The Critical Essay

Chapter 12 introduces apparatus for writing critically about literature, and the three readings further reinforce the concept that part of learning to write well is learning to read well. As the chapter points out, the strategies students have already learned about crafting essays are applicable to writing about literature as well. Despite some differences—literature requires a more careful “close” reading than other kinds of reading matter—students are already well equipped to read not only the essays included in the textbook but other literary works as well. They have already learned how to construct and support a hypothesis and thesis, how to use a journal to record their questions and responses to their reading, and how to revise early drafts. All these activities can be reviewed and applied to writing critical essays.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE

Writing a critical essay is cognitively more complex than writing from memory or observation, and as Chapter 12 tells us, “The success of the critical essay depends on another process—the informed reading of imaginative literature.” To that end, Chapter 12 offers a succinct review of the basic elements of literature and the terminology used to discuss and analyze literature.

The literary elements presented here are also pertinent to literary nonfiction, as we have seen in reading essays from previous chapters (McPhee in Chapter 5, Quindlen in Chapter 6, Selzer in Chapter 8, Dillard in Chapter 9, Hampl in Chapter 10).

Guidelines for Reading Literature

The Guidelines for Reading Literature on pages 317–318 will aid students as they work to unravel meaning and to separate their emotional responses from their
intellectual judgments about the work. A focus on the guidelines can also curb students’ tendency to look for “the one right answer,” which they are sure exists because their training in other subjects frequently stresses short answers, equations, or quantifiable answers.

Because the study of literature is also a study of value systems, it is especially productive to introduce the concept of values and to encourage students to work in collaborative groups in order to heighten “the direct personal entrance into the expanded world made possible by transactions with literary texts” (Rosenblatt 77). Students will come with many ideas about literature and will respond to characters from their own value systems. An emphasis on values can illuminate the nature of students’ readings of literature. As Louise M. Rosenblatt notes,

The group will be stimulated to look more closely at the text in order to mediate among different interpretations and judgments. They should try to understand what values are affirmed or rejected by their own reactions. They should become aware of how the attitudes they brought to the text differ from the values dominant in the world of the work, or how their own values have been illuminated, reinforced, or modified by the literary experience. In short, they should develop the habit of thinking rationally about things that engage their emotions. (77)

**PLANNING THE CRITICAL ESSAY**

**Exercises (pp. 326–327)**

**Questions About Plot**

1. Mama’s dream reveals the alienation between Dee and Mama and suggests that Dee, who has “made it,” rejects Mama, who is not thin and well groomed. Such a reunion could take place only on television, where everything is staged and real emotions are held in check.

2. Mama’s decision to give the quilts to Maggie marks the climax of the story because it resolves Mama’s inner conflict over how to respond to Dee. On the one hand, Mama is hurt and angry about Dee’s rejection and insensitivity. She often “fought off the temptation to shake her.” On the other hand, the dream suggests that she wants Dee’s approval or acceptance. Like everyone else, Mama has been buffalooed by Dee and has gone along with her wishes. Dee got the yellow organdy dress she wanted for high school graduation, Mama raised the money with the help of her church friends for Dee to go off to college, and Mama is even willing to try Dee’s adopted African name, although Mama is hurt and sees it as pretentious. Moreover, Mama realizes the importance of the
“New Day” that Dee represents. Despite Dee’s behavior, Mama has seen Dee as the daughter who represents the family’s future. In this climactic gesture, Mama stands up to Dee and affirms Maggie, whom she has tended to take for granted. Maggie, she realizes, is the true inheritor of the family tradition because she embodies it in her everyday life.

3. Wangero’s parting shot—“You just don’t understand [your heritage]”—is an example of verbal irony because it is Wangero (Dee) who does not understand her heritage. This blindness is symbolized by the sunglasses that Dee puts on: “She put on some sunglasses that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin.” Dee sees her heritage through artificial lenses in which things, people, and experience become artifacts, valued for their form, not their substance. A further irony is that Dee chastises Mama and Maggie for not “making something of themselves” when it is they who have made something real of their lives through their own efforts, while Dee has made something of herself through the efforts of those she has exploited and disdained.

