

CHAPTER ONE

*The Purpose
of an
Essay
About Literature*

THERE ARE TWO QUESTIONS INSTRUCTORS IN LITERARY STUDIES DREAD hearing from students. The first is “did we do anything important in the class that I missed?” This is what we call a loaded question: I have to agree to premises that put me in a position I don’t want to be in. The most common example of a loaded question is “when did you stop beating your wife?” To answer this, I need to agree that I have been beating my wife. To answer the question about what was missed in class, I have to accept the possibility that nothing important happened (or that something did but I’m too cranky to repeat it for the student). The instructor perceives this question as a challenge to his or her talent or to the inherent interest of the course’s subject matter. But I understand, when I get this question, that the student is asking if the missed class presented something that he or she needs to know to do well on the graded components of the course, so I usually mention those and then ask the student to find a classmate who is willing to share his or her notes.

The other question is “what do you want in this essay?” This question is more complicated. It’s loaded too, though: it implies that there is an ideal essay tucked away in my head, and a clever student can get a glimpse of it if I let down my guard or if I like the student personally enough to give special attention to him or her. There’s a whole bunch that’s whacky about that set of implications. One, there is no ideal essay. Two, if there were, I wouldn’t have it hidden away in the darker recesses of my brain; I’d have it out on the table for everyone to see. Three, my desires, whims, or even ideas, and the extent to which your essay reflects them, are not what the assignment is about. So the answers I give to this question are always a bit kooky: I say, “I want to be enlightened and moved” or “I want to make no corrections to pronoun agreement” or “I want to discover the secret of eternal life” or “I want to finish grading before the end of the holidays, or at least soon thereafter.” Or I can be more helpful and say that I want a clearly written argument, based on evidence, about the meaning, power, or structure of the work or works the essay discusses. Yes, let’s repeat that—*a clearly written argument, based on evidence, about the meaning, power, or structure of the work or works*. That’s what teachers really want.

In my courses, I’m quite careful about letting students know what I want and how to accomplish it. Grading is one of the most valuable things I do for students, and I would hate for them to think that I don’t have objective and measurable reasons for evaluating their work the way that I do, that there is no rational process to assessing an essay. I give them a breakdown of what’s important for written assignments and what the weighting of each category is. And I’ll go over in class how to get from beginning to end in the essay-writing process and how to write the best possible essay. There is a method to writing a good essay, and there are clear and manageable steps to take from start to finish. That’s what this book is about. For those of you who already know how to write great essays, I’m sorry to have to take the mystery out of the process; you know the secrets, and I’m going to blurt them out here. It’s about sharing, and that’s good. And we can all learn something new, however proficient we already are. We all want to have AHA! moments, and writing a great essay will give you more than one.

LITERATURE: INSTRUCTION,
DELIGHT, IMITATION

Literature is as complex as an ecosystem, as ineffable as the subatomic world, as rich and beautiful and interesting as the many cultures around us. It is shaped by the world, and it shapes our understanding of the world. It is made from language, an infinitely malleable and sinuous medium. It can be found in the simplest, most naïve forms and the most carefully crafted; its authors can be children with few skills or geniuses who have worked for years to hone their art. Literature in English is read all around the world and has been central to advanced education for hundreds of years. Literature is powerfully ideological; it can be subversive, oppressive, or any combination of the two. Literature comforts us, frightens us, brings us to tears, creates bonds, and opens up possibilities for our imaginations. The reasons we study literature—the reasons we write essays about literature—are to try to understand better what it gives us, how it reflects, enlarges, and critiques what it is to be human in this world, or these worlds, of ours.

Literature's principal purposes are different from those of other systems, and those differences shape how we approach it. From classical times until the present, literary critics have been in agreement about what literature does. The first thing that literature does, we believe, is to *instruct* its readers. Instruction can come in many forms, and a huge range of information, values, and ideas are conveyed in works of literature. The author may intend us to learn certain things, but we can also learn things that the author or authors didn't plan on us knowing. Those things can be about the society that the work depicts—that it is prejudiced towards women, for example, or that its religious values permeate all of the things that happen in it. They can be about the ideas that are represented in the work: we might perceive that the scientific ideas of the protagonist are related to his or her ideas about art, related in a way that the author didn't consciously intend us to perceive. They can be about the material world in which the story is set: we can make connections, as readers, between certain objects and ideas, between things and feelings, that also help us to understand more about the world, the characters, and the action that

