURE is especially common in lyrics that are sung, where a single state of mind is repeated from stanza to stanza so that the stanzas are pretty much interchangeable. As we read through "Auld Lang Syne," for instance, we get reaffirmation rather than progression. Other repetitions, however, move the meaning of the poem forward, or emphasize a key point. In these cases the stanzas are not interchangeable, and the repetition builds meaning.

Narrative Structure

In a poem with a NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, there is a sense of advance. (Note: we are not talking about "narrative poems," poems that tell a story—such as *The Odyssey* or "The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay," by Charles Sangster— but about a kind of lyric poem such as Archibald Lampman's "A Summer Dream"). Blake's "The Sick Rose," discussed earlier, is an example. What comes later in the poem could not come earlier. The poem seems to get somewhere, to settle down to an end. A lyric in which the speaker at first grieves and then derives some comfort from the thought that at least he was once in love similarly has a narrative structure. Here is a short poem with a narrative structure.

A SLUMBER DID MY SPIRIT SEAL
William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal° course,   *daily*
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

If this poem is a sort of narrative of the speaker's change in perceptions, exactly what are the perceptions? Is the idea, as some readers have argued, "I thought she seemed immortal, but now I am appalled that she is reduced to mere earthly matter"? Or is it, as other readers have argued, "I knew a woman who

seemed more than earthly; now I see, pantheistically, that in her death she is part of the grandness of nature"? According to the first of these views, there is a chilling irony in the fact that the woman who in the first stanza seemed exempt from "The touch of earthly years" is, in the second stanza, laid in earth, with no motion of her own. She is as inert as the "rocks, and stones, and trees." In this view, the poem moves from a romantic state of mind to a report of facts, and the facts imply an abrupt understanding of the brutality of death. But according to the second view, the woman participates (with natural objects) in the grand motion of "earth's diurnal course." In further support of this second view it can be argued that Wordsworth is known to have held pantheistic beliefs and that the Latinism, *diurnal*—the longest word and the only unusual word in the poem—adds dignity, especially in a line noted for melodiousness: "*Rolled round in earth's diurnal course.*" Perhaps one can even push this view further and say that the second stanza does not offer a sharp contrast to the first but deepens it by revealing a mature and satisfying view of the woman's true immortality, an immortality perceived only naïvely in the first stanza.

Possibly the poem is of indeterminate meaning, and the disagreement cannot be settled, but you might spend a moment thinking about which of these views you prefer, and why. Or do you accept all of them? Or do you hold an entirely different view?

Logical Structure

The third kind of structure commonly found is LOGICAL STRUCTURE. The speaker argues a case and comes to some sort of conclusion. Probably the most famous example of a poem that moves to a resolution through an argument is Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." The speaker begins, "Had we but world enough, and time" (that is, "if we had"), and for 20 lines he sets forth what he might do. At the twenty-first line he says, "But," and he indicates that the preceding 20 lines, in the conditional, are not a description of a real condition. The real condition (as he sees it) is that Time oppresses us, and he sets this idea forth in lines 21–32. In line 33 he begins his conclusion, "Now therefore," clinching it in line 45 with "Thus." Here is another example of a poem with a logical structure.

THE FLEA
John Donne (1572?–1631)

Mark but this flea, and mark in this
How little that which thou deniest me is:
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
Thou knowest that this cannot be said   5
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
    Yet this enjoys before it woo,
    And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
    And this, alas, is more than we would do.

O stay! Three lives in one flea spare,   10
Where we almost, yea, more than married are;
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is.
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.   15
   Though use° make you apt to kill me,   *custom*
   Let not to that, self-murder added be,
   And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden! Hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?   20
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st and saist that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now.
   'Tis true. Then learn how false fears be;   25
   Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
   Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

The speaker is a lover who begins by assuring his mistress that sexual inter-course is of no more serious consequence than a fleabite. Between the first and second stanzas, the woman has apparently threatened to kill the flea, moving the lover to exclaim in line 10, "O stay! Three lives in one flea spare." In this second stanza he reverses his argument, now insisting on the impor-tance of the flea, arguing that since it has bitten both man and woman it holds some of their lives, as well as its own. The speaker uses religious images to strengthen his case. Unpersuaded of its importance, the woman kills the flea between the second and third stanzas; and the speaker uses her action to reinforce his initial position when he says, beginning in line 25, that the death of the flea has no serious consequences and her yielding to him will have no worse consequences.

Verbal Irony

Among the commonest devices in poems with logical structure (although this device is employed elsewhere, too) is VERBAL IRONY. The speaker's words mean more or less the opposite of what they seem to say. Sometimes it takes the form of UNDERSTATEMENT, or MEIOSIS, as when Andrew Marvell's speaker remarks with cautious wryness, "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace," or when F. R. Scott sums up his 37-line attack on Prime Minister Mackenzie King in "W.L.M.K" by saying simply, "He blunted us." Sometimes it takes the form of overstatement, or HYPERBOLE, as when Donne's speaker says that in the flea he and the lady are "more than married." Speaking broadly, intensely emotional contemporary poems often use irony to undercut—and thus make acceptable—the emotion.

Paradox

Another common device in poems with a logical structure is **PARADOX**: the assertion of an apparent contradiction, as in "This flea is you and I." (Of course, this statement is metaphoric so what would be a paradox in the real world is not necessarily paradoxical in the figurative world.) But again it must be emphasized that irony and paradox are not limited to poems with a logical structure. In Webb's "Non Linear" poem, discussed in Chapter 5, for instance, there is a paradox in the fact that while the speaker has given up complaining—which is an occasion for joy—no one seems to notice, evoking a kind of sadness.

EXPLICATION

In Chapter 6, which included a discussion of Patrick Lane's "The Children of Bogota," we saw that an explication is a line-by-line commentary on what is going on in a text. (*Explication* literally means "unfolding," or "spreading out.") Although your explication will for the most part move steadily from the beginning to the end of the selection, try to avoid simply listing: "In line one [. . .], In the second line [. . .], In the third line [. . .],"; that is, don't hesitate to write such things as "The poem begins [. . .]. In the next line [. . .]. The speaker immediately adds [. . .]. She then introduces [. . .]. The next stanza begins by saying [. . .]." And of course you may discuss the second line before the first if that seems the best way of handling the passage. It is rarely a good idea to write about any text in strict chronological order: It tends to create plot summary rather than explication (or analysis).

An explication is not concerned with the writer's life or times, and it is not a paraphrase (a rewording)—though it may include paraphrase if a passage in the original seems unclear, perhaps because of an unusual word or an unfamiliar expression. On the whole, however, an explication goes beyond paraphrase, seeking to make explicit what the reader perceives as implicit in the work. To this end it calls attention, as it proceeds, to the implications of words, especially of their tone (repetitions, shifts in levels of diction, for instance from colloquial to formal language, or from ordinary language to technical language); figures of speech; length of lines (since an exceptionally short or exceptionally long sentence conveys a particular effect); sound effects, such as **ALLITERATION** and RHYME; and structure (for instance, a question in one stanza, and the answer in the next, or a generalization and then a particularization, or a contrast of some sort).

To repeat, in short, an explication makes *explicit* what is implicit, especially in the words. It sets forth the reader's sense of the precise meaning of the work, word by word, or phrase by phrase, or line by line.

A Sample Explication of Yeats's "The Balloon of the Mind"

Read this short poem (published in 1917) by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939). The "balloon" in the poem is a dirigible, a blimp, a hot air

ship. These early flying machines appeared during World War I, when Yeats was writing.