Questions About Characterization
1. Mama’s description of her working capacity establishes her extraordinary strength, energy, and drive, qualities that Dee has inherited but used in a different way. Mama’s work activities also reveal that Mama’s life has been a struggle for survival. Nothing has been handed to her. She has had to provide the basic necessities of life—food, clothes, shelter—through direct labor, not through wage labor, which yields money to buy these necessities.
2. The scars from the fire are yet another of Maggie’s misfortunes. Already homely and slow, especially in comparison to Dee, because of the scars Maggie feels even more damaged and self-consciously inferior. Just as she tries to hide her scarred arms in the folds of her skirt, so, too, she tries to make her existence unobtrusive. The fire seems to have scarred Maggie’s spirit as well as her arms.
3. Dee’s style is an assumed one, a carefully studied one. Style to Dee comes from external trappings—the bright African dress and bangles, the Muslim boyfriend, the African name.

Questions About Setting
1. Mama and Maggie live in a poor rural area, but their simple life is not without pleasures or aesthetic beauty. They see beauty in everyday objects such as the well-raked yard that is like “an extended living room,” and they have a deep appreciation for simple pleasures such as sitting under the elm and looking for
“the breezes that never come inside the house.” They live close to nature, and although their lives are hard, they do not seem to feel deprived.

2. The new house is just like the one that burned, small and crude. Mama presumes that Dee will hate this one just as she hated the other one, thinking that it is shameful, a humiliating sign of their poverty and “backward” ways.

3. Dee’s current “style” involves trying to invent African roots and appropriate her poor rural past in the form of artifacts that she finds quaint and fashionably artistic. Dee wants to claim certain parts of her black heritage by objectifying them, by making them into relics—a photo of the rural shack to verify her impoverished background, a handmade quilt to hang on the wall as folk art, the top of the butter churn to serve as a decorative centerpiece. In the past, she rejected and despised her home setting; now she wants to make it into an abstraction.

Questions About Point of View

1. It is appropriate for Mama to tell the story because it is really her conflict. In many ways, she has contributed to who Dee has become. Mama helped Dee get an education and kowtowed to her to keep the peace. Also, it is fitting because Mama seems to have more self-knowledge than Dee or Maggie. If Dee told the story, we might not see the richness in Mama and Maggie’s way of life or any of the complexity in Dee’s relationship to Mama. Dee is too self-deluding to be the central consciousness of this story. If the painfully self-conscious and retiring Maggie told the story, we again might miss the complexity of Mama’s feelings for her two daughters. Maggie does not have enough insight into Dee to be a reliable narrator. She is in awe of her sister and fears her.

2. Mama seems to pity Maggie because of the accident and to feel a bit guilty that she couldn’t save her from it. The image of Maggie’s arms sticking to her, hair smoking, and eyes “stretched open” seems to haunt her. Perhaps she also feels guilty toward Maggie because she has always given in to Dee and in a sense favored her. Mama has mixed feelings about Dee’s education. Uneducated herself, Mama is understandably proud of her daughter’s education, particularly because she worked so hard to make it possible. Yet she sees that Dee’s education, among other things, has alienated her from home, family, and heritage.

3. The author seems to be directly addressing the reader in the epigraph “for your grandmama,” telling us that the lesson in the story is for us, too. Like Dee, the author gently suggests, many of us fail to appreciate family and heritage. This epigraph and the story in general bring to mind a line from Paule Marshall’s
Brown Girl, Brownstones, where the mother, Silla, directly confronts her disapproving daughter Selina with the question “Who put you so?”

Questions About Theme
1. Quilts represent a tradition in which people make do with what they have. Bits of leftover cloth become a quilt to keep family members warm; the tree outside becomes a butter churn to make butter. The beauty in such objects comes from their function, their “everyday use,” and the memories they evoke. By contrast, style divorces form from function; things are regarded as objects detached from intended significance.

2. Wangero believes Maggie should abandon her backward way of living. This would mean giving up quilt making, her strong memories of family, her pleasure in the rural life. Wangero sees none of this as valuable; she really believes that her life with all its affectations is superior to Maggie’s.