is represented in the work. It may be important to you to distinguish between intended and unintended effects: it's always interesting, for instance, to read what an author says he or she was trying to do in a work and measure that against what you think actually got done. But because the medium of literature is language, because readers are individuals in particular cultural and social situations, and because works of literature are read in different times and places, much of the effect of a work of literature is out of the control of the author. These are reasons we keep going back to the same texts: they are never quite the same. And the enduring freshness of literary masterpieces also means we have endlessly interesting questions about what complex works of literature *mean*, which is why we keep on writing essays!

The second purpose of literature, we agree, is to *delight* its audience. Delight means to cause pleasure, so the effect is emotional. But the emotions that give us pleasure are not just joyful ones: we can take pleasure from sadness, for example, or from terror. Why else would we pay to see tear-jerkers and horror movies? One of the things we value most in art and entertainment is intensity of emotion; as a species, we like a good cry, a rush of adrenalin, a belly laugh, a shiver of fear. Psychologists and neuroscientists may be able to tell us why; perhaps rehearsing emotions that help us take action or communicate needs is just as important as staying in good physical shape. Perhaps reading literature, watching plays and films, and listening to music are as essential to our well-being as vitamins and minerals. But what we as students of literature focus on is what the emotions are, how they are produced by literary works, and how they are related to other things in works of literature and in the worlds in which they were produced and are read. As with their plan to instruct readers, authors may intend us to have certain emotions, but their works may produce emotions that are well in excess of their plans, or opposite to their intentions. These are all fair game for literary critics—of which, I think I forgot to tell you, you are one.

The third purpose of literature is to *imitate life*, to produce for the reader a believable version of a world that is or that could be. This might be an internal world (the thoughts and feelings of one being, usually a person, but sometimes an animal or even an object), or it might be the world of a set of people in a culture or of a whole society. It might be a real world that has existed or does exist, it might be a

fantastical world inhabited by outlandish creatures with magical powers, or it might be an ideal and imaginary world, in which perfectly beautiful beings possessing the essence of beingness float effortlessly above the drossy world we inhabit. Literary critics are interested in how authors build worlds and in how readers experience these worlds. We are interested in the opportunities and limitations different kinds of worlds offer to the kinds of ideas and feelings that can be produced within them. For instance, science fiction can offer a different understanding of the human body and a different experience of its capabilities than can an eighteenth-century realist novel set in a small village in England.

But we are also interested in how authors make worlds out of language. If you think about this art, it's like making a house out of ice or a dress out of sand or a dessert out of cauliflower—there's magic involved in taking symbols, scribbles on a page, and turning them into something colourful, believable, sensuous, vibrant, and captivating. Much of what literary critics do involves examining the craft of literary construction: Why does this word work better than others? What is the effect of this way of representing thought or conversation? Why does this point of view make the emotional content more powerful? Literary critics are experts in how literature is made—in how the choices authors make and the experiences readers bring to works produce the rich, beautiful, and varied worlds that inhabit the pages of the books we read.

THE LITERARY ESSAY

Evidence

A couple of pages ago, I said that the task of a student assigned to write an essay about literature is to present *a clearly written argument, based on evidence, about the meaning, power, or structure of the work or works*. The previous section has given us a bit more detail about literature and about why we are interested in the meaning (the “instruction”), the power (the “delight”), and the construction of the work or works (how it “imitates” the world it represents). The rest of this book will be about the other terms in that sentence: how to collect and use evidence and how to write a clear and cogent argument from that

evidence. But let's say a few things about those two right now, by way of introduction.

Literary studies is an evidence-based discipline, just like science, law, or medicine. If you are a doctor, your patients will list their symptoms to you, and you will try to pull those together into a plausible explanation that identifies a cause for the effects they feel. If you were a police detective, called to the scene of a crime, you would collect clues—a stray hair, a bloody knife, a used glass—and then try to put those and other bits of information together in order to produce a story that explains the body, the robbery, and the mysterious symbols painted on the mirror. The symptoms and clues you are analysing, as a literary critic, are the ideas and feelings produced by the work of literature and the things that are used to make it—the words. From this evidence, you will produce a narrative that offers an explanation for the effects the work of literature has.