The Balloon of the Mind
William Butler Yeats

Hands, do what you're bid:
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.

Annotations and Journal Entries

A student began thinking about the poem by copying it, double-spaced. Then she jotted down her first thoughts.

sounds abrupt

Hands, do what you're bid:
(B)ring the (b)alloon of the mind
That (b)ellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.

balloon imagined by the mind? Or a mind like a balloon?

*no real rhymes?
line seems to drag
it's so long!*

Later, she wrote some notes in a journal. (You can always simply think these ideas out carefully, but jotting them down helps you to frame them, and to remember them when you later come to write, so a journal system is often a good technique.)

I'm still puzzled about the meaning of the words, "The balloon of the mind." Does "balloon of the mind" mean a balloon that belongs to the mind, sort of like "a disease of the heart"? If so, it means a balloon that the mind has, a balloon that the mind possesses, I guess by imagining it. Or does it mean that the mind is <u>like</u> a balloon, as when you say "he's a pig of a man," meaning he is like a pig, he is a pig? Can it mean both? What's a balloon that the mind imagines? Something like dreams of fame, wealth? Fantasies of love?

Is Yeats saying that the "hands" have to work hard to make dreams a reality? Maybe. But maybe the idea really is that the mind is <u>like</u> a balloon--hard to keep under control, floating around. Very hard to keep the mind on the job. If the mind is like a balloon, it's hard to get it into the "shed"--the hangar. Part of the problem is that this kind of dirigible is so old-fashioned that I don't know how they flew or were launched. I should check these airships out on the web.

"Bellies." Is there such a verb? In this poem it
seems to mean something like "puffs out" or "flops
around in the wind." Just checked The Gage Canadian
Dictionary, and it says "belly" can be a verb, "to swell
out," "to bulge." Well, you learn something every day.

A later entry:

OK; I think the poem is about a writer trying to keep
his balloon-like mind under control, trying to keep it
working at the job of writing something, maybe writing
something with the "clarity, unity, and coherence"
I keep hearing about in this course.

Here is the student's final version of the explication.

Yeats's "Balloon of the Mind" is about writing poetry,
specifically about the difficulty of getting one's
floating thoughts down in lines on the page. The first
line, a short, stern, heavily stressed command to the
speaker's hands, perhaps implies by its severe or
impatient tone that these hands will be disobedient or
inept or careless if not watched closely: the poor
bumbling body so often fails to achieve the goals of the
mind. The bluntness of the command in the first line is
emphasized by the fact that all the subsequent lines
have more syllables. Furthermore, the first line is a
grammatically complete sentence, whereas the thought of
line 2 spills over into the next lines, implying the
difficulty of fitting ideas into confining spaces, that
is, of getting one's thoughts into order, especially
into a coherent poem.
    Lines 2 and 3 amplify the metaphor already stated
in the title (the product of the mind is an airy but
unwieldy balloon) and they also contain a second
command, "Bring." Alliteration ties this command
"Bring" to the earlier "bid"; it also ties both of these
verbs to their object, "balloon" and to the verb that
most effectively describes the balloon, "bellies." In
comparison with the abrupt first line of the poem, lines
2 and 3 themselves seem almost swollen, bellying and
dragging, an effect aided by using adjacent unstressed
syllables ("of the," "[bell]ies and," "in the") and by
using an eye rhyme ("mind" and "wind") rather than an
exact rhyme. And then comes the short last line: almost

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before we could expect it, the cumbersome balloon--here
the idea that is to be packed into the stanza--is
successfully lodged in its "narrow shed."  Aside from
the relatively colourless "into," the only words of more
than one syllable in the poem are "balloon," "bellies,"
and "narrow," and all three emphasize the difficulty of
the task.  But after "narrow"--the word itself almost
looks long and narrow, in this context like a hangar--we
get the simplicity of the monosyllable "shed."  The
difficult job is done, the thought is safely packed
away, the poem is completed--but again with an off rhyme
("bid" and "shed"), for neatness can go only so far when
hands and mind and a balloon are involved.
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VERSIFICATION AND RHYTHM:
A GLOSSARY FOR REFERENCE

The technical vocabulary of **PROSODY** (the study of the principles of verse structure, including METRE, RHYME and other sound effects, and stanzaic patterns) is large. An understanding of these terms will not turn anyone into a poet, but it will enable you to write about some aspects of poetry more efficiently. The following are the chief terms of prosody.

Metre

Most poetry written in English has a pattern of stressed (accented) sounds, and this pattern is the metre (from the Greek word for "measure"). Strictly speaking, we really should not talk of "unstressed" or "unaccented" syllables, since to utter a syllable—however lightly—is to give it some stress. It is really a matter of *relative* stress, but the fact is that "unstressed" or "unaccented" are part of the established terminology of versification.

In a line of poetry, the **FOOT** is the basic unit of measurement. It is on rare occasions a single stressed syllable; generally a foot consists of two or three syllables, one of which is stressed. The repetition of feet, then, produces a pattern of stresses throughout the poem.

Two cautions:

1. A poem will seldom contain only one kind of foot throughout; significant variations usually occur, but one kind of foot is dominant.

2. In reading a poem, one chiefly pays attention to the sense, not to a presupposed metrical pattern. By paying attention to the sense, one often finds (reading aloud is a great help) that the stress falls on a word that according to the metrical pattern would be unstressed. Or, a word that according to the pattern would be stressed may be seen to be unstressed. Furthermore, by reading for sense, one finds that not all stresses are equally heavy; some are almost as light as unstressed syllables, and some

have a hovering stress; that is, the stress is equally distributed over two adjacent syllables. To repeat: One reads for sense, allowing the syntax to help indicate the stresses.

Metrical Feet

The most common feet in English poetry are the six that follow:

IAMB (adjective: **IAMBIC**): one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. The iamb, said to be the most common pattern in English speech, is surely the most common in English poetry. The following example has four iambic feet:

My heart is like a sing -ing bird
—*Christina Rossetti*

TROCHEE (**TROCHAIC**): one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed:

We were very tired, we were very merry
—*Edna St. Vincent Millay*

ANAPEST (**ANAPESTIC**): two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed:

There are man -y who say that a dog has his day
—*Dylan Thomas*

DACTYL (**DACTYLIC**): one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed. This trisyllabic foot, like the anapest, is common in light verse or verse suggesting joy, but its use is not limited to such material. Janice Kulyk Keefer's "Perceptual Elegy" begins:

Out a bare window I

SPONDEE (**SPONDAIC**): two stressed syllables; most often used as a substitute for an iamb or trochee:

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes
—*Margaret Avison from* "Snow"

PYRRHIC: two unstressed syllables; it is often not considered a legitimate foot in English.

Metrical Lines

A metrical line consists of one or more feet and is named for the number of feet in it. The following names are used:

MONOMETRE: one foot	PENTAMETRE: five feet
DIMETRE: two feet	HEXAMETRE (ALEXANDRINE): six feet
TRIMETRE: three feet	HEPTAMETRE: seven feet
TETRAMETRE: four feet	

A line is scanned for the kind and number of feet in it, and the **SCANSION** tells you if it is, say, trochaic pentametre (five trochees):

Wíld wĭth rúshĭng dréams aňd déep wĭth sádněss!
> —*Duncan Campbell Scott* from "Rapids at Night"

Or, in another example, iambic tetrametre:

Thěy áre nŏt flésh, thěy áre nŏt bóne
> —*Archibald Lampman* from "The City at the End of Things"

A line ending with a stress has a **STRONG ENDING**; a line ending with an extra unstressed syllable has a **WEAK ENDING**. (***Note****:* these terms used to be "masculine" and "feminine" endings and you may see these terms in older commentaries. The older terms are rarely used in Canada.) The **CAESURA** (sometimes indicated by the symbol //) is a slight pause within the line which does not affect the metrical count. It need not be indicated by punctuation as it is not in Earle Birney's "Anglosaxon Street":

Dawn drizzle ended	dampness steams from
blotching brick and	blank plasterwaste
Faded housepatterns	hoary and finicky
unfold stuttering	stick like a phonograph

Much contemporary poetry includes irregular caesura made visible by spacing on the page. Consider, for example, Robert Kroetsch's "Collected Poem":

The world is   always
ending.