3. Maggie is a producer of folk art, not a consumer. Maggie is a creator, someone whose heritage has resulted in practical skills. Dee with all her education is a consumer, not a creator. Her sense of heritage is a manufactured one, not manifest in her everyday life.

DRAFTING AND REVISIVING THE CRITICAL ESSAY

The drafting and revising strategies suggested in these sections are reminders to use the basic strategies outlined in the first five chapters of Writing with a Purpose.

READINGS

“Old Eben and Mr. Flood,” Julia Miller

As in all the student essays in Writing with a Purpose, Julia Miller’s critical analysis of “Mr. Flood’s Party” offers students an example of how one writer approached a critical assignment.

Discussion questions (p. 332). In what ways does your response differ from the student’s response? What aspects of the poem did you overlook in your reading? What aspects did she overlook in her writing?

The questions that introduce the poem and the student essay reinforce critical reading as a process of observing and formulating questions. Because the questions focus students on their own responses, you might want to assign the reading as
Teaching with a Purpose

homework, asking students to bring in their journal responses to aid discussion. What is important is that students notice specific literary elements as they compare their responses to Miller’s, not whether they “get” everything “right” or whether they omit something. The exercise is one of trying on the language of critical analysis in a new environment, your class. The exercise offers an opportunity for students to learn from one another as they compare their observations.

What students will notice is Miller’s oversight of the ironic implications of the title (we expect to read about a party but learn that the only guests are Eben Flood and his memories), the role of poetic form (narrative poem with seven stanzas reflecting the seven stages of life and a rhyme scheme reflecting the limitations of Eben’s old age), the point of view of the speaker (third-person observer), and any mention of the poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson. (Robinson, an American poet, lived from 1869 to 1935; “Mr. Flood’s Party” was written in 1920.) The poem contains two allusions. Laurence Perrine’s Sound and Sense offers the following annotations: line 11, the reference to the bird “on the wing” comes from The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam—“The bird of Time . . . is on the wing”; line 20 refers to Roland, hero of the French epic poem The Song of Roland, who “died fighting a rear-guard action for Charlemagne against the Moors in Spain; before his death he sounded a call for help on his famous horn, but the king’s army arrived too late” (335).

Miller begins her critical analysis by jumping directly into an explanation of Eben Flood’s consciousness, but she fails to orient her reader by supplying an introductory exposition, which might include such details as the title, author, and genre. Miller’s analysis is chronological, which provides an internal organizational logic for the essay and makes it easy to read. She concludes with some insightful remarks on possible meanings of the name of the central character of the poem, Eben Flood, but she again misses the opportunity to use the title to formulate a hypothesis about the poem. Her comments are unfortunately further weakened by her clichéd final line, “After all, time and tide wait for no man.”

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Narrate: The assignment parallels the earlier one from Chapter 1 involving writing about early writing experiences. Both assignments enable students to understand themselves as readers and writers and to see a connection between what happens in class and what they experience intellectually. Most people never forget the books that were read to them as children or the first books they read on their own. Some students will not want to return to texts that hold childhood memories and analyze them, so students may need to first air their
positive feelings toward the texts and their negative feelings toward “tearing things apart.” Students might use this assignment to develop narratives from other chapters about school experiences.

2. Observe: Students might brainstorm questions for analyzing what a storyteller needs to be “good.” They can begin with such simple questions as “Why do you think xx is good at telling stories? Why do you think [someone else] is not good? What do you do when you are bored with a story? Is it the story itself or the delivery?” If possible, students might organize a field trip to hear a storyteller and observe the audience as well as the storyteller’s techniques. They might also note their own level of interest as it rises and falls during the event. In addition, students might apply the Guidelines for Reading Literature to their experiences in hearing oral literature.

3. Investigate: Students might widen their investigation of writers with recorded or written interviews about the creative process. Some of Bill Moyers’s public television interviews with poets and writers or some interviews in literary magazines such as The American Poetry Review or The Paris Review might be valuable resources. Other possibilities are accounts of the creative process told from the perspective of writers and editors who produce stories and linguists and psychologists who study creativity and language processing. In addition, students might compare what they learn with their own experience in crafting narratives for your class. In what ways do characters tend to “take over” the story, and at what point does the writer “interfere” to control the development of the piece? In other words, how do writers turn on and off their internal editors?