If you think of yourself as a detective or a doctor and you examine the work of literature and its context for clues, you too can diagnose the patient or solve the crime. I'll repeat myself: the study of literature is based on evidence, and its findings are arguments built from that evidence. The arguments must account for all the relevant evidence—there's no extra gun floating around, no additional ache or pain that's not explained by the illness you've decided on. That's how we know it's an adequate diagnosis of the illness or solution to the crime. Equally, all the evidence used to support the argument is necessary to the argument and is the best possible evidence that can be brought to the argument.

A large part of the assessment of your essay will depend on the quality of the evidence you collect, and another portion of the assessment of your essay will depend on how well you construct the explanation from it. These features are more important than the actual topic that you go after. Sometimes, students, at least in my experience, think that I'm looking for them to find a certain meaning in a work or experience a particular feeling—that doing these things is key to unlocking the mysterious ideal essay I'm supposedly keeping safe and secret in my brain. But that's not what I value in a student's essay, or in an essay by a colleague or peer: I'm looking for well-gathered evidence pulled together in a compelling and convincing argument. Even if

the essay topic is set for you, the value of what you have to say about the topic will depend on the power of the clues you gather and the persuasiveness of the argument you make out of them. Because of the importance of evidence and argument in literary studies, much of this book is devoted to how to conduct research in and about the literary works that you read and how to build an argument from that evidence.

Communication

Clear writing is a challenge for us all. It's a challenge for me, and, as an English professor, I'm basically a part-time professional writer, so sometimes I feel like it shouldn't be as hard as it can be! But essay writing doesn't need to be frightening or even difficult; there are methods to the development of clear writing, and we will look more closely at those in later parts of this book. It should help to know that literary essays are about concrete evidence: once you have the evidence assembled and have organized it into the building blocks of the argument you want to offer, all you have to do is tell the story of the evidence. It may also help to remember that you are writing about your evidence and your argument. Your argument is about the work of literature, but one important thing to avoid in writing about literature is plot summary: do not forget that you must tell the story of your argument in your essay, not the story of the work you are writing about.

The key to clear writing is to write clearly. How's that for clarity? Not very good: that sentence ends where it begins and begins again where it ends. But the point is this: there is no secret fix for effective writing. Writing is about words and putting them together. If you want to write clearly, you have to choose the words that mean what you want to say. Choosing words that you think might mean what you want to say is not good enough. You may want to use a dictionary to make sure that the words you are using mean what you want them to mean. If you think of yourself as a doctor or a detective, you'll realize that precise vocabulary is essential to getting your point across, explaining how you've diagnosed the disease or solved the crime. We could also compare essay writing to other kinds of writing. For instance, if you are writing an instructional manual for how to assemble a piece of

furniture ... well, apparently those people didn't go to the same school you are going to. But if you are a poet or write short stories, you'll know that there is an exactly, precisely, beautifully *right* word for what you are trying to say, and you'll know the wonderful, tingly, calm feeling that comes when you find it. That's what we're looking for: words that make us feel strong, safe, gorgeous, happy, enlightened. The right words in a good sentence can do those things, for both writer and reader. Try it, and try it again: you'll see. You might get hooked though—be careful.

I said “the right words in a good sentence,” and good sentences are the next most important thing about writing clearly and effectively. Good sentences begin with solid grammar. Again, you want your sentence to say what you want to say. If it doesn't do that, then you need to work it through again. We'll go over some common grammar issues later in the book, in Chapter 9, but the key again is to imagine that it is essential that you convey your meaning and only your meaning to your reader. A detective or a doctor can't be ambiguous, that is, offer up statements that can be understood in more than one way. Life depends on it. As literature is as important to us as safe streets and good health, it's absolutely key that you get your grammar right in your sentences. Lives depend on it! I'm joking, but I'm not. I honestly can't imagine what it would be like to be human without doctors, detectives, or literature. Pronoun agreement (when “this” or “it” or “she” agrees with the noun it is standing in for) and the proper use of apostrophes are not decorations: without them, we would never really know what people are trying to tell us, and never really understand ourselves. Run-on sentences are hard to read: they are like streams that divide and never come back together, and your reader won't be sure which path to follow. Sentence fragments are frustrating—they offer, but they don't deliver. When you frustrate, confuse, or delay your reader, you undermine the effectiveness of your writing and the quality of the story you are telling. If your essay (and the grade it can earn) is important to you, you must use correct grammar and good sentences.