When you get to the
beginning   stop.

An **END-STOPPED LINE** concludes with a distinct syntactical pause, but a **RUN-ON LINE** has its sense carried over into the next line without syntactical pause. (The running-on of a line is called **ENJAMBMENT**.) In the following passage, only the first is a run-on line:

Yet if we look more closely we shall find
Most have the seeds of judgment in their mind:
Nature affords at least a glimmering light;
The lines, though touched but faintly, are drawn right.
> —*Alexander Pope*

Rhythm

RHYTHM (most simply, in English poetry, STRESSES at regular intervals) has a power of its own. A highly pronounced rhythm is common in such forms of poetry as charms, yells at sports events (like The Wave), and lullabies; all of them aim to induce a special effect magically. It is not surprising that *carmen,* the Latin word for poem or song, is also the Latin word for charm and the word from which our word *charm* is derived.

In much poetry, rhythm is only half heard, but its presence is suggested by the way poetry is printed. Prose (from Latin *prorsus*, "forward," "straight on") keeps running across the paper until the right-hand margin is reached; then, merely because the paper has given out, the writer or printer starts again at the left, with a small letter. (This is very obvious with word-wrap in word processing.) But verse (Latin *versus*, "a turning") often ends well short of the right-hand margin. The next line begins at the left—sometimes with a capital, but less often so today—not because paper has run out but because the rhythmic pattern begins again. Lines of poetry are continually reminding us that they have a pattern.

Note that a mechanical, unvarying rhythm may be good to put the baby to sleep, but it can be deadly to readers who want to stay awake. Poets vary their rhythm according to their purposes; they ought not to be so regular that they are (in W. H. Auden's words) "accentual pests." In competent hands, rhythm contributes to meaning; it says something. Ezra Pound has a relevant comment: "Rhythm *must* have meaning. It can't be merely a careless dash off, with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tumty tum tumty tum tum ta."

Consider this description of Hell from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (stressed syllables are marked by ´, unstressed syllables by ˘):

Rócks, cáves, lákes, féns, bógs, déns, aňd shádes ǒf déath

The normal line in *Paradise Lost* is written in iambic feet—alternate unstressed and stressed syllables—but in this line Milton immediately follows one heavy stress with another, helping communicate the "meaning"—the oppressive monotony of Hell. As a second example, consider the function of the rhythm in two lines by Alexander Pope:

Whěn Ájǎx stríves sǒme róck's vást weíght tǒ thrów
Thě líne tóo lábǒurs, aňd thě wórds móve slów.

The stressed syllables do not merely alternate with the unstressed ones; rather, the great weight of the rock is suggested by three consecutive stressed words, "rock's vast weight," and the great effort involved in moving it is suggested by another three consecutive stresses, "line too labours," and by yet another three, "words move slow." Note, also, the abundant pauses within the lines. In the first line, for example, unless one's speech is slovenly, one must pause at least slightly after "Ajax," "strives," "rock's," "vast," "weight," and "throw." The grating sounds in "Ajax" and "rock's" do their work, too, and so do the explosive *t*s. When Pope wishes to suggest lightness, he reverses his procedure, and he groups *un*stressed syllables:

Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flíes o'er th' unbéndiňg córn, aňd skíms ǎlóng thě máin.

This last line has 12 syllables and is, thus, longer than the line about Ajax, but the addition of *along* helps communicate lightness and swiftness because in this line (it can be argued) neither syllable of *along* is strongly stressed. If

along is omitted, the line still makes grammatical sense and becomes more regular, but it also becomes less imitative of lightness.

The very regularity of a line may be meaningful, too. Shakespeare begins a sonnet thus:

When I do count the clock that tells the time.

This line about a mechanism runs with appropriate regularity. (It is worth noting, too, that "count the *c*lock" and "*t*ells the *t*ime" emphasize the regularity by the repetition of sounds and syntax.) But notice what Shakespeare does in the middle of the next line:

And see the brave day sunk in hideous night.

As we've seen, metre produces rhythm—recurrences at equal intervals—but rhythm (from a Greek word meaning "flow") is usually applied to larger units than feet. Often it depends most obviously on pauses. Thus, a poem with run-on lines will have a different rhythm from a poem with end-stopped lines, even though both are in the same metre. And prose, though it is unmetrical, may have rhythm, too.

In addition to being affected by syntactical pause, rhythm is affected by pauses attributable to consonant clusters and to the length of words. Polysyllabic words establish a different rhythm from monosyllabic words, even in metrically identical lines. One may say, then, that rhythm is altered by shifts in metre, syntax, and the length and ease of pronunciation. Even with no such shift, even if a line is repeated verbatim, a reader may sense a change in rhythm. The rhythm of the final line of a poem, for example, may well differ from that of the line before. Repeated lines may have different rhythms even though in other respects the lines are identical, as in D. C. Scott's "The Forsaken," in which each section ends with the clause "Then she had rest." The rhythm assists a change in tone in the second, final use of the line where one senses that the words ought to be spoken, say, more slowly and with more stress on "rest."

Patterns of Sound

Though rhythm is basic to poetry, rhyme—the repetition of the identical or similar stressed sound or sounds—is not. Rhyme is, presumably, pleasant in itself; it suggests order; and it also may be related to meaning, for it brings two words sharply together, often implying a relationship, as in the now trite *dove* and *love* or in the more imaginative *throne* and *alone*, or *rap* and *trap*.

PERFECT OR EXACT RHYME: differing consonant sounds are followed by identical stressed vowel sounds, and any further following sounds are also identical (*row—toe; meet—fleet; buffer—rougher*). Notice that perfect rhyme involves identity of sound, not of spelling. *Fix* and *sticks*, like *buffer* and *rougher*, are perfect rhymes.

HALF-RHYME (or off-rhyme): only the final consonant sounds of the words are identical; the stressed vowel sounds, as well as the initial consonant sounds, if any, differ (*soul—oil; mirth—forth; trolley—bully*).

EYE-RHYME: the sounds do not in fact rhyme, but the words look as though they would rhyme (*cough—bough*). This pattern is effective when you read a poem, not when you hear one.

STRONG RHYME: the final syllables are stressed and, after their differing initial consonant sounds, are identical in sound (*stark—mark; support—retort*). (Formerly called masculine rhyme.)

WEAK RHYME (or double rhyme): stressed rhyming syllables are followed by identical unstressed syllables (*revival—arrival; flatter—matter*). (Formerly called feminine rhyme.) Triple rhyme is a kind of weak rhyme in which identical stressed vowel sounds are followed by two identical unstressed syllables (*machinery—scenery; tenderly—slenderly*).

END RHYME (or terminal rhyme): the rhyming words occur at the ends of the lines.

INTERNAL RHYME: at least one of the rhyming words occurs within the line (Oscar Wilde's "Each narrow *cell* in which we *dwell*").