4. Collaborate: This assignment provides a hands-on experience in transforming written language into live theatre, showing how malleable language can be and what the differences are between spoken and written language and between ordinary conversation and literary replications of conversations. Most likely students will enjoy this “other dimension” of language, and they might investigate the varying experiences of script writers, playwrights, actors, directors, producers, and reviewers. Students might want to experiment with various roles and keep journal accounts of how they used language differently during the experiment. Students might also want to compare the original piece with their performance script to see how ideas are expressed as the medium changes from written to spoken text.
5. Read: The tension between romantic love and everyday reality is even more marked when the poems are read side by side, because the poems reflect gender differences in the perceptions of intimate relationships. The title of Richard Wilbur’s “A Late Aubade” places the poem in the carpe diem tradition, to which it refers with mention of “the rose-bud theme.” This is an allusion to Robert Herrick’s (1591–1674) “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”—“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.” An aubade is a musical composition, such as a love song, usually sung at or around dawn. Students will also need to look up the word screed: a long, monotonous harangue or piece of writing. The first-person speaker in the poem lists all the things he “should” be doing, and the title underscores this by being sung at noon rather than at dawn. The whole point of the poem is that the speaker is unconcerned with everyday realities because he is doing what he most wants to do: spending his time in bed kissing his beloved. The poem also alludes to Arnold Schönberg (the modern Austrian composer known for his twelve-tone compositions). Wilbur’s word choice stacks the deck against those everyday women’s activities that compete with lovemaking: the books she could be reading are “liver-spotted,” the shopping elevator is a “cage,” the flowers in the garden are “raucous,” the friend’s recitation of problems is a “screed,” the setter is “unhappy,” and the lecture is “bleak.” Through the use of such negative qualifiers, Wilbur disregards women’s activities as insignificant when compared to his lovemaking needs.

Adrienne Rich’s poem begins with the idea of “sin” and “living in sin” in the title, which turns out to be not the sin of living outside of marriage rituals but the sin of all the things that don’t get done: the dusting, the washing up, the time for the proper cup of coffee. The speaker here is third-person limited omniscient. The “relentless milkman” becomes a metaphor for the routine of daily maintenance, appearing each day at five o’clock, ready or not. Wilbur and Rich are well known in American poetry, Rich for her ardent feminist views, which are obvious in this poem.

6. Respond: Using the literature as a frame for their own experiences, students can gain insight into Walker’s piece by constructing a little history of their own. Their own story might be quite different from Dee/Wangero’s, but their relationship with family members might be similarly strained as they return home after their first few weeks at a university. Students might imagine themselves as Dee/Wangero in order to speak through her voice, but first they must read the piece closely to try to draw a portrait of Dee as a character. What motivates her? What kinds of phrases is she likely to use? The
assignment asks that students look closely at Dee/Wangero’s language and also experience the character, letting go of some of their own inhibitions in order to do so. This assignment could make an excellent group project as students share their interpretations of Dee/Wangero and their understandings of their own distinct heritages.

7. Analyze: The quilt is the central artifact in both pieces and becomes a metaphor for the unsung black female artist. Both the fictional account of Mama in “Everyday Use” and the (auto)biographical account of Walker’s own mother provide individual portraits of creative, long-suffering black women, which suggest a pattern, not a single archetypal black female. The individual stories, fictional and (auto)biographical, are important in highlighting real situations. Students might need to discuss point of view and how the (fictional) personal “I” of “Everyday Use” demands that the reader pick up information based on indirect reference. Mama’s voice is strong in the piece, and she is highly observant and articulate, despite her lack of education. Although she never characterizes herself as “strong,” the strength of character is obvious through her actions and reactions to Dee. Walker describes her own mother in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” through more direct statement, since she is describing her in the third person. However, it is clear that both characters are strong, loving mothers who find ways to express their artistry despite overwhelming demands on their lives. Neither woman recognizes herself as an artist, concentrating instead on survival.