Paragraphs and the shape of the whole are also important to effective writing in essays about literature, and we'll go over them in greater detail in Chapter 7 and 8. For now, let's just repeat that you are telling a story. Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends. They keep readers engaged throughout by moving from one point to the next at a

brisk pace. They may hover over a detail, but it's an important detail; the reader will see, maybe sooner, maybe later, that this detail is key to the power of the story. These will all be qualities of an excellent essay. Because of the importance of clear writing, much of this book is devoted to the composition of your essay.

Subjectivity

In preparation for writing this book, I've looked through a lot of books, pamphlets, and online guides about writing essays. There's a terrible untruth repeated in some of them: that the grading of essays is in some measure "subjective." By this, the writers mean that the mood, personality, and likes and dislikes of the instructor (whether for people or for ideas) somehow influence the way that he or she judges your essay. This may well be true, but it shouldn't be. That kind of subjectivity in a teacher—or in anyone with the power to judge, rank, and assess—is a form of incompetence and is not acceptable. We all have our weaknesses as teachers, let's be honest, and we are only human: for sure, we sometimes suffer bad moods, and we may like or dislike individuals. But we work very hard to ensure that those feelings (and any other stresses that we have) do not affect how we evaluate student work.

I've team taught a number of courses over the years, and one of the exercises we do as teachers is to calibrate our grading. We'll both mark the same essays and then compare the grades. My co-teacher and I always discuss beforehand what we value in essays, what our objectives are, and we always make sure that students know what those are. Every time that I've done this, there are very few essays that my co-instructor and I don't agree on. In fact, I can only remember one instance in which the grades were more than two points apart. My co-instructors have different moods, different likes and dislikes than I do, different approaches to life, literature, and even teaching. But we agreed beforehand on what was valuable; we communicated those values to the students; we kept them in the front of our minds as we graded; we agreed. Our grading, that is, was not subjective in the sense that students sometimes believe it is.

Students also tell me that reading literature and writing essays are both subjective. By this I think they mean that, if I judge what they are

saying in an essay or how they read and write about literature, I am in some way imposing an assessment on their personalities, their likes and dislikes, their feelings and inclinations. I would never want to do that, and I hope that I never have done it. But I'd like to clarify here the ways that reading and writing about literature are subjective and the ways that they are not. I think it will help you to write your essays and to understand the assessment process.

There are two meanings of subjective that are relevant here. The first is the one we've been using above. "Subjective," in this sense, describes something that is based on personal opinions or feelings and not on verifiable external facts. If I were to give you a bad grade on an essay because I didn't like the way you dressed or because I thought that you didn't like me (you never laugh at my fantastic jokes!) or because I'm cranky and mean-spirited (especially on weekdays), then I would be being "subjective" and—I think—incompetent as a teacher. If you were to write an essay that said unsubstantiated but *feeling* things about a novel that you just didn't like because it didn't have any romance in it or you didn't understand the language or you were upset about something in your real life outside of literature, you would be writing subjectively. As a teacher, I'd have to say you were really not doing your job as a literature student: the detective can't let his dislike of violence turn him away from the crime scene, and the doctor can't let her pain and sadness prevent her from telling patients the truth. Your feelings and opinions that are not grounded in evidence from the works you are studying do not have a place in your essay. In this respect, essay writing is not subjective but objective.

But, in another way, reading and writing about literature is certainly subjective. One of the most dynamic qualities of literature is that it means different things to different people. Each person's experience, knowledge, and interests are unique to that individual. One of the most fascinating areas of literary study is the analysis of reception through history—people didn't always idolize Shakespeare, for instance. And even when they did admire his works, they adapted them to the ideologies, tastes, and interests of their times. Our experiences of literature are similar: we bring what we are to the works. You are an individual subject. When you read a work of literature and talk

and think and write about it, you bring your experience, knowledge, and interests to meet the material you are studying. This conjunction is one of the most powerful experiences we can have, and most of us remember one book or another as *formative*: it changed our lives. Your essays are about the experience of being you, reading the works you've read, describing the thoughts that you've had as a result.