ALLITERATION: sometimes defined as the repetition of initial sounds ("*A*ll the *a*wful *a*uguries" or "*B*ring me my *b*ow of *b*urning gold"), and sometimes as the prominent repetition of a consonant ("a*f*ter li*f*e's *f*it*f*ul *f*ever").

ASSONANCE: the repetition, in proximate words, of identical vowel sounds preceded and followed by differing consonant sounds. Whereas *tide* and *hide* are rhymes, *tide* and *mine* are assonantal.

CONSONANCE: the repetition of identical consonant sounds and differing vowel sounds in words in proximity (*fail—feel; rough—roof; pitter—patter*). Sometimes, consonance is more loosely defined merely as the repetition of a consonant (*fail—peel*).

ONOMATOPOEIA: the use of words that imitate sounds, such as *hiss* and *buzz*. (Consider the effect of " [. . .] and the hiss / cease not [. . .]." in Lampman's "The City at the End of Things.") A common mistaken tendency is to see onomatopoeia everywhere—for example, in *thunder* and *horror.* Many words sometimes thought to be onomatopoeic are not clearly imitative of the thing they refer to; they merely contain some sounds that, when we know what the word means, seem to have some resemblance to the thing they denote. Tennyson's lines from "Come Down, O Maid" are famously onomatopoeic: "The moan of doves in immemorial elms / And murmuring of innumerable bees." Consider this example, again from Lampman's "The City at the End of Things." Does this excerpt contain true onomatopoeia or merely suggestive words? Or does the example provide both?

And all the while an awful sound
Keeps roaring on continually,
And crashes in the ceaseless round
Of a gigantic harmony.

Stanzaic Patterns

Lines of poetry are commonly arranged into a rhythmical unit called a **STANZA** (from an Italian word meaning "room" or "stopping-place"). Usually, all the stanzas in a poem have the same rhyme pattern. A stanza is sometimes called a VERSE, though *verse* also (and correctly) means a single line of poetry. (In discussing stanzas, rhymes are indicated by identical letters. Thus, *a b a b* indicates that the first and third lines rhyme with each other, while the second and fourth lines are linked by a different rhyme. An unrhymed line is denoted by *x*.) Common stanzaic forms in English poetry are the following:

COUPLET: a stanza of two lines, usually, but not necessarily, with end-rhymes. *Couplet* is also used for a pair of rhyming lines. The **OCTOSYLLABIC** COUPLET is iambic or trochaic tetrametre:

> Had we but world enough, and time,
> This coyness, lady, were no crime.
> > —*Andrew Marvell*

HEROIC COUPLET: a rhyming couplet of iambic pentametre, often "closed," that is, containing a complete thought, with a fairly heavy pause at the end of the first line and a still heavier one at the end of the second. Commonly, a parallel or an *antithesis* (contrast) is found within a line or between the two lines. It is called heroic because in England, especially in the eighteenth century, it was much used for heroic (epic) poems.

> Some foreign writers, some our own despise;
> The ancients only, or the moderns, prize.
> > —*Alexander Pope*

TRIPLET (or TERCET): a three-line stanza, usually with one rhyme. Here's an example which is now familiar to you:

> Whenas in silks my Julia goes
> Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
> That liquefaction of her clothes.
> > —*Robert Herrick*

QUATRAIN: a four-line stanza, rhymed or unrhymed. The heroic (or elegiac) quatrain is iambic pentametre, rhyming *a b a b*.

SONNET: a 14-line poem, predominantly in iambic pentametre. The rhyme is usually according to one of the two following schemes. The **PETRARCHAN** (or **ITALIAN**) SONNET has two divisions: the first 8 lines (rhyming *a b b a a b b a*) are the OCTAVE; the last 6 (rhyming *c d c d c d*, or a variant) are the SESTET. Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (page 212) is a Petrarchan sonnet as is Lampman's, "A Summer Dream," mentioned earlier. The second kind of sonnet, the **SHAKESPEAREAN** (or **ENGLISH**) SONNET, is arranged usually into three quatrains and a couplet, rhyming *a b a b c d c d e f e f g g*. Lampman's "A Summer Evening" is a Shakespearean sonnet. Many sonnets have a marked correspondence between the rhyme scheme and the development of the thought. Thus, a Petrarchan sonnet may state a

generalization in the octave and a specific example in the sestet. Or a Shakespearean sonnet may give three examples—one in each quatrain—and draw a conclusion in the couplet. Very often the Shakespearean sonnet also divides, subtly, into octave and sestet, the first two quatrains forming one thought—but this need not be so.

Blank Verse and Free Verse

A good deal of English poetry is unrhymed, much of it in **BLANK VERSE**, that is, unrhymed iambic pentametre. Introduced into English poetry by Surrey in the middle of the sixteenth century, late in the century it became the standard medium (especially in the hands of Marlowe and Shakespeare) of English drama. A passage of blank verse that has a rhetorical unity is sometimes called a verse paragraph.

The second kind of unrhymed poetry fairly common in English, especially in the twentieth century, is **FREE VERSE** (or *VERS LIBRE*): rhythmical lines varying in length, adhering to no fixed metrical pattern, and usually unrhymed. The pattern is often largely based on repetition and parallel grammatical structure. Here is a sample of free verse. It is an excerpt from F. R. Scott's "Laurentian Shield":

> Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer
> This land stares at the sun in a huge silence
> Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear.
> Inarticulate, arctic,
> Not written on by history, empty as paper,   5
> It leans away from the world with songs in its lakes
> Older than love, and lost in the miles.

What can be said about the rhythmic structure of this poem? Rhymes are absent, and the lines vary greatly in the number of syllables, ranging from 7 (the fourth line) to 13 (the first line) and, in fact, to 16 (in line 27, not reproduced here), but when we read the poem we sense a rhythmic structure. The first three lines obviously hang together, each dealing with the silence of the land. We may notice, too, that each of these three lines has approximately the same number of syllables (the numbers are 13, 11, 12); this similarity in length, leading to and highlighting the short fourth line, is a kind of pattern. Long lines lead to short lines—such as "cabin syllables"—throughout the poem.

A division occurs when Scott inserts a quotation from an essay by Stephen Spender in *The Making of a Poem* (1955). This prose interruption both sums up the silent search for a tongue in which to speak the land—in the first section—and lays a foundation for the discussion of what kind of language is appropriate for Canada in the second section: "Cabin syllables/ Nouns of settlement / [. . .] / a language of life." The pause which the prose line creates (and the fact that it is printed in italics) marks a division and, as a result, the next section develops a new rhythm.

The next three lines each have 5 syllables, then the number of syllables grows: 7, 10. The pattern continues: 11 syllables, 14, and so on. From the

"pre-words" of line 14 to the words of "full culture" in the longest line (27), the poem's rhythm builds as the land becomes more and more articulate.

The effect of naturalness in the speech rhythm of the penultimate line—"Will come, presently, tomorrow"—gives the sense of the speaker thinking aloud, being more precise as he or she thinks through how the future "speech" of the land will develop. Of course, this final effect of naturalness is part of a carefully constructed pattern in which rhythmic structure is part of meaning. Though at first glance free verse may appear unrestrained, as T. S. Eliot (a practitioner) said, "No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job"—or for the woman who wants to do a good job.