8. Evaluate: The assignment engages students in literary research and promotes critical reading and writing. After students have read and evaluated Julia’s work and have formulated their own argument, they might read each other’s letters to Julia and then respond to the various points of view in another round of letters, this time choosing a particular letter from a member of the class and arguing for or against the ideas presented. In this way, students participate in an actual dialogue.

9. Argue: This is a good “re-creation” exercise. By “creating” the woman in Wilbur’s “A Late Aubade” or the man in Rich’s “Living in Sin,” students can speculate about the immediate audience for the poem and thus explain its tone and style. By writing an argument from her or his point of view, students can use specific details and images to re-create the nature of the relationship recorded in each poem.
10. Argue: This is an excellent group activity as well as an individual project, which students might expand into a major project for the course. They might use computers to produce a handsome “published” version of their book, which might include some of their own poems or essays or those written by members of their group. Alternatively, this could be a whole-class activity in which each student contributes a poem and collaborates in writing an introduction to that contribution. You might then produce booklets through a commercial copier and ask each student to purchase his or her own copy.

USING THE WRITING CENTER

Regardless of topic, students can bring writing assignments to Writing Center tutors to get additional support as they work to analyze literature. Students are sometimes hesitant to go to the Writing Center with reading assignments, but tutors can help them with the Guidelines for Reading Literature. Students who have had little experience reading literature often respond initially—especially to poetry—by saying “I don’t understand any of it.” Working with tutors, students can begin to work their way through the meaning of specific passages in the texts. Although tutors may not be familiar with the specific piece of literature, they can sit and listen while students describe what they have read. Tutors can then ask questions about plot, characterization, setting, and theme to help students unravel meaning within the literature and formulate plans for critical essays. But just as tutors do not write papers for students, tutors also do not tell students what the literature “means”; rather, tutors help students read closely and find their own interpretations.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THE COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM

Students’ responses to and interpretations of literary texts can form the basis of any number of lively group activities.

- Ask students to respond to a literary text, following the Guidelines for Reading Literature, and share written responses in small groups.

- Divide the class into five small groups, and assign each group one element to examine in a particular literary text. Each group will be responsible for arriving at a group interpretation of how that element works in the text, which the group then reports back to the whole class.
• Create a collaborative writing task that engages students in the current reading assignment. For example, students might write an interior dialogue of the woman’s response to her lover’s elaborate plea in “A Late Aubade.” Or they might draft a response to Dee’s demand for the quilts from Mama’s point of view or Maggie’s.

• Students often have difficulty choosing subjects and focusing their critical essays, so this is a good time to ask them to try out preliminary hypotheses, scratch outlines, or rough drafts in writing groups. The following peer response guide will also be helpful:

*Critical Essay*

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<tr>
<th>Peer respondent:</th>
<th>Writer:</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Did the writer’s interpretation of this literary work enlarge your understanding of it? If so, how?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Summarize the writer’s central idea or interpretive thesis. Is this thesis sufficiently focused, clearly worded, and truly interpretive?</td>
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<td>3. Describe the pattern of development used in this essay. Is there a definable organizational principle at work?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Is the writer’s interpretation supported by adequate evidence from the text? Are there points where the writer needs to cite more evidence or cites too much evidence without explaining why? Has the writer chosen the most persuasive evidence possible to support his or her claims?</td>
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<td>5. Has the writer avoided plot summary?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Has the writer correctly and effectively integrated direct quotations and paraphrases into his or her own prose? Are such references properly introduced and punctuated?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. What global and local revisions would you suggest to this writer?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL REFERENCES**

Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen’s *Beat Not the Poor Desk* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton, 1982) presents both theory and method for teaching writing using literary structures as frames.
Frank Smith offers methods and linguistic analysis for the reading process in *Reading Without Nonsense*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers Coll., 1985), and *Essays into Literacy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983).


Kathleen Dudden Andrasick offers practical strategies for getting students to write critically about literature in *Opening Texts: Using Writing to Teach Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990).


Sharon Crowley presents an introduction to the work of Jacques Derrida and its application to the classroom in *A Teacher’s Introduction to Deconstruction* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989).