Your perspective is an invaluable and essential part of the essays that you write. The essays you write will be accounts of what you have seen, thought, and felt *as a result of the literature that you have read* and about which you are writing. The ideas, perceptions, and feelings that you will convey in your essay are rooted not just in you but in your encounter with the work of literature. So you can show your reader where and why and how you had the idea, perception, or feeling you did, in the text (the evidence). And you can analyse your reactions to the text and show that analysis to your reader (the argument). In producing evidence for your feelings, insights, and thoughts from the text and in constructing an argument, you are able to share those feelings, insights, and thoughts with your reader. You know very well that if you tell someone what your feeling is—sadness or happiness or frustration—they can't feel it. They need you to tell them why you feel that way; they need examples, experiences, observations before they can empathize. It's the same in an essay: you have to point to evidence, explain your feelings in words, share your ideas, and persuade your reader to share your point of view. In this sense, writing essays is all about subjectivity—or rather about subjectivities. It's about sharing your subjective experience with other subjects, helping them see what you see, think what you think, and then, possibly, feel what you feel.

As a person, I am also an individual subject, with particular desires, preferences, and ways of dealing with the world around me. But I've had lots of experience as a teacher (even the newest teacher has had decades of education and years of practice). What I bring to the classroom, and what I bring to grading, is my "teacher-subjectivity." If I'm a good teacher, I've revealed to you in the course what my desires, preferences, and ways of dealing with things are as a teacher. I've told you what the learning objectives for the course are, I've given you some arguments that I think are persuasive about the texts we are studying, and I've adjusted those, or strengthened them, in response

to your comments and questions. I've given you a detailed outline of what I want in an essay and shown you the relative importance of each component: I've told you that the quality of your argument will be worth more or less than other aspects, that how you handle evidence, how you write sentences, and how you document your sources will be worth a certain proportion of your grade. These preferences are the result of my years of teaching experience, of my objectives as a teacher, and of my interaction with students over the years. So yes, it's subjective, grading—I am a human being, and I bring to the texts we read and the essays I grade a set of inclinations that are unique to me. But a good teacher will have explained to you what he or she wants, and why, and will have shown you much of how his or her teacher-subjectivity works in lectures and discussions. And a good teacher will always be willing to explain your grade, based on the evidence of your essay and the criteria he or she has put forward. Finally, a good teacher will always be willing to make an adjustment to your grade based on persuasive evidence that he or she has misjudged your work.

Our subjective experience as human beings is the great topic of literature, from the beginning of writing to the present. Sharing that experience subject to subject is what writing essays is all about. But sharing means communicating: it means finding the words for the feelings you have, reinventing the experience of your insight for your audience, and using logic to persuade your reader that yours is a valuable, meaningful, and interesting point of view. In this sense, writing essays is a template for the most profound of human experiences: communicating with another engaged and articulate person what you find moving, valuable, interesting, clever, brilliant, transcendent, joyful, tragic, enlightening. We might say that our goal as literary critics is to treat our subjectivity, and that of others, objectively; to study what it is to be human, to have language, to share with others. This is why we read, and it's why we write. We can learn to read more carefully, write more clearly, and communicate more strongly an objective view of the complex subjective interactions that make literature what it is.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to help you write the best essays you can write. It is my firm belief that every student who is a competent reader and

writer can write an A-level essay. The best way to make sure that happens is to work from evidence to argument. If you follow the model described in the following chapters, you will need to take many notes from the works you are focusing on in your essay, and you will need to keep a list of ideas that come to you as you do your reading. You will also have to reread both the text you are working on and the notes you make from it. But, by the end of the evidence-gathering process (by the end of Chapter 5), you will have everything you need to write a first-class essay. The remainder of the book will help you arrange and connect your evidence so as to craft a persuasive, even beautiful, argument.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do teachers want in an essay?
2. What does literature do for people?
3. Why is a doctor or a detective a good metaphor for a literary scholar?
4. What are the most important qualities of writing for an essay about literature?
5. How is literary analysis subjective? How is it not subjective?