In recent years, poets who write what earlier would have been called "free verse" have characterized their writing as OPEN FORM. Such poets as the Americans Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov and the Canadian "Tish" poets and others reject the "closed form" of the traditional, highly patterned poem, preferring instead a form that seems spontaneous or exploratory. Olson's interest was in "composition by field"—that is, a poetics of the breath. To some readers, the unit seems to be the phrase or the line rather than the group of lines; it is, in fact, a set of words bounded by breath. Denise Levertov insists that the true writer of open-form poetry must have a "form sense"; she compares such a writer to "a sort of helicopter scout flying over the field of the poem, taking aerial photos and reporting on the state of the forest and its creatures [. . .]."[1] The "Tish" group of poets were influenced by Olson; they include George Bowering, Fred Wah, Frank Davey, Jamie Reid, and Daphne Marlatt. Although not part of the "Tish" group, bill bissett also works in this way. Marlatt has recently rethought Olson's theory of the breath as a compositional principle, converting it to her own sense of the word as an extension of her *female* body. (See the discussion of *écriture féminine*.)

All of these approaches to POETIC LINE, RHYTHM, RHYME, and BREATH demonstrate the ongoing attempt by poets to link *what* they say to *how* they say it. An understanding of form is essential to an understanding of poetry, yet, as Levertov says, "Form is never more than a *revelation* of content."

PREPARING TO WRITE ABOUT PROSODY

- Once you have decided to write about verse structure (whether metre, rhyme, or other sound pattern), write out a copy of the poem, photocopy it several times to give yourself a text upon which to work or—if you can scan it into your word processor—triple space it so you have plenty of room to work.

- Number the lines.

- Read the poem several times aloud, reading for sense and not imposing a false metre.

[1] "Some Notes on Organic Form," *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald M. Allen, and Warren Tallman (New York, 1973) 316–17.

- Mark the stresses.

- Make marginal notes of any irregularities.

- Circle words that seem connected (by alliteration, or assonance, for example) and consider if this pattern is meaningful.

- Mark the rhyme scheme and make marginal notes of any imperfect rhymes. (Be careful of pronunciation in earlier poetry. In the eighteenth century, for example, line and join (pronounced jine) were perfect rhymes.)

- Prepare a tentative essay plan. Remember that your plan may change as you prepare a second draft. You may find that you want to focus on another pattern, or add a second grouping to the pattern which first interested you.

SAMPLE ESSAY ON METRICS:
"SOUND AND SENSE IN HOUSMAN'S 'EIGHT O'CLOCK'"

Once you have decided to write about some aspect of versification, write your own copy of the poem, double-spaced or even triple-spaced, providing plenty of space to mark the stresses, indicate pauses, and annotate in any other way that strikes you. At this stage, it's probably best to use pencil for your scansion, since on rereading the poem you may revise some of your views, and you can simply erase and revise.

Here is an excellent analysis by a student. Notice that he quotes the poem and indicates the metrical pattern and that he proceeds chiefly by explaining the effect of the variations or departures from the norm in the order in which they occur.

Notice, too, that although it is usually a good idea to announce your thesis early—that is, in the first paragraph—this writer does *not* say, "This paper will show that Housman effectively uses rhythm to support his ideas." It's sufficient that the writer announces his topic in the title and again, in slightly different words, in the first sentence (the paper will "analyze the effects of sounds and rhythms in Housman's 'Eight O'Clock'"). We know where we will be going, and we read with perhaps even a bit of suspense, looking to see what the analysis will produce.

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20 March 2003


          Sound and Sense in Housman's "Eight O'Clock"
Before trying to analyze the effects of sounds and
rhythms in Housman's "Eight O'Clock," it will be useful
to quote the poem and to indicate which syllables are
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stressed and which are unstressed. It must be
understood, however, that the following scansion is
relatively crude, because it falsely suggests that all
stressed syllables (marked / are equally stressed, but
of course they are not: in reading the poem aloud, one
would stress some of them relatively heavily, and one
would stress others only a trifle more than the
unstressed syllables. It should be understood, too,
that in the discussion that follows the poem some other
possible scansions will be proposed.

> He stood, | and heard | the steeple
>   Sprinkle | the quar | ters on | the mor | ning town.
> One, two, | three, four, | to mar | ket-place | and people
>   It tossed | them down.
>
> Strapped, noosed, | nighing | his hour.
>   He stood | and coun | ted them | and cursed | his luck;
> And then | the clock | collec | ted in | the tower
>   Its strength, | and struck.

As the first line of the second stanza makes
especially clear, the poem is about a hanging at eight
o'clock, according to the title. Housman could have
written about the man's thoughts on the justice or
injustice of his fate, or about the reasons for the
execution, but he did not. Except for the second line
of the second stanza--"He stood and counted them and
cursed his luck"--he seems to tell us little about the
man's thoughts. But the poem is not merely a narrative
of an event; the sound effects in the poem help to
convey an idea as well as a story.

The first line establishes an iambic pattern. The
second line begins with a trochee ("Sprinkle"), not an
iamb, and later in the line possibly "on" should not be
stressed even though I marked it with a stress and made
it part of an iambic foot, but still the line is mainly
iambic. The poem so far is a fairly jingling description
of someone hearing the church clock chiming at each
quarter of the hour. Certainly, even though the second

line begins with a stress, there is nothing threatening
in "Sprinkle," a word in which we almost hear a tinkle.

But the second half of the first stanza surprises
us, and maybe even jolts us. In "One, two, three, four"
we get four consecutive heavy stresses. These stresses
are especially emphatic because there is a pause,
indicated by a comma, after each of them. Time is not
just passing to the chimes of a clock: this is a
countdown, and we sense that it may lead to something
significant. Moreover, the third line, which is longer
than the two previous lines, does not end with a pause.
This long line (eleven syllables) runs on into the next
line, almost as though once the countdown has begun
there is no stopping it. But then we do stop suddenly,
because the last line of the stanza has only four
syllables--far fewer than we would have expected. In
other words, this line stops unexpectedly because it has
only two feet. The first line had three feet, and the
second and third lines had five feet. Furthermore, this
short, final line of the stanza ends with a heavy stress
in contrast to the previous line, which ends with an
unstressed syllable, "péople ." As we will see, the
sudden stopping at the end is a sort of preview of a
life cut short. Perhaps it is also a preview of a man
dropping through a trapdoor and then suddenly stopping
when the slack in the hangman's rope has been taken up.

In the first line of the second stanza the
situation is made clear, and it is also made emphatic by
three consecutive stresses: "Strapped, noosed, nighing
his hour." The pauses before each of these stresses make
the words especially emphatic. And though I have marked
the first two words of the next line "He stood,"
possibly "He" should be stressed too. In any case even
if "He" is not heavily stressed, it is certainly
stressed more than the other unstressed syllables,
"and," "-ed" (in "counted"), and "his." Similarly in
the third line of the stanza an effective reading might
even stress the first word as well as the second, thus:

"And then." And although normal speech would stress only the second syllable in "collected," in this poem the word appears after "clock," and so one must pause after the k̲ sound in "clock" (one simply can't say "clock collected" without pausing briefly between the two words), and the effect is to put more than usual stress on the first syllable, almost turning it into "collected." And so this line really can reasonably be scanned like this:

　　And then the clock collected in the tower.

And again the third line of the stanza runs over into the fourth, propelling us onward. The final line surely begins with a stress, even though "Its" is not a word usually stressed, and so in the final line we begin with two strong stresses, "Its strength." This line, like the last line of the first stanza, is unusually short, and it too ends with a heavy stress. The total effect, then, of the last two lines of this stanza is of a clock striking, not just sprinkling music but forcefully and emphatically and decisively striking. The pause after "strength" is almost like the suspenseful pause of a man collecting his strength before he strikes a blow, and that is what the clock does:

　　And then the clock collected in the tower.
　　Its strength and struck.

