

Reading And Writing About Literature

Writing about literature is much different from writing about acid rain or homelessness or diabetes, topics you might have dealt with in ENC 1101 or ENC 2210, if you chose to take that course before this one. The difference is not so much in the form of the writing: a 500 word essay is still going to have an introductory paragraph, two or three body paragraphs, and a conclusion, whether the essay is about *Huckleberry Finn* or global warming. It is still going to have a lead-in and a thesis statement, though the nature of the thesis might be different when dealing with a literary work. If anything, it will be less concrete, less certain. In ENC 1101, you could say that “Acid rain is a serious problem in America today because of its effects on the environment.” With research, using the technique of causal analysis, you could support that thesis where any reader would agree with you. What would you say about *Huckleberry Finn*? For one thing, it’s a novel and not a social or environmental issue. Could you make a case for a thesis like, “*Huckleberry Finn* is the greatest novel ever written in America”? Could you PROVE that? Could you use causal analysis to show this so that any reader would accept it as true? Probably not. Even if you could point to Hemingway’s statement that “All American Literature started with *Huck Finn*,” would everyone accept that? Another question that might come to mind is what could you say about this novel that has been written about so many times and by so many smart people over the past 150 years? Do you have to come up with something new? Is that even possible? The answer to the second part is, yes, you could come up with something new. Different people bring different experiences and perspectives to their reading of a work. If you read *Huck Finn* as an adolescent and then come back to it as an adult, you’re not the same person. You know more and have experienced more. Your reading of the novel this time would almost have to be different. It’s almost as if you are seeing it through a different pair of eyes. The question of reading literature is one we need to deal with before we go any further in discussing writing about literature.

Reading About Literature

I’m assuming that, since you’re in this class, you know how to read. How well you read is another question altogether. Whether you like to read is another question. Reading magazines or newspapers is not the same as reading a short story or a poem. You read the former to be informed or educated. You might also find the article amusing or entertaining (a Dave Barry column for instance). More often than not, though, there is a pragmatic reason for reading: it’s a text for a class, a manual for a computer, or a how-to book that will help you lose weight, get control of your finances, or be your own best friend. Some of the reasons people give for reading literature are for entertainment, enlightenment, or to escape (people’s troubles, boredom, etc.). We will discuss some other reasons in class. However, when people talk about reading literature in that way, they don’t usually use words like literary analysis or criticism. First and foremost, I would like you to enjoy what it is I’m going to ask you to read this semester, but you are also going to have to take your reading further than that. You are going to have to read the work analytically and critically. Though this might seem like the kiss of death to enjoying the work, just the opposite may be true. Once you see how a story or poem was developed and written, it may increase your appreciation of it. It does get discouraging to read something at home and then come to class and hear the professor or perhaps fellow students say something about that work that you didn’t see or think at all. Sometimes you wonder what’s wrong with you or whether you just aren’t smart enough. Another reaction could be, “Well, I’m not

an English major, so why should I know all that stuff?” Hopefully, I’ll provide some answers to that question during the semester. But, English major or not, you can learn to read a work more critically (and that doesn’t mean finding fault with it) and analytically.

There are certain techniques that a writer uses to create a work of literature. Identifying them adds to our appreciation of what the writer has done. If you haven’t acquired elements of the critical vocabulary in high school or even earlier that you need to talk about and write about literature, you will need to work on that now. The book that I am having you buy this term has a glossary of literary terms that you should review. In each section listed on the syllabus, there is further discussion of literary techniques with some examples of works to help you understand them more clearly. We will also talk about these things in class, in a general way, but also in connection with actual works throughout the term. These terms should become part of your critical vocabulary when writing about the literature. Just as in medicine or computer technology or engineering, literature has its own terminology that makes it easier to talk about it and write about it. Some techniques are fairly common ones, characterization, theme, plot, conflict, point of view (narrator), symbolism, and setting, for example. Some are more complex, especially when we discuss poetry. This course is meant to be an introduction to this critical vocabulary not a mastery of it, so don’t be too concerned about this. It just gives us a common basis for our class discussions and your writing.

Going back to the analytical part of the reading for a minute, you might still wonder how you are supposed to read the works. In class, I am going to suggest that you keep a journal of your reading. This is not a formal assignment, but it could help you organize your thoughts about the work and also organize questions you might have. I would keep an entry for each work. I would record things like the title, author, when it was written, characters, setting, and symbols. If you can’t figure something out, write it down while you’re reading so you can bring it up in class. Try to figure out what the theme is (what point the writer was trying to make in the work) or moral. You might also record your reaction to it. Did you like it or not? Was it something you could identify with? What pictures (imagery) did it create in your mind (especially poetry)? Your textbooks will give you some ideas about reading literature.