If "clock collected" has in its k̲ sounds a sort of ticktock effect, the clock at the end shows its force, for when it strikes the hour, the man dies.

　　I said near the beginning of this essay that Housman did not write about the man's thoughts about the justice or injustice of the sentence, and I think this is more or less true, but if we take into account the sound effects in the poem we can see that in part the poem is about the man's thoughts: he sees himself as the victim not only of his "luck" but of this machine, this ticking, unstoppable contraption that strikes not only the hours but a person's life.

📖 Suggestions for Further Reading

Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) is an indispensable reference work, with entries ranging from a few sentences to a number of pages on prosody, genres, critical approaches, schools, and so on. See also Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (1997).

On prosody see Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, rev. ed. (1997), and John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason* 3rd. ed. (2001). Also consider Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (1998).

For poets talking about their work, see *The Poet's Work: 29 Masters of 20th Century Poetry on the Origins and Practice of Their Art*, ed. Reginald Gibbons (1979). There are a number of videos showing American and Canadian poets reading and discussing their own work.

See also: Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (1980); and *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (1988); Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics* (1992); Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (1991); Diana A. M. Relke, *Literary Mothers and Daughters: A Review of Twentieth Century Poetry by Canadian Women* (1987); Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License* (1990).

✓ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about Poetry

If you are going to write about a fairly short poem, it's a good idea to copy out the poem, writing or typing it double-spaced. By writing it out you will be forced to notice details, down to the punctuation. After you have copied it, proofread it carefully. Catching an error—even the addition or omission of a comma—may help you to notice a detail in the original that you might otherwise have overlooked. And, once you have the poem written down with ample space between the lines, you have a worksheet with room for jottings.

A good essay is based on a genuine response to a poem; a response may be stimulated in part by first reading the poem aloud and then considering questions like these:

First Response
- ✓ What was your response to the poem on first reading?
- ✓ Did some parts please or displease you? Or puzzle you?
- ✓ After some study—perhaps checking the meaning of some words in the dictionary and reading the poem several times—did you modify your initial response to the parts and to the whole?

Speaker and Tone
- ✓ Who is the speaker? (Consider such issues as age, sex, personality, frame of mind, and tone of voice.)
- ✓ Is the speaker defined fairly precisely, or is the speaker simply a voice meditating?
- ✓ Does the speaker unconsciously reveal his or her personality and values?

✓ What is your attitude toward this speaker?

✓ Is the speaker reflecting on an earlier experience or attitude? If so, does he or she convey a sense of new awareness, such as regret for innocence lost?

Audience

✓ To whom is the speaker speaking?

✓ What is the situation (including time and place)? In some poems a listener is strongly implied, but in others there may be no audience other than the reader who "overhears" the speaker's meditation.

Structure and Form

✓ Does the poem proceed in a direct way, or at some points does the speaker reverse course, altering his or her tone or perceptions? If there is a shift, what do you make of it?

✓ Is the poem organized into parts? Is so, what are these parts—stanzas, for instance—and how does each develop from what precedes it?

✓ What is the effect of the form? Does the fact that the poem is organized into stanzas, or is written in blank verse matter to its meaning or effect? If the sense overflows the form, running from one part to the next, what effect is created?

Centre of Interest and Theme

✓ What is the poem about? Is the interest chiefly in a particular character or on a particular idea?

✓ Is the theme stated explicitly or implicitly? How might you state the theme in one sentence? What is lost by reducing the poem to a statement of a theme?

Diction

✓ How would you characterize the language?

✓ Do certain words have rich associations that relate to other words and help to define the speaker or the theme or both?

✓ What is the role of figurative language, if there is any? Does it help to define the speaker or the theme?

✓ What do you think is to be taken figuratively or symbolically, and what literally?

Sound Patterning

✓ What is the role of sound patterns, including repetition of sounds (for example, alliteration) and of entire words, and shifts in versification?

✓ If there are rhymes or half-rhymes or off-rhymes, what is their effect on you?

✓ If there are stresses or pauses, what do they communicate about the speaker's experience or thoughts? How do they affect you?

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Writing about Film

Learning Objectives

When you've read this chapter, you should be able to

➤ see film as a medium with links to novels and drama, but with its own highly visual character.

Some literature classes study film. You may be asked to write about a film, or you may compare a film version of a text to the printed version. This brief chapter offers some definitions of indispensable technical terms, a few suggestions about topics, a sample essay by a student, and a list of questions that you may want to ask yourself as you begin to think about writing on a film.

THE CAMERA

An immediate reality in film criticism is the fact that film is more a matter of pictures than of words. The camera usually roves, giving us crowded streets, empty skies, rainy nights, or closeups of filled ashtrays and chipped coffee cups. A critic has aptly said that in Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* "the almost unbearably ornate crystal goblets, by their aspect and their positioning in the image, convey the oppressive luxuriousness of the diners' lives in purely and uniquely FILMIC terms." Cinema is primarily a visual medium.

Much Canadian film demonstrates this fact. Vast landscapes or harsh winter scenes dominate the action, which is often turned inward against the hard climate. Often little seems to happen—indeed, for some viewers Canadian films seem static—but, in fact, the camera is busy, interrogating the setting and exposing connections between the characters and their environment. Such is the case, for example, in Atom Egoyan's *The Adjuster,* where the camera returns again and again to a bleak undeveloped subdivision site which becomes a dominating symbol of the characters' lives and the adjuster's moral emptiness. It is true also in Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Un Zoo, la Nuit (Night Zoo)* where the PROTAGONIST is seen surrounded by high tech stereo equipment and telephone answering machines that seem to have more life than he does.

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In short, the speaker in a film does not usually dominate. When a character speaks, the camera often gives us a *reaction shot,* focusing not on the speaker but on the face or gestures of a character who is affected by the speech, thus giving the spectator a visual interpretation of the words. Even when the camera does focus on the speaker, it is likely to offer an interpretation. An extreme example is a scene from *Brief Encounter:* A gossip is talking, and the camera gives us a close-up of her jabbering mouth, which monstrously fills the screen.

In many ways, film is more like a novel than a play, the action being presented not directly by actors but by a camera, which, like a novelist's point of view, comments on the story while telling it. A novelist may, like a dramatist, convey information about a character through dialogue and gesture but may also simply tell us about the character's state of mind. Similarly, a filmmaker may use the camera to inform us about unspoken thought.

The medium, as everyone knows, is part of the message, an idea that the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan popularized. Lord Laurence Olivier made Shakespeare's *Henry V* in colour, but *Hamlet* in black and white because these media say different things. Peter Brook's film of *King Lear* is also in black and white, with an emphasis on an icy whiteness that catches the play's spirit of old age and desolation; a *Lear* in colour might have an opulence that would work against the lovelessness and desolation of much of the play. Richard Brooks's *In Cold Blood,* also in black and white, tried to look like a documentary. This documentary quality is very prevalent in early Canadian film, much of which is shot to appear as reportage even when it is in colour. Indeed, the term **DOCUMENTARY** was coined by John Grierson in his early work at the National Film Board. Similarly, although most contemporary films are made in colour, Todd Haynes made parts of *Poison* (1991) in black and white, to evoke the grainy "B movie" horror films of the 1950s, and parts in lurid Technicolor to exaggerate the Romantic films of that decade.

Of course, a filmmaker, though resembling a novelist in offering pervasive indirect comment, is not a novelist any more than he or she is a playwright or director of a play; the medium has its own techniques, and the filmmaker works with them. These choices are sometimes purely artistic, but often involve specific use of the technical apparatus of the medium. For example, the kind of lens used can help determine what the viewer sees. In *The Graduate,* Benjamin runs toward the camera (he is trying to reach a church before his girl marries another man), but he seems to make no progress because a telephoto lens was used and thus his size does not increase as it normally would. The lens helps communicate his desperate sense of frustration. Conversely, a wide-angle lens makes a character approach the camera with menacing rapidity; he quickly looms into the foreground. There are, of course, many such techniques available to the director.

POSTSTRUCTURAL CRITICISM
AND THE CINEMATIC GAZE

Film criticism in the past 20 years has changed radically. Important film journals, such as *Screen* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, review film using the poststructuralist theories discussed in Chapter 8. PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM, especially Lacanian criticism, is appropriate for cinema in which human identity is observed, mirrored, and seen to fade. Political criticisms, especially MARXIST approaches, show cinema to be part of the larger structures by which society forms, explains, and regulates itself. The major debate over authorship is particularly fraught in film criticism, where the role of the viewer in interpreting what is seen is central. FEMINIST CRITICISM has been especially interested in film, and it is as a result of feminist discourse that film criticism generally has opened up.

Feminist critics argue that film has been a major force of the patriarchy, creating images of women (and men) that construct gender and subordinate women. Perhaps most important in this context is the important notion of the GAZE. Since the viewer watches without actually being present (and without the same level of imaginative participation that is seen in drama spectatorship), the relationship of the viewer as subject to the character on the screen as object is full of important implications. Theorists suggest that our love of watching (scopophilia) makes the viewing erotic (at least on the deepest psychological level), which further complicates the viewing of, say, female movie stars by male watchers. A number of critics have used the term the *male gaze*, which, it is asserted, reduces the object of its vision to a position of non-male object. Female screenwriters and directors are attempting to find new ways to use film to explore women's and men's bodies, women's place in society, and female language without subscribing to the traditional voyeuristic objectification which, it is argued, has been typical of film since its outset. Many of the issues here are very complex and require extensive reading in psychology, feminist theory, and film methodology. For an excellent, detailed overview of recent trends in film criticism, see Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (1988).

EDITING

A film, no less than a poem or a play, is something made, and it is not made by simply exposing some footage. Shots—often taken at widely separated times and places—must be appropriately joined. For example, we see a man look off to the right, and then we get a shot of what he is looking at and then a shot of his reaction. Until the shots are assembled, we don't have a film—we merely have the footage. V. I. Pudovkin put it this way: "The film is not *shot*, but built, built up from the separate strips of celluloid that are its raw material." This building-up is the process of editing.

More than a story can be told, of course; something of the appropriate emotion can be communicated by juxtaposing, say, a medium-long shot of a

group of impassively advancing muggers against a close-up of a single terri-fied victim. Similarly, emotion can be communicated by the duration of the shots (quick shots suggest haste; prolonged shots suggest slowness) and by the lighting (progressively darker shots can suggest melancholy; progressively lighter shots can suggest hope or joy).

The Russian theorists of film called this process of building by quick cuts MONTAGE. The theory held that shots, when placed together, add up to more than the sum of the parts. Montage, for them, was what made a film a work of art and not a mere replica of reality. American writers commonly use the term merely to denote quick cutting, and French writers use it merely in the sense of cutting. Today, some people oppose extensive editing, arguing that the viewer should be allowed to react with less direction. Even when the director steps back from suggesting interpretation, however, the art form *itself* is an agent of construction.

THEME

It is time now to point out an obvious fact: Mastery of technique, though necessary to good filmmaking, will not in itself make a good film. A good film is not a bag of cinematic devices but the embodiment, through cinematic devices, of a vision, an underlying theme. What is this theme or vision? It is a filmmaker's perception of some aspect of existence that he or she thinks is worthy of our interest. Normally, this perception involves characters and a plot. Though recent North American films, relying heavily on colour, music, quick cutting, and the wide screen, have tended to emphasize emotional experi-ence and de-emphasize narrative, still most of the best cinema is concerned with what people do: with character and plot.

Some critics have argued that the concept of theme is meaningless: A film is only a detailed presentation of certain imaginary people in imaginary situations, not a statement about an aspect of life. Susan Sontag, in a chal-lenging essay in *Against Interpretation*, argues that our tendency to seek a meaning in what we perceive is a manifestation of a desire to control the work of art by reducing its rich particulars to manageable categories. Sontag's view is worth considering, but as we said in Chapter 11, quoting Janet Wolff, "the true experience of art involves the understanding of meaning" (191). When we watch a film we enjoy an aesthetic experience with its own criteria, but we also see characters and events that have wider meaning. These mean-ings, however, are neither more universal than other events we observe nor necessarily more significant. The new critics of film open up our under-standing of how film has become part of the SIGNIFYING PRACTICES by which we regulate our lives. It is, contemporary theorists argue, important that we are aware of how those narrative elements in a film which seem to point to universal types or truths are, themselves, part of larger social metanarratives. When we read a novel, or see a happening on the stage or screen, we inevitably feel—if only because we've been asked to give the event an hour or more of our time—that it is offered to us as noteworthy, an example not of what

happened (it didn't happen; it's fictional) but an example of what *happens.* Contemporary film critics suggest we must resist the tendency always to extrapolate categories and classes from individual fictive representations. Sometimes a character can speak for a category of people, but usually a careful reader or viewer will see some aspects of character that a fictional person may share with others and some aspects that are unique to that particular fictional being. Making wide generalizations is never a good idea.

Sometimes we sense that a film has an arguable thesis. Stanley Kubrick, for example, has said that *A Clockwork Orange* "warns against the new psychedelic fascism—the eye-popping, multimedia, quadrasonic, drug-oriented conditioning of human beings by other human beings—which many believe will usher in the forfeiture of human citizenship and the beginning of zombiedom." A filmmaker, however, need not argue a thesis that is subject to verification. It is enough if he or she sees in the human experience something worth our contemplation and embodies it on film. Contemporary film— and certainly current film criticism—asks only that this "looking" be self-conscious, that viewers be aware that they are looking at a construction in art (in light, in the case of film) and not believe that they are looking at a fundamental reality.

GETTING READY TO WRITE

Probably an essay on a film will not be primarily about the use of establishing shots or of wipes or of any such matters, but rather it will be about some of the reasons why a particular film pleases or displeases, succeeds or fails, seems significant or insignificant, and in discussing these large matters it is sometimes necessary (or at least economical) to use the commonest technical terms.

Writing an essay about a new film—one not yet available for study on video—presents difficulties not encountered in writing about stories, plays, and poems. Because we experience film in a darkened room, we cannot easily take notes, and because the film may be shown only once, we cannot always take another look at passages that puzzle us. But some brief notes can be taken even in the dark; it is best to amplify them as soon as light is available, while you still know what the scrawls mean. If you can see the film more than once, do so; if it is available on video, rent it and watch it more than once and, of course, if the script has been published, study it. Draft your paper as soon as possible after your first viewing, and then see the film again. You can sometimes check hazy memories of certain scenes and techniques with fellow viewers. But even with multiple viewings and the aid of friends, it is almost impossible to get all the details right. Formal papers or books on film use sophisticated editing machines to pinpoint scenes, or even frames, and cite these, allowing for very specific comments. Student essays can rarely match this level of documentation; try your best to indicate clearly where in the film your point is illustrated and try very hard to get your facts correct.

A SAMPLE ESSAY ON VISUAL SYMBOLS: "A JAPANESE *MACBETH* "

Printed here is a student's essay on a film. Because it is on a version of *Macbeth*, it is in some degree a comparison between a film and a play, but it does not keep shifting back and forth and does not make the obvious point that many differences are found. Rather, it fairly quickly announces that it will be concerned with one kind of difference—the use of visual symbols that the camera can render effectively—and it then examines four such symbols.