There are usually questions asked after each work we read. You’ll never be able to answer every question in every work, but it does give you somewhere to begin. You might even want to write out your answers to these questions in your journal. These could form the basis for writing in or out of class essays on the work. I let you use these materials for in-class essays.

Literary Criticism

One other aspect of the reading that I want to discuss briefly is actual literary criticism. For as long as people have been writing literature, others have been writing about it. Contrary to what people might sometimes say, people don’t become critics because they can’t write (or paint or sing, etc.) themselves. Instead, their writing is derived from a genuine love of what they are writing about. Good literary criticism is fascinating to read. It often brings us to understand and appreciate a work in a way that we might not have done otherwise. Sometimes, it forces us to look at a work in a way we didn’t want to. It shows the depth of a great work. It could also infuriate us at times. The chief thing that critics want us to do is THINK. This is also the chief thing that I want you to do this term.

One thing you might wonder is whether you should read the criticism before or after you read the literature. That's a good question. Do you read movie reviews before you go to see a movie? Why? Could a bad review cause you to not see a movie? I guess that depends on the critic to an extent. If it's someone whose opinion you respect (which often could mean that he or she tends to agree with you), then that might influence whether you see it or not. If so, that's a shame. Even if you still go see it, a negative review might have predisposed you to not like it. Could negative criticism have the same effect on your enjoyment of literature? Perhaps. However, if you keep an open mind and think for yourself, what someone else thinks shouldn't spoil the experience for you. If anything, if you then disagree with it, you have a basis for criticism of your own. The critic then becomes a foil or a touchstone for your own view. This might bring us back to the question about how we write about literature and what we write. I will discuss this aspect of criticism in class. Where you find literary criticism will also be discussed in class.

Writing About Literature

So, if you're still with me, I hope you have some ideas now about how you will write about literature. The writing techniques you learned in ENC 1101 will still apply to ENC 1102. The content will be different. The thesis and conclusions will be different. You will start employing a critical vocabulary when writing about literature. This should be much more interesting writing, as well as challenging. Remember, it is a lot less concrete than ENC 1101 writing. Whereas you could use causal analysis to prove that acid rain is detrimental to the environment by pointing out its effect on the soil, crops, water supplies, and man-made objects like bridges, statues, and buildings, it would be a lot more difficult to say that a story like Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" is about a man's coming to grips with his own mortality in the face of an indifferent universe and a cruel world when all he seems to be doing is fishing in a cold stream. Critics might help, but wouldn't you rather think about what he's doing there and imagine yourself wading in that freezing water, feeling the trout pull against your line, and realizing that the very meticulous attention to the details of fishing is a way to avoid thinking about or feeling anything else? You might think about things you do, hobbies or other distractions (which others might view as obsessions), and how they might be done to avoid something else (a job, a relationship, school work); at that point, you're ready to explore other clues in the story to see if you can tell what he's avoiding. Isn't that more interesting than having a critic (or a teacher) telling you right off what the story's about? Unless it's a research paper (which we will discuss much later in the term), you might even want to make this a personal exploration brought on by the story. Say you like to fish. The story then makes you think of your experiences. It's no longer just about a character named Nick Adams, but it's also about you. Writing about your reaction to a piece of literature is also a valid approach. Sometimes you may not even get to the "big picture" that some people talk about. You may only understand one small element of a story, but that's all right. Going back to *Huck Finn* for a moment, even in a research paper, it would be hard to write about the whole novel. So, you pick some aspect of it to focus on. You might look at the relationship between Huck and Tom Sawyer or perhaps between Huck and Jim. Jim is a man who is also a slave. To many people at that time, Jim is less than human—a piece of property. When he runs away, Huck is with him. They go down the river on a raft. The raft might be thought of as a microcosm (look it up). In the course of their journey, Huck comes to some powerful conclusions about the society that told him Jim wasn't a man. He makes a major moral decision. What he decides could be the basis for a very compelling essay on the conflict between society's view of morality and one's own personal morality. What you write about need not always be as deep or as

moving as that would probably be. Sometimes what you get out of something will be a great big laugh. Humor is the way I often deal with the world. Many writers do that, too. Mark Twain's story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is pure enjoyment. Why should an essay about that story be serious?

This has gone on long enough. We will discuss all of these things in class throughout the entire semester. Often, I will give you specific topics to write about although I hope there is still some leeway in how I pose the questions to allow you to take your own approach to the analysis of the various works of literature we will read this term. The key thing is that you need to have something to say (your thesis) and some approach that will make me, the usual reader of your work this term, understand what you are saying and why. I don't have to agree with you, nor do you have to agree with me. That's the best part of this whole writing process: anything you say is true if you can go back to the work and show me why you think so.

I hope you enjoy the semester.