The writer of this essay has done more than work out an acceptable organization; she has some perceptions to offer, and she has found the right details and provided neat transitions so that the reader can move through the essay with pleasure.

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                    A Japanese <u>Macbeth</u>

Essayist's general   A Japanese movie-version of <u>Macbeth</u> sounds
position, and   like a bad idea--until one sees Kurosawa's
implicit thesis, is
clear from the   film, <u>Throne of Blood</u>, in which Toshiro
start.   Mifune plays Washizu, the equivalent of

                    Macbeth. It is a satisfying film largely

                    because it is not merely a filmed version

                    of a play, but rather it is a freely

                    re-created version that is designed for

                    the camera. The very fact that it is in

                    Japanese is probably a great help to

                    Westerners. If it were in English, we

                    would be upset at the way some speeches

                    are cut, but because it is in Japanese,

                    we do not compare the words to Shakespeare's,

                    and we concentrate on the visual aspects

                    of the film.

As the paragraph   There are several differences in the
proceeds, it zooms   plots of the two works. Among the alterations
in on the topic.
                    are such things as these: Shakespeare's three

                    witches are reduced to one; Lady Washizu has a

Essayist tells us exactly what will be covered in the rest of the essay.

miscarriage; Washizu is killed by his own troops and not by Macduff. But this paper will discuss another sort of change, the introduction of visual symbols, which the camera is adept at rendering, and which play an important part in the film. The four chief visual symbols are the fog, the castle, the forest, and the horses.

Transition (through repetition of part of previous sentence) and helpful forecast.

The fog, the castle, and the forest, though highly effective, can be dealt with rather briefly. When the film begins we get a slow panoramic view of the ruined castle seen through the fog. The film ends with a similar

Analysis, not mere plot telling.

panoramic view. These two scenes end with a dissolve, though almost all of the other scenes end abruptly with sharp cuts, and so the effect is that of lingering sorrow at the transience of human creations, and awe at the permanence of the mysterious natural world, whose mist slowly drifts across what once was a mighty castle built by a great chief. The castle itself, when we come to see it in its original condition, is not a particularly graceful Japanese building. Rather, it is a low, strong building, appropriate for an energetic warrior. The interior scenes show low, oppressive ceilings, with great exposed beams that almost seem to crush the people within the rooms. It represents man's achievement in the centre of the misty tangled forest of the mysterious world, but it also

Thoughtful interpretation.

suggests, despite its strength, how stifling that achievement is, in comparison with the floating mists and endless woods. The woods, rainy and misty, consist of curiously gnarled trees and vines, and suggest a labyrinth that has entrapped man, even though for a while man thinks he is secure in his castle. Early in

Further interpretation.

the film we see Washizu riding through the woods, in and out of mists, and behind a maze of twisted trees that periodically hide him from our sight. Maybe it is not too fanciful to suggest that the branches through which we glimpse him blindly riding in the fog are a sort of net that entangles him. The trees and the mist are the vast unfathomable universe; man can build his castle, can make his plans, but he cannot subdue nature for long. He cannot have his way forever; death will ultimately catch him, despite his strength.

Essayist moves chronologically.

Summary leads, at the end of the paragraph, to interpretation.

One later scene of the forest must be mentioned. Near the end of the film, when the forest moves (the soldiers are holding up leafy boughs to camouflage themselves), we get a spectacular shot; Shakespeare talks of the forest moving, but in the film we see it. Suddenly the forest seems to give a shudder and to be alive, crawling as though it is a vast horde of ants. Nature is seen to rise up against Washizu's crimes.

The first half of this paragraph is a well-handled comparison.

Shakespeare's stage could do very little about such an effect as the fog, though his poetry can call it to mind, and it could do even less about the forest. Kurosawa did not feel bound to the text of the play: he made a movie, and he took advantage of the camera's ability to present impressive and significant scenic effects. Similarly, he made much use of horses, which, though mentioned in Shakespeare's play, could not be shown on the Elizabethan stage. In fact, in <u>Macbeth</u> Shakespeare more or less apologizes for the absence of horses when one murderer explains to the other that when horsemen approach the palace it is customary for them to leave their horses and to walk the rest of the way. But

A reminder of a point made earlier, but now developed at length.

the film gives us plenty of horses, not only at the start, when Washizu is galloping in the terrifying forest, but throughout the film, and they are used to suggest the terror of existence, and the evil passions in Washizu's heart. Shakespeare provided a hint. After King Duncan is murdered, Shakespeare tells us that Duncan's horses "Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls," and even that they ate each other (2.4.16-18). In the film, when Washizu and his wife plot the murder of their lord, we see the panic-stricken horses running around the courtyard of the castle--a sort of parallel to the scene of Washizu chaotically riding in and out of the fog near the beginning of the movie. The horses in the courtyard apparently have sensed man's villainous plots, or perhaps they are visual equivalents of the fierce emotions in the minds of Washizu and his wife. Later, when Washizu is planning to murder Miki (the equivalent of Banquo), we see Miki's white horse kicking at his attendants. Miki saddles the horse, preparing to ride into the hands of his assassins. Then Kurosawa cuts to a long shot of the courtyard at night, where Miki's attendants are nervously waiting for him to return. Then we hear the sound of a galloping horse, and suddenly the white horse comes running in, riderless. Yet another use of this motif is when we cut to a wild horse, after Washizu's wife has said that she is pregnant. In the film the wife has a miscarriage, and here again the horse is a visual symbol of the disorder engendered within her (the child would be the

Thoughtful generalization.

heir to the usurped throne), as the other horses were symbols for the disorder in her mind and in Macbeth's. All of these cuts to the horses are abrupt, contributing to the sense of violence that the unrestrained horses themselves embody. Moreover, almost the only close-ups in the film are some shots of horses, seen from a low angle, emphasizing their powerful, oppressive brutality.

Conclusion is chiefly a restatement but the last sentence gives it an interesting twist.

Throne of Blood is not Shakespeare's Macbeth--but even a filmed version of a staged version of the play would not be Shakespeare's Macbeth either, for the effect of a film is simply not identical with the effect of a play with live actors on the stage. But Throne of Blood is a fine translation of Macbeth into an approximate equivalent. Despite its lack of faithfulness to the literal text, it is in a higher way faithful. It is a work of art, like its original.

⌨ Suggestions for Further Reading

For quick reference, see Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia* (1980); and Leslie Halliwell, *The Filmgoer's Companion*, 9th ed. (1988). For somewhat fuller discussions of directors, see Richard Roud, ed., *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary: The Major Film-Makers*, 2 vols. (1980).

Good introductory books include Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies*, 5th ed., rev. Bruce F. Kawin (1992); Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame* (1984); Bruce F. Kawin, *How Movies Work* (1992); Thomas Sobchack and Vivian C. Sobchack, *An Introduction to Film*, 2nd ed. (1987); David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (1989); Edward R. Branigan, *Point of View in Cinema* (1984); Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* (1989).

For theory, see Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (1988); Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed. (1992). For a highly influential feminist study, see Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989).

For studies of Canadian film, see Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949–1989* (1991); Joyce Nelson, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend* (1988); Debbie Green, ed., *Guide to the Collection of the Film Library of the Canadian Film Institute* (1984); Jean T. Guenette and Jacques Gagone, *Inventory of the Collections of the National Film, Television and Sound Archives* (1983).